

# *s fia*

No. 100 June 2011



## *100<sup>th</sup> Birthday Edition*





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**Back cover:** Reredos batik, St Botolph's-without-Aldgate: *The Tree of Life in the Holy City New Jerusalem*. (Rev 21:2)

Photos by the Editor.



is the magazine of SOF – the Sea of Faith – Network (Britain). Registered Charity No. 1113177.

*Sofia* does not think wisdom is dispensed supernaturally from on high, but that it can only be sought by humans at home on Earth, and is inseparable from human kindness.

*Sofia* regards religion as a human creation and, in rejecting the supernatural, is for humanity with its questing imagination and enabling dreams.

*Sofia* is for diggers and seekers in its own native radical tradition and everywhere.

# 100<sup>th</sup> Birthday Edition

editorial

Welcome to the hundredth edition of the SOF magazine, whose name for the last five and a half years has been *Sofia*. In order to celebrate this milestone, we have a full-colour, four-page, centrefold spread of all 100 covers, so that readers can look back over its development. Our archivist Ronald Pearse has kindly supplied me with the magazines missing from my collection, so that I could scan them all for this display.

For this centenary edition, two founder members of SOF, David Paterson and Stephen Mitchell, have written special articles, reminiscing and looking forward. David, who runs the Oxford SOF group, which is very active in that university city, has *A Vision to Offer* and Stephen, Rural Dean of Mildenhall, Suffolk, who chaired the Network for many years, looks back on the magazine's beginnings using the technology of the period: *In the Beginning was the Amstrad PCW*. In *Sofia: the Pursuit* I have written about editing the magazine.

Stephen has also reviewed Don Cupitt's 'final' (hmm!) book *The Fountain*, which is dedicated 'To the members of the Sea of Faith with my gratitude'. Don Cupitt, of course, has been a major influence on SOF, and the Network is named after his 1984 BBC TV programme *Sea of Faith*. The two core images in *The Fountain* are the fountain itself and the sun (water and fire), both pouring out. Don Cupitt has certainly followed his own advice and poured himself out with great generosity, publishing many books and in other ways. Thinking about these images, I remembered that they were both used of Christ. In the story of the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus offers 'living water' which is 'a spring of water welling up to eternal life'. And in the Advent liturgy he is 'Sun of Justice', invoked at the solstice to 'Come and give light to those sitting in darkness and the shadow of death'.

Although I have sometimes strongly disagreed with Don, like so many others I have been inspired by his writing, especially about the death of God and, more recently, the point of God. To express my gratitude, although I think editors should use the utmost restraint in publishing their own poems, for this centenary issue of *Sofia* I've taken the liberty of dedicating a little poem to Don, which I hope he will like.

In the matter of editorial restraint, poet

Anne Ashworth was exemplary when she edited *Universalist*. I have had many very positive comments about her *Spiritual Journal*, extracts from which have been appearing in *Sofia*.

Unfortunately there is no space for the next extract in this centenary edition, but there will be more to come next time.

At the recent well-attended London SOF Conference, Kenan Malik gave a talk on *God, Science and the Quest for Moral Certainty*. We publish two extracts from it, in which he reflects on the strange similarity between relying on God or Science for moral certainty. The whole talk will be published on SOF website.

On page 6 we have an announcement once again of this year's annual SOF Conference, *Brain, Belief and Behaviour*. Full details and an application form are also on the website [www.sofn.org.uk](http://www.sofn.org.uk). There is a strong line-up of speakers and the event is set to be challenging and enjoyable. Do come if you can.

Whether or not you can get to the Conference, I hope you will raise a glass to *Sofia's* hundredth birthday edition and wish her many happy returns. I wanted two particular images for the front and back covers. I have a small, unsophisticated camera and am certainly no expert but decided to revisit two London churches with unusual twentieth-century artwork behind the altar. In Notre Dame de France, the round French Church near Leicester Square which also has a Cocteau mural, I snapped the tapestry of Wisdom playing, looking rather like Snow White. And in St Botolph's without Aldgate, which stands just where the East End meets the City of London, there is a modern batik of the Tree of Life with a transformed golden city in the background, which could be London. As in Blake's visionary poem: 'There Jerusalem's pillars stood' – on Earth. Perhaps because it was near Pentecost, there was a dove suspended on a wire over the altar. There was no way I could keep this dove out of the picture and I baulked at photoshopping out the Holy Ghost. As we used to sing:

You can't kill the Spirit  
She's like a mountain, old and strong.  
She goes on and on and on...

# A Vision to Offer

David Paterson looks back on the history of SOF Network and thinks about the future.

The world has changed a lot since 1987. That was the year when some Anglican clergy in the Leicester Diocese had been meeting together to share their dissatisfaction about the Church. Many Christian clergy – priests, vicars, ministers – though they had learned about the new light thrown on text, doctrine and ritual by modern scholarship, were failing to pass this on to their congregations. Church authorities were still trying to prop up ideas of faith which were no longer viable. Bishops who knew better wouldn't challenge their clergy, vicars were afraid of their bishops and reluctant to shake the faith of the laity, and sceptical people in the congregations didn't dare tell the clergy about their doubts, and many either conformed to or left a Church still deep in denial and collusion.

I had joined this little radical group. Unlike the others I hadn't ever been an Evangelical in any conventional sense, having already rejected the concept of God's existence before I applied for ordination. My motive – half-formed, but deeply felt – was to give my life to the service of truth, justice and compassion. 'God' was just a word you could use to encapsulate these ideals.

## Listen to one another's insights, value them, challenge them...

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But for some the idea that God was a creation of the human imagination was like a bereavement. We took on the task of providing a route from beliefs which were no longer tenable to something which could really be believed in the light of modern thought (later this was to be termed *A Reasonable Faith*). Loughborough University were to hold their annual Summer Conference, so we decided to run a workshop at it.

*Honest to God* had long since made waves, and now Don Cupitt had published *Taking Leave of God* and done the TV series *The Sea of Faith*. Two of our group held livings in the gift of Emmanuel College Cambridge, so knew Don as the Warden. We shared our ideas with him, and he gave us the mailing list of those who had responded to the TV series. It was

long, and we soon had too many people wanting to come to our little workshop, so instead it became a conference in its own right. It was very successful, so we did it again the next year. We did not see ourselves as starting a movement, or forming a society or an organisation, but aimed simply to link together people with similar concerns and needs. We called what was emerging a Network, free to develop in its own way, with ourselves and a few others as a Steering Committee to hold it together.

The original purpose of the Network was, then, to reassure people in the Christian Churches that they need not be afraid of their doubts, but should value them. The context was a world in which Christendom was losing its credibility and its influence. To find God we must 'take leave of God'; religion is a human creation, and it is entirely our responsibility. There is no god 'out there', nothing supernatural. It is all contained in human experience and expressed in human language.

Much has changed since then. Christianity – contrary to widespread predictions for over a century – didn't die. It lost its power over British society, perhaps, but in the world as a whole the religions have moved centre-stage. Don was right as he explored the Christian tradition in the light of modern Western philosophy, but there were other things going on. And the form of religion which has become more powerful is fundamentalism. This has been particularly so in two economically and culturally important communities – Christianity in the United States and Islam in the oil-rich nations of the Middle East – but it can be seen in Judaism and Hinduism as well. When threatened, the instinct is to barricade yourself in and fight tooth-and-nail. Religion is a source of power. Rival truth-claims by religions have always been a seed of conflict, and now they have become a major danger.

In this changing world, the Sea of Faith Network – in my opinion – failed to move with the times. It is true that support for radical thinkers within the Churches remains necessary. That's a battle that will not go away. But the world as a whole has much bigger problems to face. Religion as a force for good – a source of insight and compassion, a prophetic critique of power struggles and greed, a vehicle of respect, co-operation and peace-making – has been lost in truth-claims, dogmas and pontificating about ethics. Most of what flourishes is bad religion. Does the Network have a vision of good religion to offer?

There's an energetic dialogue going on now. Anti-religious atheists (Dawkins, Hitchens, Harris and others usually get mentioned) are news. And surely we should be out there too in that debate. There are many things we might be saying. That the Church should listen to its critics. That theist religion must plead guilty to the charges against it. We might

acknowledge the harm ethical

monotheism has done. And we might suggest that the atheists listen to what Hindu, Pagan, Buddhist and many other faiths have been saying and living for centuries, very different from the stereotype of 'religion' (= dogmatic ethical monotheism) which they rightly oppose. And we might seek to demonstrate how much of human thought, emotion and behaviour is not rational. Our minds do lots more than think. So although the scientific method is a marvellous tool for explaining things, making models, finding new understanding, inventing ever-growing new techniques, that's not all that we humans do with our lives. Wonder, love and hope are perhaps more central. Science **can** – I don't doubt – **explain** these, and the explanation may well be very important; but people also **live** them, they gossip about them, write stories, paint pictures, play music and take part in rituals about them. The world is an inspiring place for us. Explaining it all can make it even more exciting, but we mustn't let explanation replace or destroy our experience of this treasury of delights.

In itself, the cosmos is meaningless. Meaning is a human creation, a human concept, a human need which we must provide. This need has evolved in our huge brains. Science, the arts and the religions have also evolved – they weren't created – and they are still evolving. In biological evolution a large gene pool is vital for healthy flourishing and development. It's the same with religion. In embracing new ways of celebrating the cosmos, there's no need to throw away the old ones. You never know when an ancient insight from the other side of the world may come in useful. There is no final answer, and all human systems of understanding have deep flaws, contradictions and



'Mercy and Truth have met together, Justice and Peace have kissed each other.' – EVELYN DE MORGAN. c. 1900

inadequacies in them, often unseen without a historical perspective. We need to be able to stand outside the ideas of our own place and time, our culture, assumptions and obsessions. The 'search for truth' is always contingent, provisional and plural.

The Sea of Faith Network – in my view – has ways of addressing the issues which should place it at the heart of these debates. Its specific contribution is to provide a basis – namely, that all religions, including one's own, are human creations – that might enable atheists, humanists, secularists, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, Sikhs, Pagans and many others to listen to one another's insights, value them, challenge them, learn from them and be constantly developing new insights from the encounter. The Network is nowhere near that yet; but, in my view, that should be our aim.

I don't think any religion need be ashamed of its origins. The same applies to the Sea of Faith Network. It was originally formed to support new thinking in the Anglican Church (though for me at any rate a wider understanding of world religions was always important). Matthew Arnold's poem *Dover Beach*, from which our name comes (via Don's TV series) is beautiful and sad. It doesn't argue anything, but observes and reflects on the human plight, responds emotionally and purposefully. The Network over the years has evolved many totally different ways of using the metaphor – sailing on the Sea of Faith, exploring its vastness, risking its dangers, plumbing its depths, surfing its waves, and many more. It would be a pity to lose such a rich source of metaphor. It still calls itself a Network. I don't think anyone has used that as a metaphor for catching fish (probably just as well!), but

rather for linking together very diverse people and movements who share a concern for the future evolution of human ideas; and that remains apposite. If we decide to change our name, it should – if possible – be to one with a similar emphasis on immensity, variety, uncertainty and depth.

On the other hand, maybe we should drop 'faith' because it's a concept compromised by its common usage to mean truth-claims and dependence on irrational methods of thought. But maybe our message requires that we redeem the word, insisting on other meanings which celebrate the complexity of the cosmos. Sea of Faith is an awkward name, but I wouldn't like to change it until we agree on something more rather than less evocative.

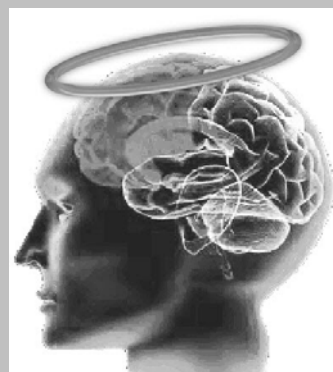
But, to conclude: It would be easy to say that the Sea of Faith Network no longer has a rôle; to accept that its time has past and it should die. But I see a continually-evolving rôle for it. We should be asserting our ideas in the public debate, concentrating perhaps on university students, helping to shape the terms of the discussion. We should be finding common ground with those who are exploring issues of philosophy and religion; seeking to influence the way R.E. is taught in schools (there are lots of opportunities there); getting involved in interfaith dialogue, exploring with all faiths the implications of understanding faith as a human creation; promoting, as essential to democracy, a secularism which would value the insights of all faiths, while allowing none to dominate or become powerful. We should insist that humanist values (or, better, the values of respect for **all** life) should be the test of validity for any religion.

I would like to see us as deeply involved as we can be in our own religions, and in atheist, humanist and secular societies, specially among students through AHS ( the nationwide Association of Atheist, Humanist and Secular student societies) and the Student Christian Movement. We should be using the electronic communication systems – our own web and blog sites, the e-newsletters of many organisations, Twitter, Facebook *et al.* In fact, any modern ways of networking.

We should be confident that we have a great deal to offer in helping to shape the future of humanity, and in that confidence we should be listening to all that is going on in human understanding – scientific, philosophical and religious.

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David Paterson is a founder member and former Chair of SOF. At present he runs the Oxford SOF Group and sits on SOF Board of Trustees.



## SOF Annual Conference

# Brain, Belief and Behaviour

Leicester University  
22<sup>nd</sup> – 24<sup>th</sup> July 2011

This year we approach religion as a human creation from the perspectives of neuroscience, practical theology and behavioural psychology. Our principal speakers will be:

- Colin Blakemore
- Gwen Griffith-Dixon
- Alan Allport

For more details and booking forms see insert fliers or contact:

**Sea of Faith Conference**  
**'Tanahlot'**  
**Main Road**  
**Brighstone**  
**Newport, Isle of Wight**  
**PO30 4AJ**  
**01983 740172**  
**sofconf11@yahoo.co.uk**

# In the Beginning was the Amstrad PCW

Stephen Mitchell recalls SOF Magazine's beginnings.

In my garage, and perhaps in yours – although my garage (an old school) is probably bigger than your garage – in a dusty box, is a collection of old computers with all the necessary paraphernalia. Amongst them are a Sinclair ZX81 and a Sinclair Spectrum. And, it's only recently that I took my old Amstrad to the tip. These relics of my thirties are now icons of the 1980s.

We've said before that Sea of Faith was a child of the eighties. In the year the BBC broadcast *The Sea of Faith*, Margaret Thatcher had been in office for five years. A coking plant in Orgreave was the scene of violent clashes between picketing miners and riot police. David Jenkins was consecrated Bishop of Durham and York Minister was struck by a bolt of lightning. Boy George was the nation's pop idol. Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean's interpretation of Ravel's *Bolero* won them an Olympic gold in Sarajevo and Alan Sugar began producing his range of Amstrad computers and word processors.

*Sea of Faith* Magazine was a child of the nineties, made possible by the rapid growth of home computer technology. Clive Richards, the first editor of the magazine, describes the process in the third issue:

While contributions began to trickle in for the first issue, I was involved in a rapid learning experience as my much loved typewriter was junked in favour of a new personal computer and laser printer together with the requisite wordprocessing and desktop publishing software with which to assemble the new 'product'.

I'd met Clive Richards at the Loughborough School of Religious Studies. He'd enrolled as a student and despite never having had any kind of religious affiliation had an extensive knowledge of radical theology and a large collection of 1960s popular, paperback theology. He was a politics graduate and house husband. So far as I know, his only job had been as a cinema manager in Birmingham:

For this essential capital expenditure I must thank my partner, Lyn Bulman, to whose successful career I provide full-time domestic support. I am fortunate to be able to organise my time to accommodate the burst of concentrated activity involved in getting something like the magazine together. The first issue was produced against a background of not just unfamiliarity with new technology but also

having to divide my time between Loughborough and Bristol, where Lyn had started a new job. The appearance of the first magazine in March (1990) was almost as much of a relief as finally selling our house in the East Midlands after nine tedious months.

For me, Clive was the Peter Mandelson of Sea of Faith. He had a shrewd political mind and behind the scenes was instrumental in helping to give Sea of Faith shape and direction. After organising three conferences, I remember him insisting that the whole conference organising committee resign in order to test that there really was a commitment to the future of the network and the annual conference.

The magazine was launched not long after a policy and task-setting meeting open to all on the SOF mailing list had agreed the founding of the network. Clive Richards again:

A network was all very well, I thought, but it was like a grid with the power turned off. People wouldn't feel linked to it (especially those who for whatever reason couldn't or didn't want to attend conferences) unless they received something from it. I also felt very strongly that SOF's 'agenda' was getting perilously academic and removed from concerns such as integrity of church membership, relations with traditional believers and a continuing sense of spirituality that loomed large in conversations I'd had in a SOF context. I believed some balance could be restored and non-conference members 'included in' with the production of a magazine for the network, written by members themselves. I wanted to 'turn on the current' and, having volunteered, was elected as Editor.

Clive, like all our editors, worked hard to encourage members to risk putting their thoughts down on paper and spent a lot of time patiently going through their work to improve their arguments. In an attempt to encourage new discussion he suggested some possible topics. Here's a couple of them:

How can we guard against our radical beliefs becoming elitist and inward-looking and make then relevant to people who suffer – physically, financially or environmentally?

Does the phenomenon of SOF signify



anything? Is it more of an end than a beginning? Or just a means of adapting to a post-Christian posture?

Clive handed on the editor's baton to David Boulton after ten editions with a plea to keep the scope of *Sea of Faith* wide.

The *Sea of Faith* Magazine, or in its latest reincarnation *Sofia*, will always have a special place within *Sea of Faith*. But we are now in the second decade of the twenty-first century and while the magazine has been embracing innovations in publishing and printing, technology has made remarkable advances in other directions. The 1990s saw the development of the World Wide Web. Patti Whaley was quick to put *Sea of Faith* on the web and launched the *Sea of Faith* website. Rob Wheeler gave it a radical revision and added to its resources.

Our youngsters grow up social networking, tweeting, and downloading their books on to their *Kindle* or *Ipad*. The magazine also has its place on the website but if our discussions are to have a relevance and a future then we have to embrace the relevant technology as well.

Stephen Mitchell is a founder member and former Chair of SOF Network. He is the Rural Dean of Mildenhall in Suffolk.



Fountain, Welwyn Garden City

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## Habeas Corpus

*For Don Cupitt*

When I am dead  
were I admitted to heaven  
I would not feel at home.  
How I would miss the Spring.  
I sit in an April garden  
deep-blue-scented with hyacinths  
amid yellow crown imperials.  
Would I want a heavy gold crown  
for a life achieved? I want this,  
which changes every day,  
one petal now ragged  
where an insect has bitten in,  
everything pressing, passing.

How I would miss the Summer  
with higgledy-piggledy picnics  
on the Heath, even when someone  
gets lost, arrives late cross  
and it threatens rain.

I prefer that to an angel choir  
where I don't belong,  
*habeas corpus* being  
*sine qua non*  
of a human song.

Untidy city with your muddle of people  
living their lives, still falling short.  
Earth with your beauty so old and so new  
that does not stay but slays me  
again and again with each different recurrence,  
kind and careless habitat  
where love can flower (or not),  
and every body lives and dies  
and the heart's desire tantalises.  
I would be homesick in heaven  
and hanker.

Dinah Livingstone



# The Fountain

Don Cupitt gave this talk at the launch party of his latest book *The Fountain* in Emmanuel College, Cambridge on 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2011.

*The Fountain* is billed as being probably my last book. It may be seen as a purely rational religious book for the era of cultural globalisation, being pitched somewhere between Christianity, Buddhism, and the kind of modern critical secularism that began with young Hegelians like Marx and Feuerbach. For about a decade I've called my philosophy 'Energetic Spinozism', meaning a form of religious naturalism whose dominant metaphors speak not of rational necessity, substance, and eternity, but of an explosive outpouring, streaming, and scattering of energies-read-by-us-as-signs. Everything pours out and passes away, everything is *broadcast*, and *on show*, everything is constantly being re-read, re-interpreted and re-valued. In short, everything is utterly transient, including both you and me, both the stuff of the world and all our readings of it. Everything is always in flux. Call my energetic Spinozism watery, if you like, in contrast to Spinoza's dryness.

The Fountain metaphor applies these ideas of the continual coming-forth of all temporal Being, to Big-Bang- cosmology, to life, to the world of human communications, to the human self, and even to God, who is spoken of as pouring out his spirit upon all flesh in the last days. Even God scatters and democratises himself, and so passes away. Hence the slogan 'God, ever-living and ever-dying'. I've been trying to introduce various neologisms to describe how everything pours out all the time from nothing, calling it E/ Vent or forthcoming, or M/Other, a kind of symbolically-female darkness, the O/void.

As I tell all this story, I'm trying not to *escape* from our utter transience, but to get readers so immersed in it that we get a blissful intuition of the eternal in the very midst of life. The Fountain is all gushing, formless transience: but as we step back from it, it becomes a symbol of healing and repose, and of life's consoling self-renewal. In city squares and in great gardens the Fountain is situated at a point where many ways meet, a *focal* point that attracts the eye. An observation as old as Aristotle points out that there are motions so even and rapid that they can seem to be completely still. Like a child's spinning top, like a

bear of light 'resting' upon something, like the far-off stream tumbling down a hillside, and like the Fountain.

Let's switch the metaphor for a moment replacing the Fountain with the Sun. The process by which the sun lives or exists all the time is identical with the process by which it dies all the time. It synthesises living and dying. It hasn't a care. It is all-out. It is pure Act: it lives in an eternal Now. That's how we too can and should live. We should – to use another jargon phrase – be 'easy going', happy to be transient, pouring out our own lives along with everything else. Hence my phrase 'Solar Ethics', and indeed I hope that one day *The Fountain* may be published in one volume with the *Solar Ethics* of 1995.

So, then, this little book is for everyone. It says that our chief religious problem today, in an age of extremely rapid cultural change, is time-dread and the fear of death. I try to show that one can be completely happy to be just a mortal. Go with the flow: we are always in the midst of things, and will never be left out. We can be content always simply to coincide with our own expressive lives. I *am* the time of any life; so should *have* the time of my life.

Thus I have urged people to give up the old metaphysics of substance, and instead be content with our own passing lives. We come to pass, and we pass away. That's it. That's all. We are already in the last world we will ever know, as I believe most people nowadays recognise. We should therefore move on from the kind of outlook that persuades us to spend all our lives preparing for another life beyond this one. We are there already! The Church is both institutionally and ideologically committed to the idea of another world beyond this one. That idea is, I think, no longer tenable, which is why I wrote thirty years ago that 'Classical Western Christianity is now our Old Testament'. It's time to move on, and to explore the next dispensation.

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*The Fountain* is reviewed by Stephen Mitchell on page 24.

# God, Science and the Quest for Moral Certainty 1

In two extracts from his talk given at the SOF London Conference Kenan Malik looks at the strange similarity between relying on God or Science for moral certainty.

‘God does not exist, everything is permitted.’ Dostoevsky never actually wrote that line, though so often is it attributed to him that he might as well have. It has become the almost reflexive response of believers when faced with an argument for a godless world. Without religious faith, runs the argument, we cannot anchor our moral truths or truly know right from wrong. Without belief in God we will be lost in a miasma of moral nihilism.

In recent years, the riposte of many to this challenge has been to argue that moral codes are to be discovered not in the mind of God but in the human brain. They are not revealed through faith but uncovered by science.

Ethics is not a theological matter but a scientific one. Science is a means of making sense not simply of facts about the world, but also of values, because values are in essence facts in another form.

Some, like the cognitive psychologist Marc Hauser, who has faced condemnation by Harvard authorities for the fraudulent manipulation of experimental data, argue that humans possess a ‘moral organ’ akin to Noam Chomsky’s language organ, ‘equipped with a universal moral grammar, a toolkit for building specific moral systems.’ Others, such as the philosopher Sam Harris, reject the idea that evolutionary dispositions are a good guide to questions of right and wrong, but suggest that values are facts about ‘states of the human brain’ and so to study morality we have to study neural states. In his new book, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values*, which has caused considerable stir, Harris writes that:

Questions about values are really questions about the well-being of conscious creatures.

Values, therefore, translate into facts that can be scientifically understood: regarding positive and negative social emotions, the effects of specific laws on human relationships, the neurophysiology of happiness and suffering, etc.

Science does not simply explain why we might respond in particular ways to equality or to torture but also whether equality is a good, and torture morally acceptable. For those whom we might describe as ‘neuro-moralists’, the best way to distinguish between good and evil is, it would seem, in an fMRI scanner.

At first glance these two approaches – that God tells us what to do, and that science defines right and wrong – seem to be distinct, indeed almost polar opposite, ap-

proaches. One alienates moral values to a transcendental realm, and makes them the personal choice of a deity, albeit an all-powerful, entirely good deity. The other suggests that values emerge out of human needs, and that such values can be discovered by scientists in the same way that they can discover the causes of earthquakes or the composition of the sun.

I want to suggest, however, that these two approaches have far more in common than might appear at first glance. In particular, in the desire to look either to God or to science to define moral values, both diminish the importance of human agency in the creation of a moral framework. Both seek to set moral values in ethical concrete.

The religious insistence on the need for a divine ethical lawmaker is, in part, an argument about the nature of God. In the monotheistic traditions, God is an all-powerful, all-knowing, completely good transcendent being, upon whose



power, knowledge and goodness humans rely to establish the moral rules by which they should live.

This is not simply, however, an argument about God's nature. It is also a claim about human nature. It is the weakness of human nature that creates the necessity for God's moral law. In the Christian tradition that weakness is primarily the result of Original Sin. All humans are fallen because of Adam and Eve's transgression in the Garden of Eden in eating of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, having been forbidden to do so by God. It was this act of disobedience that disordered and disabled human nature. 'The overwhelming misery which oppresses men and their inclination towards evil and death,' as the Catechism of the Catholic Church puts it, 'cannot be understood apart from their connection with Adam's sin and the fact that he has transmitted to us a sin with which we are all born afflicted.' Only through God's grace can humans now achieve salvation. 'It is through the grace of God alone,' the theologian Alister McGrath explains, 'that our illness is diagnosed (sin) and a cure made available (grace).'

The great medieval philosopher Thomas Aquinas more than any previous Christian thinker lauded human nature and human reason and, unlike most theologians before him who had often insisted that faith and reason were contrary principles, sought instead to find faith through reason. But like all Christian thinkers Aquinas saw human nature and human reason through the prism of Original Sin. Before Adam and Eve's misdeeds, human nature had been in pristine condition. Once humans had been cast out of the Garden of Eden, their nature was no longer a reliable guide to good and evil, 'On account of the uncertainty of human judgement,' Aquinas wrote, 'different people form different judgements on human acts; whence also different and contrary laws result'. Such confusion reveals the need for divine intervention:

In order, therefore, that man may know without any doubt what he ought to do and what he ought to avoid, it was necessary for man to be

directed in his proper acts by a law given by God, for it is certain that such a law cannot err.

What is striking about this medieval theological claim about human nature is how closely it mirrors the argument now made by many of those who reject God but look to science to define right and wrong. The bioethicist Julian Savulescu, Director of the Uehiro Center for Practical Ethics at Oxford, argues, for instance, that the human capacity for morality is 'limited', because evolution favoured a tribal, short-sighted sense of morality that is insufficient to deal with the problems of the twenty-first century, from climate change to terrorism. Space age science can, however, put right our Stone Age morality. 'Our moral

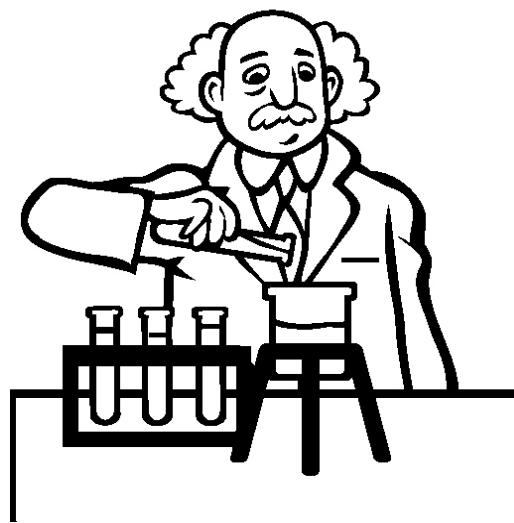
dispositions are,' Savulescu argues, 'malleable by biomedical and genetic means'. So, a combination of positive eugenics and neurological intervention will, he believes, provide for 'a better understanding of human moral limitation' and allow us to 'inculcate certain values and certain forms of morality', enhancing good dispositions such as altruism, generosity and compassion, and flushing out unacceptable ones such as aggression and xenophobia.

In other words, to echo Aquinas, the uncertainty of human judgment has created different and contrary moral codes. So that we may know without doubt what we should do and what we should avoid, it is necessary for humans to be directed in their proper acts by moral laws established by science, for such laws cannot err. The argument about the weakness of human nature, and the necessity for moral certainty to be imposed upon frail humans, has become translated from the language of faith and transcendence to that of science and empiricism.

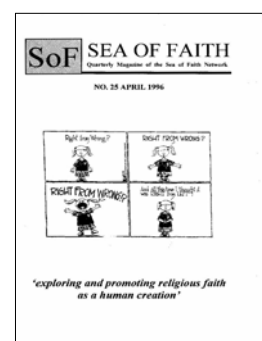
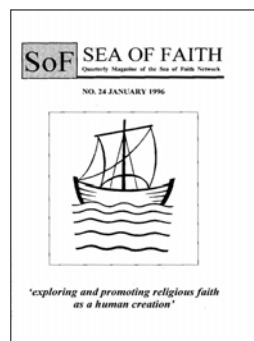
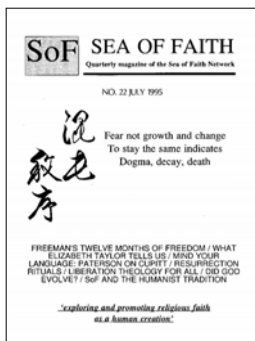
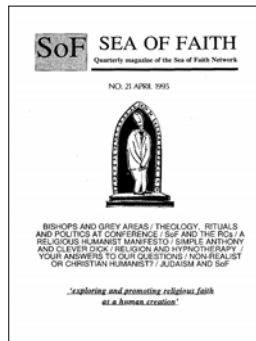
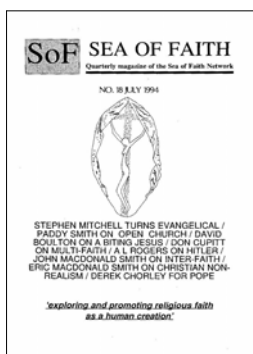
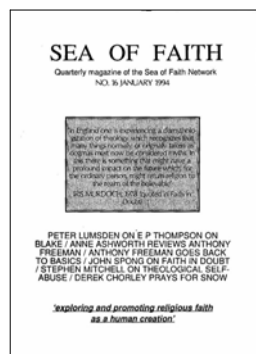
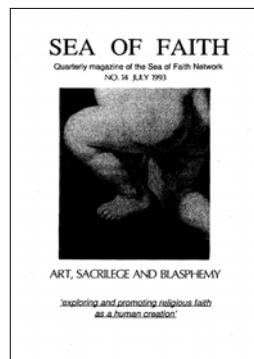
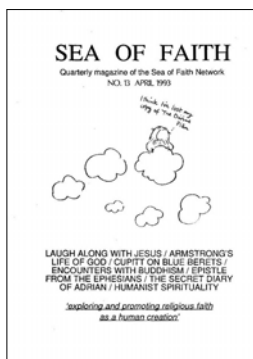
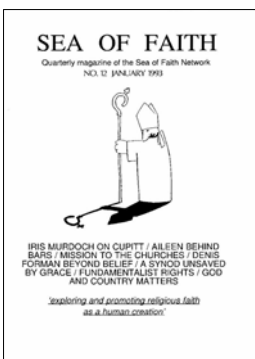
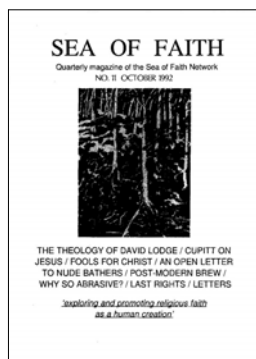
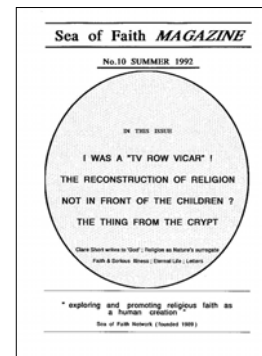
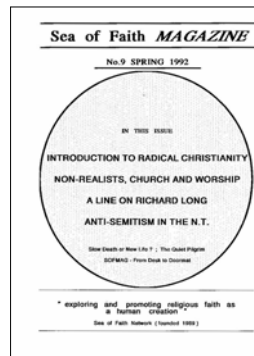
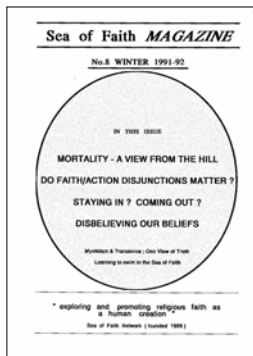
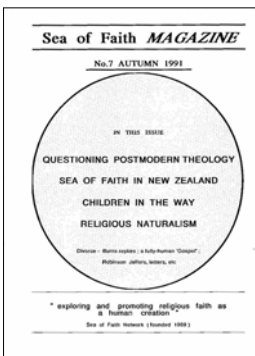
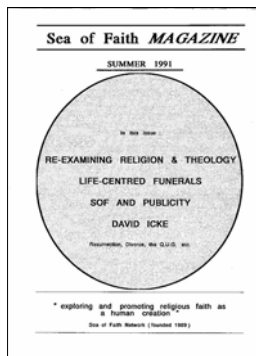
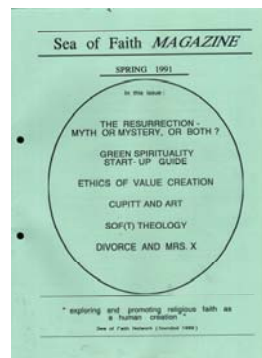
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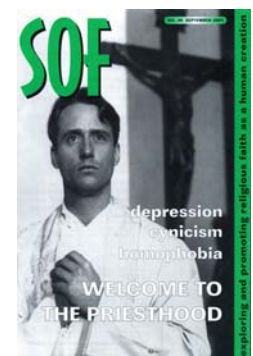
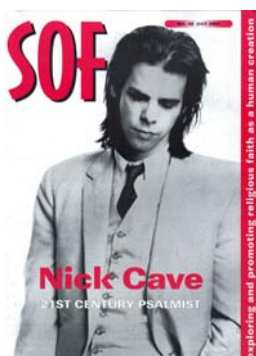
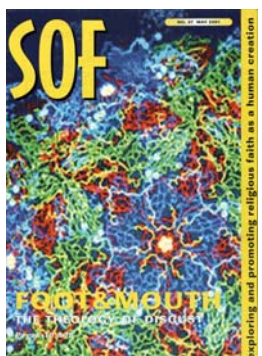
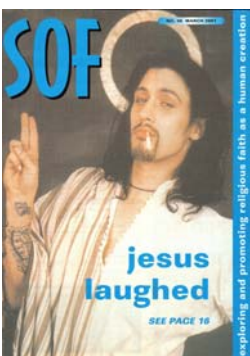
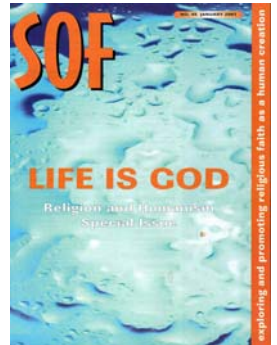
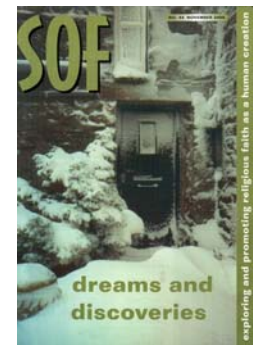
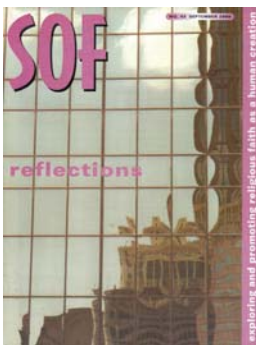
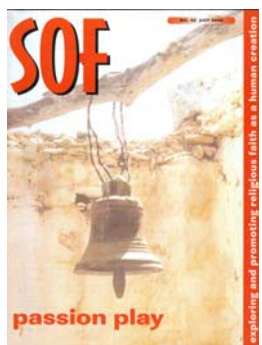
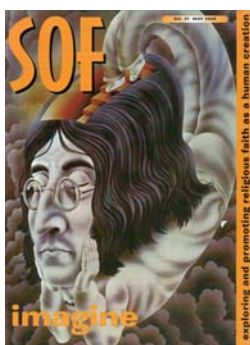
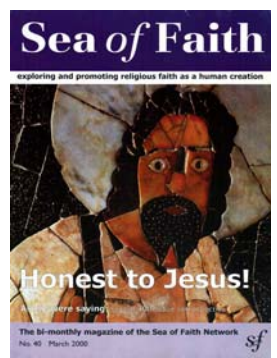
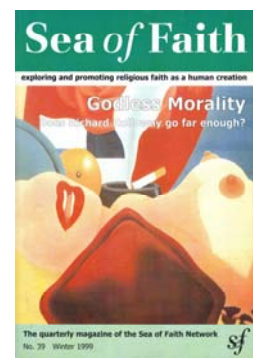
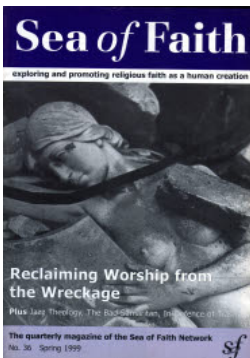
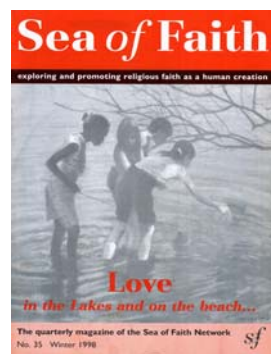
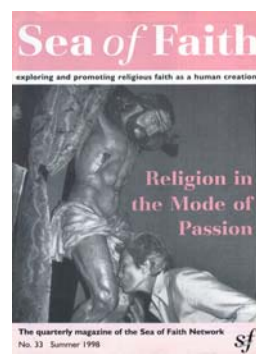
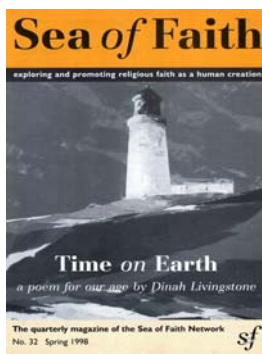
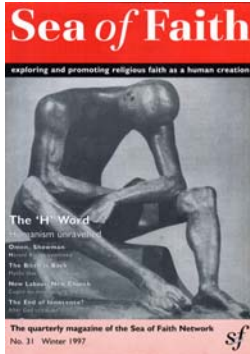
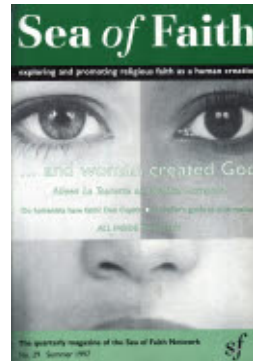
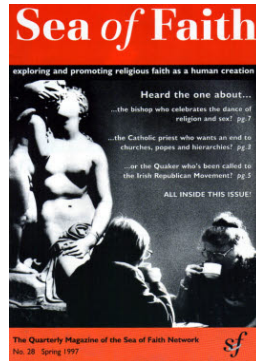
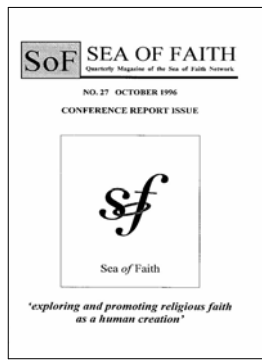
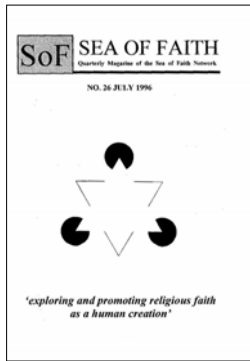
Kenan Malik is a writer, lecturer and broadcaster, a presenter of Radio 4's *Analysis* and a panellist on *The Moral Maze*. His latest book *From Fatwa to Jihad: The Rushdie Affair and its Legacy* was shortlisted for the 2010 George Orwell Book Prize. [www.kenanmalik.com](http://www.kenanmalik.com)



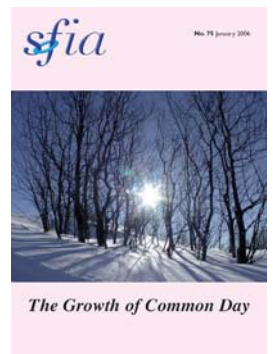
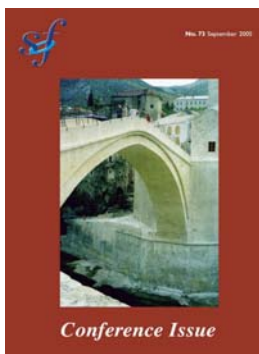
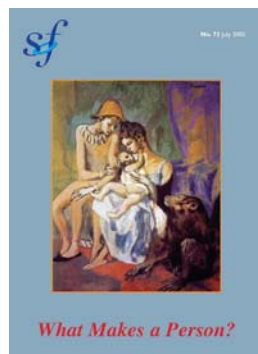
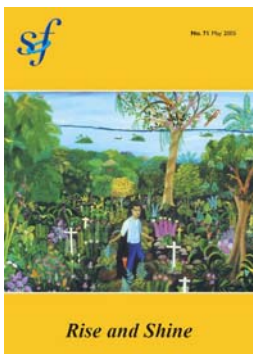
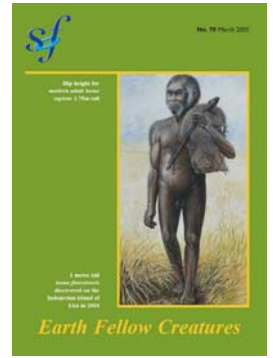
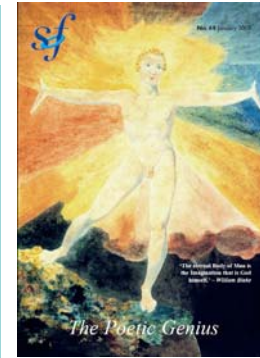
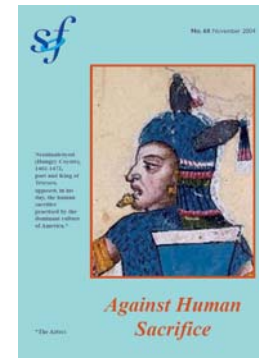
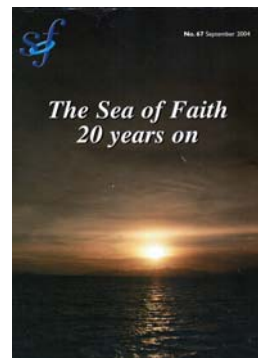
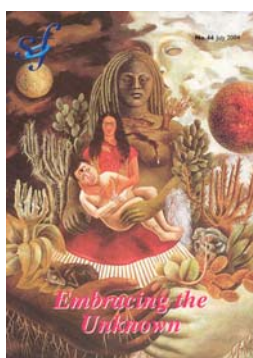
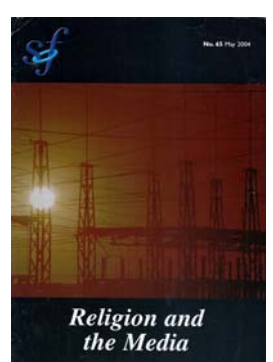
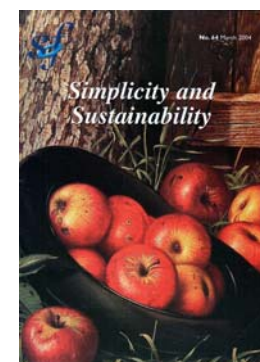
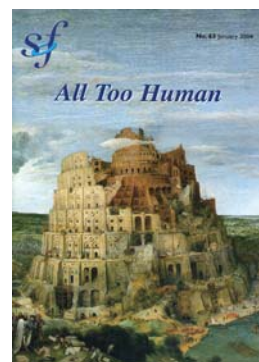
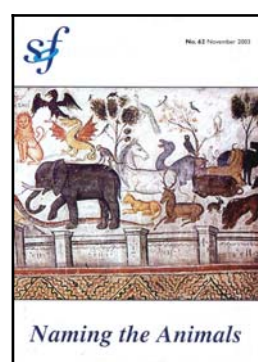
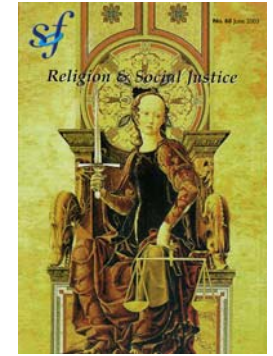
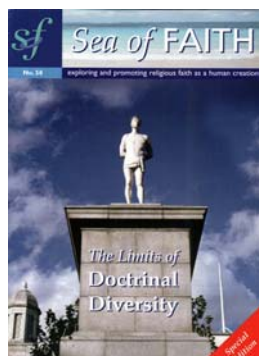
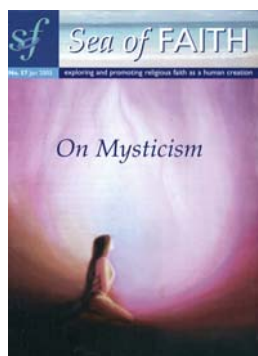
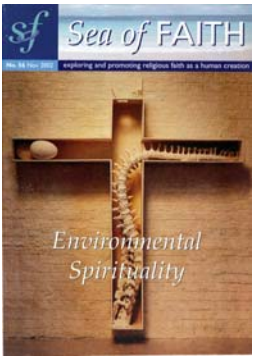
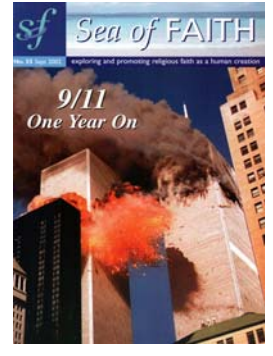
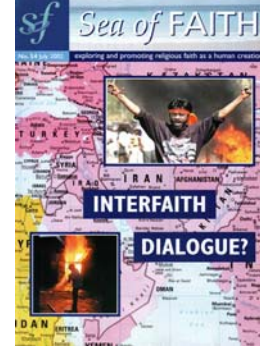
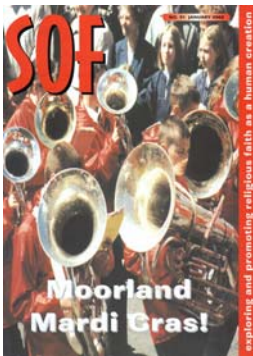




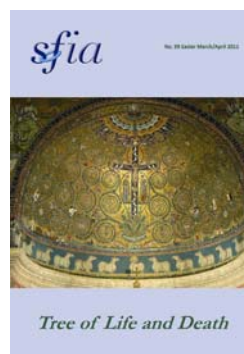
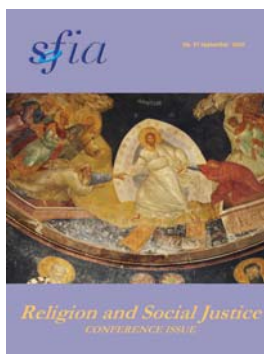
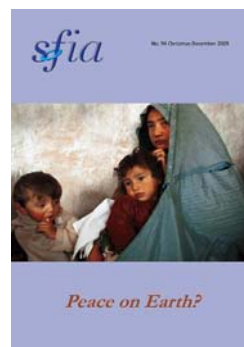
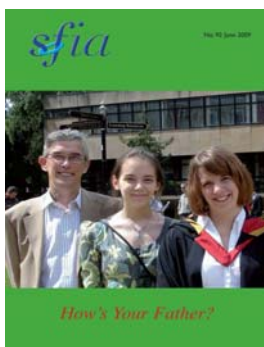
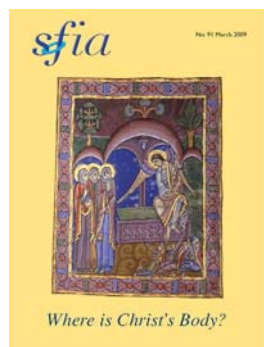
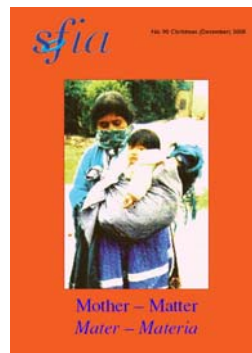
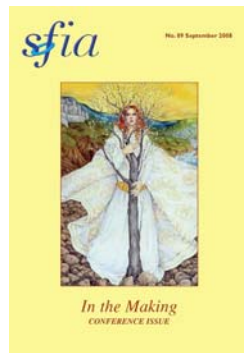
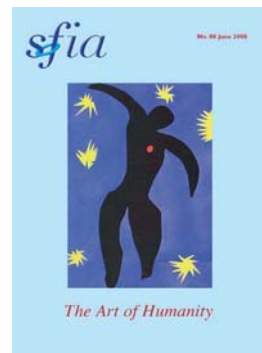
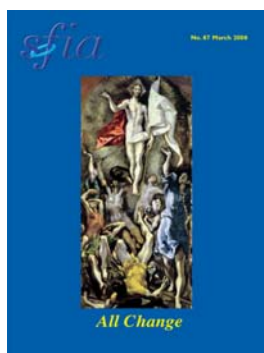
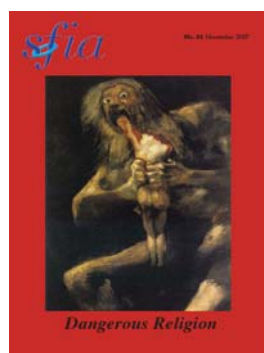
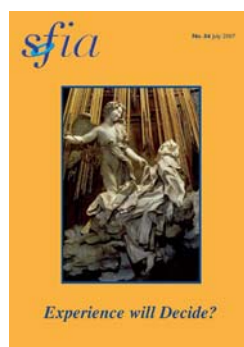
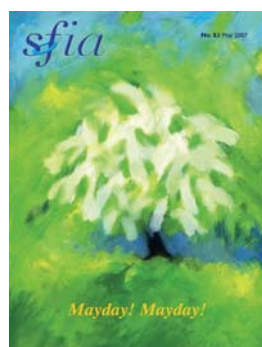
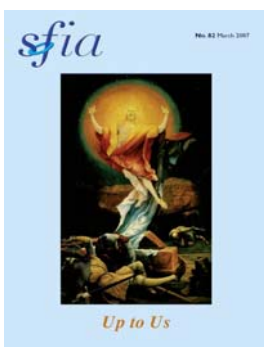
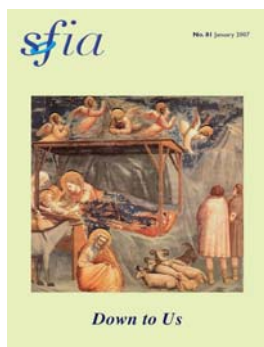
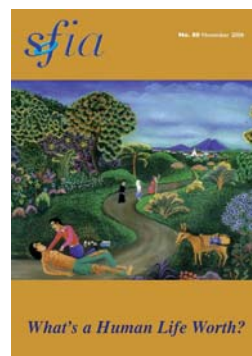
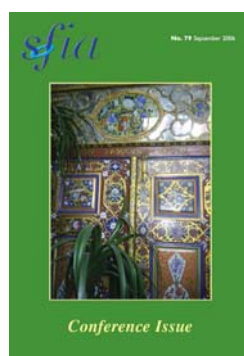
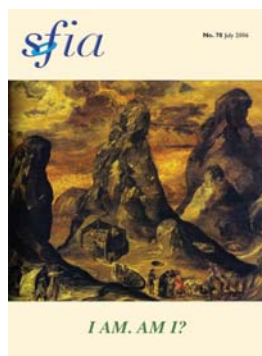
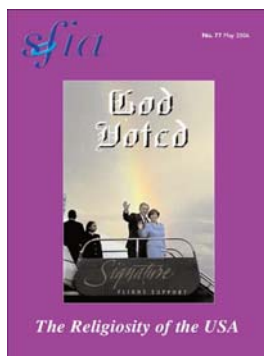












# Sofia: the Pursuit

Editor Dinah Livingstone shares some thoughts about *Sofia*.

I can't speak for the whole SOF Network but with this hundredth issue I thought I'd say something about *Sofia*, which I have edited since 2004. Before that, the magazine had served its purpose well at the time when, rather like the early Christians hoping for an imminent Second Coming, there was an imminent hope that the churches might openly 'buy non-realism'. When I took over the editorship, I wanted to move the magazine on from what might be called the ding-dong mode – the mode of apologetics, the unending argument about 'realism' and 'non-realism' and the famous 'sliver', the proposition lists, the 'hypos'...

*Sofia* takes for granted that God and all the gods are created by the human imagination or poetic genius, and religions are human creations. On that basis, it tries to explore our common treasury of religious stories and practices, which may contain much wisdom. It would be a pity if that wisdom were lost to a secular society. At the same time *Sofia* is fully prepared to confront and criticise the negative things to be found in religions.

Stories of supernatural beings are 'poetic tales' or myths. But we need *mythos* as well as *logos*; imagination is as important for our humanity as are philosophical statements. Recently, we have been offered a Jesus who was merely a sage and moral teacher, which assumes it was a 'disaster that early Christianity turned him into a God'. However, for his followers Jesus became both *logos* and *mythos* incarnate or, as Blake would put it centuries later, 'the Lord, the universal humanity'. I think there is great richness, wisdom and insight to be explored in this developing theology, for us too who regard all supernatural beings as products of the human imagination. We need both *logos* and *mythos* in our approach not only to stories of God as universal Father, but also to stories of God the Son and God the Holy Ghost.

While 'historical Jesus' research is interesting and important, it is not the whole story. There is also the danger that the researcher will construct a 'historical Jesus' that accords with his (usually) or her preconceptions and reject any evidence that

goes against them. Anyway, I don't think Jesus saw himself primarily as a 'sage' or ethical expert. His behaviour, like that of many revolutionaries – for example, his reported consistent rudeness to his mother – is not a model to be followed blindly in all circumstances. First and foremost, Jesus thought he had a mission to announce and inaugurate the coming on Earth of what he called the Kingdom of God, which was not just a matter of private morality but of *social joy*.

He described that Kingdom in many parables. This is the central Christian 'myth', to which were added the splendid *kenosis* hymn in *Philippians* about one in the form of God 'emptying himself'; together with pregnant images of a new humanity as 'the body of Christ' (developed in recent decades in the liberation theology of 'the crucified people'); and the marriage of heaven and Earth with Christ as the divine bridegroom and 'fair Jerusalem his bride'. She then becomes the beautiful city where tears are wiped away. And more, including the intricacies of the developing Christian theology of incarnation and trinity. In fact, the Chalcedon statement that Jesus Christ as human and divine is one and the same person, the same, the same, the same ... leads to the most humanist outcome. All that is ours.

*Sofia* believes we should 'test everything; hold fast to what is good' (1 Th 5:21). It is worth exploring the whole Christian tradition and sifting for 'what is good'. Or perhaps we should say traditions. *Sofia* is interested in both the 'high' and 'low' traditions – for example, the Catholic sense of the sacramental and wealth of liturgy and symbol, and the Protestant challenging of overweening clerical claims to authority, 'cleansing the temple'. 'Exploring' is not always 'endorsing' and we should not hesitate to be fierce critics when necessary. The majority of SOF members come from these Christian traditions so that is our starting point. At the same time some SOF members (as well as non-members) can tell us more about the richness to be found in other religions, for example, American Indian religions. Bolivia, which has its first indigenous president,



Evo Morales, is giving the Earth, known as the mother goddess Pachamama, legal rights in its 'Law of Mother Earth'. It is not clear, though, how this law will operate.

When we say 'hold fast to what is good', the question arises 'good for what?' The answer has to be for humanity and Earth our habitat. In rejecting the supernatural, *Sofia* is for humanity with its questing imagination and enabling dreams, for a sane and kindly humanism that sees the liberation and flowering of humanity as the chief object of culture. Religion is part of human culture; it is one of the main ways in which people have tried to make sense of their lives and the world in which they find themselves. They make gods and then these gods make them. *Sofia* rejects the postmodernist view that 'it's all relative'. It regards humanity and the Earth as of the utmost importance. That is not something you prove but something you love. And you don't need a God to tell you to do that.

For the full flowering of humanity we need poetry as well as love. Human love and kindness become richer when their imagination is fed. With its full awareness both of the inestimable value of our treasury of religious stories and that the supernatural is a product of the human imagination, *Sofia* (together with SOF Network as a whole) is in a strong, perhaps unique, position not only to reflect on that treasury but to keep it current and active in our general culture. Apart from anything else, much of our literature can't be understood without some knowledge of it.

For this treasury is not the private property of religious institutions; it belongs to us all. We should not treat it as a separate 'bank account' held in a foreign country (always dodgy). That is why it is *Sofia's* policy to give some space to poetry that is not confined to what are usually thought of as 'religious' topics, as well as to accounts of visits to all kinds of exhibitions and places charged with meaning.

I constantly meet people who say, 'I'm not religious but...' and then go on to express their interest in religious themes and stories and, often, commitment to their import. Such people do not usually go to church but I also think many people who do go to church are quietly thinking *sofist* thoughts, despite (or because of?) the fact that many churches have officially been becoming more fundamentalist. So although it seems unlikely that SOF will win in a knockout ding-dong with the official churches, *Sofia* wants to be part of that process which could be described as

osmosis, that scent, that gentler infiltration not only into the churches but our whole society.

In this attempt to move outwards, I have to say what a relief it is that the magazine is now called *Sofia*, because the name is much more understandable outside a narrow circle of initiates. In February this year I was invited to take part in an international poetry festival in Granada, Nicaragua. Among my biographical details, with which I was introduced by the organisers, was 'Editor of the magazine *Sofia*'. The local audience and the poets from over fifty countries all round the world had an immediate inkling of what the magazine might be about, whereas *Sea of Faith* would probably not only have baffled but misled them. The same thing happens in London when *Sofia* is mentioned. SOF is the root and *Sofia* is the flower and my wish is that she may blossom as abundantly as the maytree in this glorious Spring. I mean wisdom, which the magazine does not claim to be, but is called after, her patron saint. Or in Pauline cosmic terms – echoed by Blake above: 'Christ the wisdom of God' (1 Cor 1:24), in whom everything is 'recapitulated' (Eph1:10). At the same time 'wisdom' is not confined to Christianity. *Sofia* does not dispense wisdom but pursues it – but yes, those Tories are at it again, trying to abolish May Day and all it stands for, and that destructive David Cameron had a nerve, singing in Westminster Abbey about building Jerusalem.

This is a sketch of what could be called *Sofia's* editorial line. The magazine is also a forum for all SOF members, as well as writers from further afield. Different points of view are welcome but the Editor and everyone else is free to disagree with them.

'Seek first his kingdom' (Mt 6:33). Jesus announced the Kingdom of God, or we could translate it 'the reign of kindness', coming on Earth. This kingdom belonged first and foremost to the poor, the hungry would be satisfied. It would be a society in which people are kind to one another, a task that is both personal and political. Jesus thought that kingdom was coming soon but as we can see, it has not come yet, except in small ways and unlikely places. Nevertheless, this is the central 'poetic tale' in the Christian story to which *Sofia* holds fast. Or perhaps we should say vision. As William Morris put it at the end of *News from Nowhere*: 'If others can see it as I have seen it, it may be called a vision rather than a dream.' That is *Sofia's* main pursuit.



# God, Science and the Quest for Moral Certainty 2

In this second extract from his talk given at the SOF London conference Kenan Malik argues that looking to Science to determine right and wrong expresses a very Old Testament view of morality.

If some have turned to religion to provide an anchorage in an age of uncertainty, others find similar solace in science. Science today is expected to provide not just a factual description of the world, but also a moral account of human existence. 'People need a sacred narrative,' the sociobiologist EO Wilson argues. 'They must have a sense of larger purpose, in one form or other, however intellectualised.' Such a sacred narrative, he believes, can be either a religion or a science. 'The true evolutionary epic,' he writes, 'retold as poetry, is as intrinsically ennobling as any religious epic.' Evolutionary science 'has brought new revelations of great moral importance... from which new intimations of immortality can be drawn and a new mythos evolved.'

## Do the gods love the good because it is good, or is it good because it is loved by the gods?

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Wilson may be a maverick, and few would accept his idea of the evolutionary story retold as a sacred narrative, but science has unquestionably stepped in increasingly to answer questions that previously were seen as political or moral. And for many that is the only way that such questions can be answered. Where there are disagreements over moral questions, Sam Harris writes, 'science will... decide' which view is right 'because the discrepant answers people give to them translate into differences in our brains, in the brains of others and in the world at large.'

Some, like bioethicist Julian Savulescu, as we have seen, take it further, looking to science not only to determine right and wrong but also to make humans more right than wrong. Drugs or neurosurgery could help purge racists of their immoral views, and neurotransmitters such as oxytocin could be added to the water supply to improve the general level of social trust. 'Safe, effective moral enhancements,' should,

Savulescu insists, 'be obligatory, like education or fluoride in the water.'

What is striking about these arguments is that they express a very Old Testament view of morality. Moral norms do not emerge through a process of social engagement and collective conversation, nor in the course of self-improvement, but rather are laws to be revealed from on high and imposed upon those below. Science will tell us which conception of the good life is objectively true, and scientists will inculcate such values into the masses, by tweaking the brain, lacing the water, handing out ethics pills or simply by keeping an eye upon our behaviour.

Sam Harris, for instance, relishes the prospect of governments and corporations utilising neuro-scanning technology to detect if people are lying, and so enforcing no-lie zones. 'Thereafter, civilised men and women might share a common presumption,' he writes, 'that whenever important conversations are held, the truthfulness of all participants will be monitored... Many of us might feel no more deprived to lie during a job interview or at a press conference than we currently feel deprived of the freedom to remove our pants in the supermarket.' Not for Harris the moral virtues of freedom and liberty. Science has decreed that truthfulness, at least truthfulness to those in power, possesses a moral premium.

The moral Utopias conjured up by Savulescu and Harris remind one of nothing so much as modern, high-tech versions of Plato's Republic, that best of societies in which 'the desires of the inferior many are controlled by the wisdom and desires of the superior few.' Unlike a democracy, in which every citizen ruler is, in Plato's words, 'always surrendering rule over himself to which ever desire comes along', leading to an anything-goes morality (a fear that lies at the heart of much neuromoralist thinking), the rulers of Plato's Republic are especially wise and rational philosopher kings, in whose Utopia a special breeding programme ensures that only the best marry the best, in which deficient children are culled, and in which all undergo a strict programme of education, indoctrination and discipline. No doubt, had Plato known of oxytocin

and neural scanners, they, too, would have had their place in the Republic.

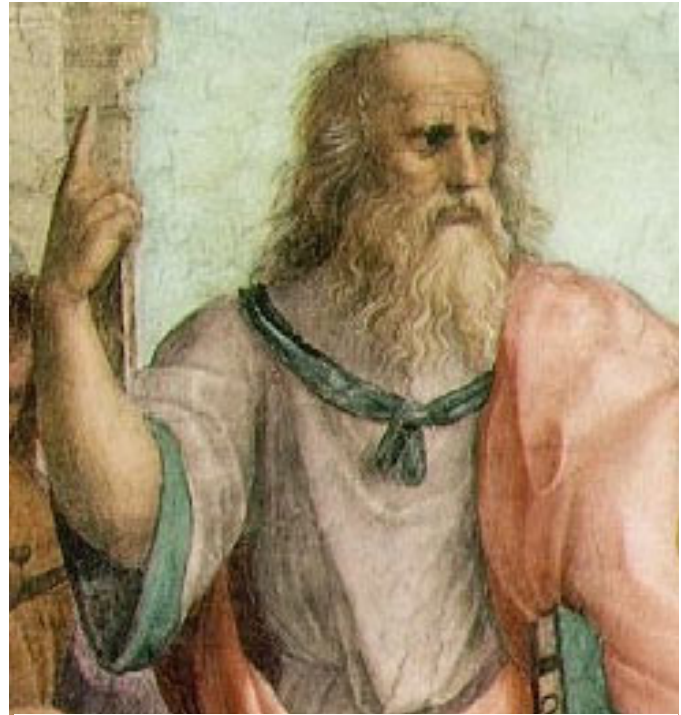
The neuromoralists' Utopias are clearly fantasies. There is no prospect, at least in the foreseeable future, of oxytocin being added to the water or of Nick Griffin being force-fed 'love thy neighbour' pills. And yet, in an age in which many people increasingly look to science for answers to social and moral questions, and in which fMRI scan results are beginning to be used as evidence in criminal cases, it pays to be attentive to such fantasies. What they provide are not blueprints for a coming Platonic Republic but fleshed out versions of themes with which our age is already preoccupied, in particular despair about human nature and disillusionment with human agency.

The desire to root morality in science derives from an aspiration to demonstrate the redundancy of religion to ethical thinking. The irony is that the classic argument against looking to God as the source of moral values – Plato's *Euthyphro* dilemma – is equally applicable to the claim that science is, or should be, the arbiter of good and evil. Plato provided the resources for the Christian view of goodness as a transcendental quality. But he also provided one of the key arguments that challenge the idea that God can define right and wrong. He might have created the template for neuromoralist Utopias. But he also demonstrated the fundamental weakness in their argument.

In his dialogue *Euthyphro*, Plato has Socrates ask the famous question: Do the gods love the good because it is good, or is it good because it is loved by the gods? If the good is good because the gods choose it, then the notion of the good becomes arbitrary. If on the other hand, the gods choose the good because it is good, then the good is independent of the gods (or of the God in monotheistic faiths). Most of us would agree that torture is wrong whatever God's views on the matter. A believer might say that God would never choose torture as a good. But to say that God would never choose torture as a good is implicitly to accept that torture is evil independently of God.

A similar dilemma faces contemporary defenders of the claim that science defines moral values. If well-being is defined simply in biological terms, by the existence of certain neural states, or by the presence of particular hormones or neurotransmitters, or because of certain evolutionary dispositions, then the notion of well-being is arbitrary. If such a definition is not to be arbitrary, then it can only be because the neural state, or hormonal or neurotransmitter level, or the evolutionary disposition, correlates with a notion of well-being or of the good, which has been arrived at independently.

Or, to put it another way, science can tell us about



From Raphael's *School of Athens*:  
Plato, who expelled the poets from his Republic.

the behavioural consequences of oxytocin. But it cannot tell us whether we should add oxytocin to the water supply. It cannot even tell us whether increased trust is a good or an evil. Adding fluoride to water is a good because stronger teeth enamel is desirable in all circumstances. But is it a good that trust be enhanced in all circumstances? After all, would not authoritarian regimes and even democratic politicians welcome a more trustful, and therefore a less questioning, population? These are moral judgements, not scientific ones.

Again, science (or rather scientists) may be able to invent machines that can predict whether an individual is lying or telling the truth. But it cannot tell us whether it is a good that all our thoughts should be monitored. That, again, is a moral judgement.

Who or what can make such a judgement? Or, to ask that question slightly differently, if the *Euthyphro* dilemma reveals the need for an independent gauge of goodness, what could such an independent gauge be, either in the case of God-defined morality or in the case of science-defined morality? The answer is the same in both: the existence of humans as autonomous, moral agents. The significance of the *Euthyphro* dilemma is that it embodies a deeper claim: that concepts such as goodness, happiness and well-being only have meaning in a world in which conscious, rational, moral agents exist. Human choice acts as the bridge between facts and values.

The search for ethical concrete is a search for moral certainty that derives from a despair about human capabilities and a deprecation of human

agency. Both the argument that God tells us what to do and the claim that science defines right and wrong are attempts to relieve humans of the burden of making moral choices, by alienating to God or to science the responsibility for establishing what is good and evil. But one cannot so easily abandon our responsibility to make choices, even in those cases in which external commandments seem to have expunged any possibility of choice.

Take the story of Abraham, in which he is commanded by God to sacrifice his only son Isaac. Kierkegaard points out that even though this is a divine command, Abraham still has to make choices. First, he has to decide whether the command he has received is authentic. And, second, he has to decide whether to follow the command or not. Abraham cannot evade his own moral responsibility simply by following orders.

Perhaps no one has better expressed this sentiment than Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, his meditation on faith and fate. Written in the embers of the Second World War, Camus confronts both the tragedy of recent history and what he sees as the absurdity of the human condition. There is, he observes, a chasm between 'the human need [for meaning] and the unreasonable silence of the world'. Religion is a means of bridging that chasm, but a dishonest one. 'I don't know if the world has any meaning that transcends it,' he writes. 'But I know that I do not know this meaning and that it is impossible for me just now to know it.'

Camus does not know that God does not exist. But he is determined to believe it, because that is the only way to make sense of being human. Humans have to make their own meaning. And that meaning can come only through struggle, even if that struggle appears as meaningless as that of Sisyphus, who, having scorned the gods, was condemned by them to spend eternity in the underworld forever rolling a rock to the top of a mountain.

The certainties of religion provide false hope and in so doing undermine our humanity by denying human choice. So do any other false certainties with which we may replace religion. For Camus, religious faith had to be replaced neither with faithlessness nor with another kind of false certainty but with a different kind of faith: faith in our ability to live with the predicament of being human. It was a courageous argument, especially in the shadow of the Holocaust. It is also an argument that remains as important today as it was then.

The human condition is that of possessing no moral safety net. No God, no scientific law, nor yet any amount of ethical concrete, can protect us from

the dangers of falling off that moral tightrope that is to be human. That can be a highly disconcerting prospect. Or it can be a highly exhilarating one. Being human, the choice is ours.

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In Kenan Malik's original talk, between these two extracts there was a linking historical section, describing the development from belief in God to belief in Science as moral arbiter. His whole talk will be published on SOF website: [www.sofn.org.uk/london/km.html](http://www.sofn.org.uk/london/km.html)  
Short URL direct link: <http://bit.ly/iBbLiH>

## Earth Song

*'We long to make music that will melt the stars.'*  
FLAUBERT

Not entirely,  
unless stars are no more than ice,  
their light the bright shaping of frost  
whose loss would leave heaven featureless.

Better to share  
with them the mystery that keeps  
each star within its galaxy,  
locked in a universe that never sleeps.

One quaver cannot shift  
a constellation's fixed design,  
or tile the bars of space to prove  
we are made equal with the sun.

Earth's hope must be  
some singing will survive, its music  
bright enough to melt the heart  
when, like dead stars, our fires are burnt out.

Edward Storey

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Edward Storey now lives in Wales. His latest collection *Almost a Chime Child* was published by Raven Books in 2010 and his *New and Selected Poems* are published by Rockingham Press.



*Sofia welcomes comment and debate.*

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letters

## Censorship

I'm not sure that our West Country SOF member has been censored (*Sofia* 99: *Radio Rockall*). To turn down a piece, or a series of pieces, for a newsletter is only censorship if that newsletter is effectively the only way of being published; i.e. if the editor has a monopoly on all avenues of distribution. In these times, when there are so many ways to publish, being turned down by one newsletter still leaves many other avenues open.

So I do have some suggestions for our SOF writer. Do not be discouraged by your Rector. Ask if you can run off copies of your pieces and display them in the churches for people to pick up, as Tony Windross did with his excellent series of brochures. Start up your own internet blog, and ask if you can advertise in the newsletter to attract people to subscribe to your blog. Or start up your own mailing list – paper or electronic – and advertise in the newsletter for people to send you their address if they want to subscribe. If your Rector and Warden refuse to let you distribute or advertise your writings in any way, then I think you can fairly say that you have been censored. But I hope they will not, and that you can continue to find an appreciative audience.

Patti Whaley

Faversham

[pattihickswaley@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:pattihickswaley@yahoo.co.uk)

## Anne Ashworth's Journal

I've been reading *Sofia* and found much of interest especially in Anne Ashworth's journal, with its echoes my own 'pilgrimage'. I too have been particularly exercised by those 'dimensions of life' for which only religious language seems adequate. There was much in Anne's journal worth reflecting on, particularly the way in which we (or

at least some of us) who started life with a profoundly religious sense and vision have now moved beyond the traditionally religious constraints of thinking, not to reject them in a formal atheistic or secular sense, but to expand and enhance them by responding to modern knowledge of the way things are. It's not that our past is denied but re-evaluated. I find most people I meet can't understand this distinction.

Along the way we seem to have met up with people like Brian Cox – I was very struck by his recent *Wonders of the Universe* series on BBC2. People like him are coming from a purely secular background who realise that a sense of awe and wonder – Rudolf Otto's famous understanding of holiness' – is an important element in their pilgrimage. I think this is quite a distinctive pathway which *Sofia* – under your inspired direction – continues to pilot in a way no other journal I know of does.

Dominic Kirkham  
Manchester

## An Eden Project

Readers who, like me, found Part 1 of Anthony Freeman's *Eden Project* interesting (*Sofia* 99), may also be interested in a recent book, *In the Name of God: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Ethics and Violence* by John Teehan (Wiley Blackwell 2010). Teehan uses recent developments in evolutionary psychology to trace, in a more detailed – and, for me, totally convincing – way, the likely course of the evolution of ethics from the earliest humans, to the present day use of religion as a ground for acts of violence. I am willing to email anyone interested an outline of the argument of the book.

Donald Feist  
Dunedin, New Zealand  
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# SOF Sift

A column in which Network members think out loud about SOF and their own quest.

*Steve Regis, Friern Barnet, London*

## Wondering Wanderer

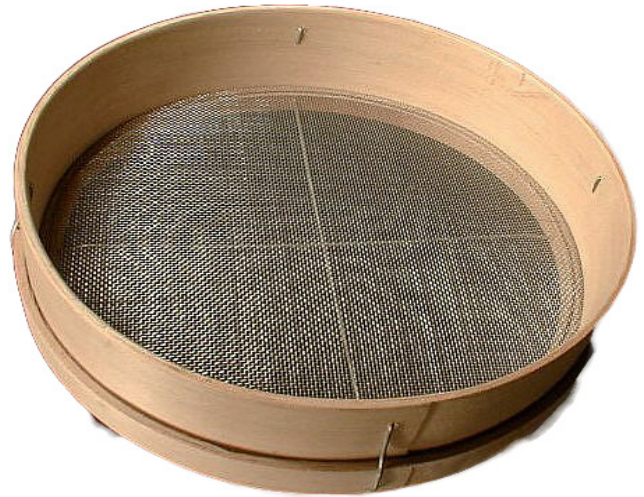
At 15 or so, by virtue of (what were then to me) unsatisfactory answers to my questions, I rejected Confirmation in the Church of England. At 16, (less virtuously) seeking to keep my eye on a church-going girl I fancied, I fell under the spell of a preacher. By 18 I was committed to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament in the Congregational Church (later United Reformed Church). By 38 I was on my way out of that ministry.

At the time I wanted to say that, just as God had led me into the ministry, so he led me out of it. Whatever the truth, I flourished for a while. Particularly so in Barnet in the early 1970s – producing a plethora of worship and drama events in the Mill Hill Council of Churches. Exciting times – until I became exhausted in the telling and had nothing more to say; and/or much of what I might say would not go down well with the majority within my congregation or my fellow clergy. Furthermore, whatever I said would not be heard by any outside church walls unless we found another language – because its language no longer spoke in an alive and relevant way to many, if not most, people.

As part of my psychotherapy training I undertook a Jungian analysis which did much to aid a revaluation of my beliefs. One day I remarked that I saw myself as helping the church to come to terms with the ‘dark’ side of our nature. ‘Good luck,’ my analyst replied. But, as with many in SOF, I ran out of luck and was unable to change things within the church.

So I needed to take up the challenges of modern-day living without the protection of my ministerial cloth. Yet a vocational aspect never left me; which was and is to find the means to convey ‘things that really matter’. Thus, wherever I was and whatever I did, it was always the writing that meant most to me. My Abrahamic-like journey has continued ever since, but unlike Abraham I have never quite found a place of rest.

First as a minister, then social worker and later psychotherapist and trainer and ever the family man, I have continued to explore life (often referring to it as ‘Life’, which for me largely replaced what once I ascribed



to ‘God’) as I search for a language to describe ‘things that really matter’.

Some years ago – while attempting to make meaningful contact with erstwhile colleagues in the URC ministry at a residential conference – I sat in the library devouring Don Cupitt’s book *Radicals and the Future of the Church*. Also about that time someone introduced me to Richard Holloway’s writings. I found myself then, as I do now, sitting somewhere between them. But also apart, for their language is still largely addressed to those familiar with an ‘old faith’ who seek a new faith, rather than those who have no faith but seek some way.

Back then I looked into the Sea of Faith and was quite taken; but maybe not enough. In any event I kept my distance. Now, having taken a second look more deeply, I find much that has appeal – seeing this as an agreeable ground on which to stand. A ground that is not very solid and could disappear – along with its dwindling band of my contemporaries who grew up in the early post-war years within a society still familiar with the Bible and Christian symbolism. And I must say how it feels good, both to mix with and be welcomed by others from such a background as I search for something more suited – not only for myself but for succeeding generations.

For me, these past few past months have been a resurgence of studying material that explores what coming from and moving out of a Christianised milieu might mean. I remain unsure where this leaves me or leads me. However, currently I find myself wanting to put on one side the more specialised Christian roots in order to seek what now branches out from humanity’s religious roots as a whole; asking for instance, What can words and phrases such as: ‘soul’, ‘forgiveness’, ‘being human’, ‘good and evil’, mean today?

# Red Letter Day

A column which recalls the birthday or death day of people who have made a notable contribution to humanity. Mary Lloyd presents John Lilburne.

## 29<sup>th</sup> August: John Lilburne



John Lilburne 1614 – 29 August 1657

John Lilburne, affectionately known as ‘Freeborn John’, died of fever 29<sup>th</sup> August 1657, probably aged 43. At the time, he was on extended leave from imprisonment at Dover Castle, visiting his wife and 10 children at Eltham.

A political agitator and Puritan pamphleteer from apprenticeship days, he was brought before Star Chamber in 1638 and demanded his right to take the oath in English, rather than French. Flogged through the streets, pilloried and imprisoned, he was confirmed in his lifelong determination to fight for the ‘freeborn rights’ of every human being: among them, freedom of religion and equality before the law.

Rising to Lieutenant Colonel in the Civil War, he left the parliamentary army in 1645, refusing to sign the Presbyterian Covenant, and was imprisoned in the Tower for denouncing the Earl of Manchester as a Royalist. Labelled a ‘Leveller’ by his enemies, he preferred the term ‘Agitators’ for his thousands of supporters, who struck a medal celebrating ‘Freeborn John’ in 1649.

During the years in the Tower, he collaborated on three editions of *An Agreement of the Free People of England*, which demanded regular elections, universal male suffrage, equal electoral districts and an end to conscription, along with religious freedom and equality before the law. He strongly supported women’s equality, if not universal suffrage.

Most significantly, the Agreement also made the first formal demand for the adoption of a written constitution and the reform of the House of Lords: issues which still prove contentious today, over 350 years later.

## March 26<sup>th</sup> 2011 Christians Bail-In Against the Cuts

On 26<sup>th</sup> March 2011, the day of the great TUC March, Christians concerned about the cuts planned to hold an ecumenical service in Barclays Bank on 16-17 Tottenham Court Road, London at 2pm. People were invited to be in the store at 2pm and ‘join in when you hear “O Come All Ye Faithful” start:

‘The British taxpayer bailed-out the banks with £1 trillion of public money and they haven’t paid us back. So now we are bailing-in and transforming this Barclays into a church... We want to show the millionaires in cabinet that we know what their cuts are doing to our communities and they should be making the banks pay, not our communities and congregations. Barclays was founded by Christians – Quakers to be precise... But just last month Barclays paid £3.5bn in bonuses, with average pay per employee in the investment banking division rising to £236,000 – that’s ten times the UK’s average salary. It was this greed, and the recklessness of the banks, that caused the economic crisis. Yet the government are making ordinary people pay the price. David Cameron himself has said that the cuts will change Britain’s “whole way of life”.’

When people arrived to attend the service, Barclay’s Bank had closed early. Christians planning to join in the worship included Chris Howson, a Church of England priest and author from Bradford, and Symon Hill, associate director of the Christian think-tank Ekklesia.

Source: <http://another-green-world.blogspot.com/2011/03/christians-bail-in-against-cuts.html>



TUC March, London, March 26<sup>th</sup> 2011. Half a million or more marched.



## Stephen Mitchell reviews *The Fountain: A Secular Theology*

by Don Cupitt

SCM Press (London 2010). Pbk. 86 pages. £14.99.

*The Fountain* is dedicated to 'To the members of the Sea of Faith with my gratitude'. Even the very word *SOF* is delightfully slipped into the text.

The dedication is appropriate. At the very first Sea of Faith conference in 1988, the question delegates were left asking was: 'Can we create a new religious story?' As Denis Nineham had said in his lecture, 'If a new radical theology is to be communicable and become the focus of a community it needs a new religious story which isn't biblically based.' Here, now, over twenty years and thirty books later is a new religious story, a secular theology. But don't expect a self-congratulatory read. This book is a challenge to the Sea of Faith.

At the end of that first conference, many of us thought we could easily write a new religious story. It was simply a matter of stripping out the supernaturalism and doing a bit of demythologising. It was only the religious story that needed rewriting. The story of everything else was fine. I remember devising a workshop with Clive Richards for the second Sea of Faith conference. We asked delegates to tell us how they felt about certain words – resurrection, spirit, life, salvation and so on. They told us what they thought by putting these words into a smiley face column or under the skull and crossbones. All we had to do was tell the story in smiley face words.

Had we thought about it, this couldn't possibly do. The religious story was a story of everything from beginning to end, from creation to death and everything else in between. As Mark C. Taylor says in *Erring*, 'God, self, history and book are bound in an intricate relationship in which each one mirrors the other. No single concept can be challenged without altering the others.' Our task is nothing less than making 'a new beginning, "all over again"', as Cupitt challenges us at the end of the book.

So this is a book about everything. It's about our world and ourselves. It's about how to live and how to die. And it's the drawing together of the threads of a forty year quest. 'Some of my most recent books . . . have been casting about, looking for the best way to frame a final statement. Here it is then – though no doubt I shall soon start to feel very dissatisfied with it.' The central, unifying symbol which brings these themes together is the fountain. The fountain symbolises all our experience of life. As Cupitt sums

up the argument later in the book, 'In our time the development of thought and of our new technologies has surrounded us with

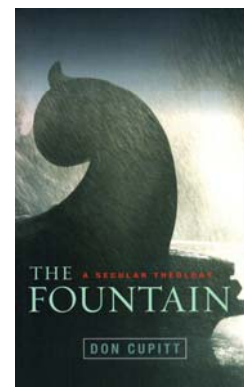
images of everything as pouring out into expression and passing away – broadcast, scattered, disseminated. We have looked at examples: the silent outpouring of all be-ing, our Big Bang cosmology, the energetic perpetual striving and self-renewal of all life, the human self as intensely and continuously expressive and communicative, and the good life as an 'outgoing' life of emotional expression, the life of love. We have used the Fountain as a traditional unifying and reconciling symbol: it is restful, life-giving, and a blissful object of contemplation.'

And it's in that contemplative frame of mind that we are also challenged to read this book. We can sit down and read this book from beginning to end in an hour or two. Or we can read each chapter and ask ourselves: Have I learnt to love life fearlessly? Have I got myself together and found ways of avoiding the splitting of the self between reason and emotions, sense and spirit, justice and love, short-term and long-term, duty and inclination?

There is work to be done. Take one paragraph at random. 'We cannot even conceive personal life except as temporal, and if I reflect I find that all the beauties I love most are transient, and that it is precisely for their transience that I love them. I cannot coherently wish them to be anything but transient and the same goes for myself.' We're not asked to agree or disagree but to reflect, examine and challenge ourselves. I sometimes wish Don would add reflective pauses in the text, but then why should he do what I must do for myself? Of course, Sea of Faith is but one of those transient loves. Whether it proves beautiful and life-giving will depend upon its members' willingness to rise to the challenge of becoming generous and fearless. I just wish I could get the third stanza of the hymn *Jesu, Lover of my Soul* out of my brain!

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The publishers SCM are offering *Sofia* readers a discount on this title of 20% off the received retail price (i.e. £14.99, *Sofia* Reader Offer £11.99). To order, ring 01603 785 925 quoting reference FOUN11. P&P charges apply.



reviews



## Christine Hacklett reviews

### *Absence of Mind*

by Marilynne Robinson

Yale University Press (New York & London 2010). 158 pages.  
Hbk: £18. Pbk due July 31 2011: £10.99.

This is a collection of Marilynne Robinson's four Terry Lectures (Yale University), which explored the mystery of the human mind. Her lectures looked at the tension that exists between science and religion. She tends to write in long rambling sentences, sometimes difficult to follow. The text may have come over better when spoken in her lectures.

She is concerned by the rift introduced by positivism, initiated by Auguste Comte in the early nineteenth century. In later years logical positivism sought to banish metaphysics, seeing it as devoid of experimental proof and so meaningless. Now modern culture pushes science to the fore and sees it as claiming authority for its arguments. It dismisses Western Religion along with its skeleton of metaphysics. Robinson herself tends to bracket religion and metaphysics, with no regard for the acceptance of metaphysics by a number of philosophers, who see that its topics do not necessarily include discussion on whether God exists.

She finds a faulty diagnosis for the sense of emptiness in the modern world. It is not, she says, because of the death of God, or 'the ebbing away of faith'. This notion from *Dover Beach*, written in 1867, was post-Darwin but pre-logical positivism. The malaise might be due, Robinson suggests, to exclusion stemming from parascience, which, in its various forms, she sees as barring the mind from accepting accounts of reality..

Turning to the topic of altruism, Robinson notes that Comte saw a selfless devotion to the welfare of others as filling the space left by a belief in God and by the triumph of scientific positivism. But this ignores the possibility that the altruist may seek not only the benefit to the recipient, but also – or even more – the favour of others who are aware his actions.

She also looked at the effects of Malthus's *Theory of Population*. He suggested a formula expressing a supposed ratio of the growth of population to the increase of arable land. Population must therefore be limited. His contemporaries saw the effect this could have on social policy, and on the life of the poor. Darwin was influenced by Malthus, and included tribal warfare in the process of evolution, a notion that accorded with colonialism, and the esteem in which the Europeans of the time held themselves. A further opinion on the distribution of natural resources was

raised by Adam Smith and others, which she sees as another instance of parascientific reasoning.

Looking at Freud, Robinson quoted Jung's criticism that a person's works of art or expressions of spirituality were too readily accepted by Freud as repressed sexuality. He had also consistently asserted that the mind is not to be trusted. He saw the self as entrapped by an interior drama, of which the conscious mind is not aware, unless it is aided by psychoanalysis to become aware of it. In his role as a scientist (which at that time he had the right to claim) Freud attempted to bring the assumptions of rationalism to bear on the myths and frenzies that were carrying Europe towards catastrophe.

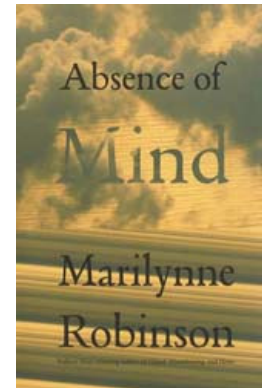
In her final – and perhaps best – essay she muses on various questions. Could there be life elsewhere in the universe? Is mind non-physical, or is it an activity of the brain? Was time created together with the universe, or is it independent of it? The present answer to these questions is mostly that we just don't know. She mentions in passing that she is not religious, but that if she were, she would tend towards Feuerbach's view that it is a human projection. She might, then, find a home in SOF.

Science, she says, has a cluster of hypotheses concerning the start of the universe. Perhaps eventually one description may prove to be more likely than any of the others. Observation had led to the fact that the universe is expanding. The suggestion that gravity could slow cosmic expansion could not be reconciled with the new data, and the anti-gravitational force led to a changed conception of the universe.

Meanwhile we live largely within ourselves, assembling a narrative of past and present which, although unique and individual, gives rise to cultural aspects such as art. She ends by hoping mankind might generously acknowledge the very mystery that we humans are. Should you venture to read this book, do persevere to this fine final essay.

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Christine Hacklett is interested in philosophy and is currently Secretary of the Pinner Philosophy Group. She is a member of SOF.



reviews

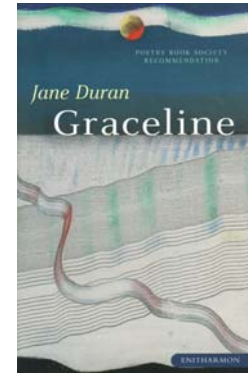
## Kathleen McPhilemy reviews

### *Graceline*

By Jane Duran

Enitharmon (London 2010). PBk. 76 pages. £9.99

## reviews



Jane Duran's latest collection, *Graceline*, is a quiet book. The poet returns to her childhood in an attempt to place herself in her personal and wider history by returning to her childhood journey from New York to Valparaíso in Chile on the *Santa Barbara*, one of the Grace Line fleet. The poems move from childhood to adulthood when, in the final section, the poet relocates herself in relation not only to the Chile of her youth but to her own child in the present day, 'My boy picks up the black and red/ volcanic stones. He plays on the slopes.' (*Lago Todos Los Santos*) Along the way, Duran not so much confronts but creeps up sideways on two of the major traumas of South America: the building of the Panama Canal and the Pinochet regime in Chile.

Many poems are concerned with our need to impose shape on the formlessness of experience. The image of a squared exercise book is used to convey the security of form as the poet reflects on her long sea journey:

Everyday we are somewhere new  
along the grid.  
I am so beautifully contained here,

as if nothing bad could ever happen to me. (*Grid*)

The same thought is found in the title poem, *Graceline*, based on Max Ernst's painting, *The Sea*, which is on the cover of the book. She describes how the artist 'scraped away the recent white/and oatmeal oils//to show at last the older blues and blacks' to make 'a restless/ pattern over the sea'. Duran recognises the subjectivity of our attempts to give our lives significance: 'The ship creates the illusion of a path.' Despite this uncertainty, she also explores the responsibility of the individual to 'those countries that raised [her]' (*Coastline*). In *Panama Canal* she moves from her experience of travelling through the canal to a consideration of the suffering of the labourers who built it. She imagines one of them receiving a letter from home, from 'somewhere else// with no terror, no yellow fever,/ no sliding mud, broken boots' and recognises the cost of this triumph of engineering, 'the human wanted to join up// the two oceans with weeping/ and wailing'.

Much of the volume is taken up by Duran's attempt to reconcile her childhood experience of Chile with later political and historical events. The sequence *Invisible Ink* addresses the horrors of the Pinochet regime. In these songs of innocence and experience the poet revisits childhood memories in the light of

adult knowledge. In

*Calampas* She writes

about the shanty

towns: 'we see them at

first/and then don't see or want to/ in the glare.'

However, her approach avoids sensationalism.

Only in the poem, *Street, Santiago 1973*, does she directly evoke violence, 'his eye is already pierced,/ her mouth broken'. Here and elsewhere, she shows us that the potential for conflict was there long before Pinochet's coup and that the wounds which were created are still contained in the present: 'But then the concrete side of a stadium/ looms up where you did things/and saw things you don't want to say/or spell out (today on an outing/ with your grandchildren...)' (*Soldier*)

This notion of the past being implicit in the present pervades the whole collection. The past is the mountain landscape the poet carries within her, which 'still measures [her] progress' and which by the end of the collection has become part of her own physical being. In *Tuna*, (here, a name for the prickly pear, not the fish), the poet presents a visionary moment of identification with the landscape: 'My feet and my hands can just touch/ the two ends of Chile...' This ambivalent relationship is not pain-free: 'I meet its fleeing rigour/ with numbness and a variable pain.'

The pain is part of that difficult process of going back and down in order to come back up to the present which is characteristic of serious writing. The penultimate poems are oblique celebrations of motherhood and the present, but the final poem is much less certain. It returns again to the theme of travel, of displacement and loss of identity:

must this reverie be at first,  
this casting off  
of all I own –

(*The Room and The Road*)

The presiding metaphor of the journey across the unmappable sea returns as, like Ulysses, the poet sets out once more, rejecting the possibility of any final homecoming. These poems do not need to shout; they have an unsettling power, which is all the more effective in its understatement. This strong and coherent collection seals Duran's status as a significant contemporary poet.

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Kathleen McPhilemy teaches English at Oxford FE College. Her latest poetry collection is *The Lion in the Forest* (Katabasis, London 2004).

# Seeking God in a Garden

Following *Sofia 99 on Trees*, Cicely Herbert visited the Garden Museum next door to Lambeth Palace.

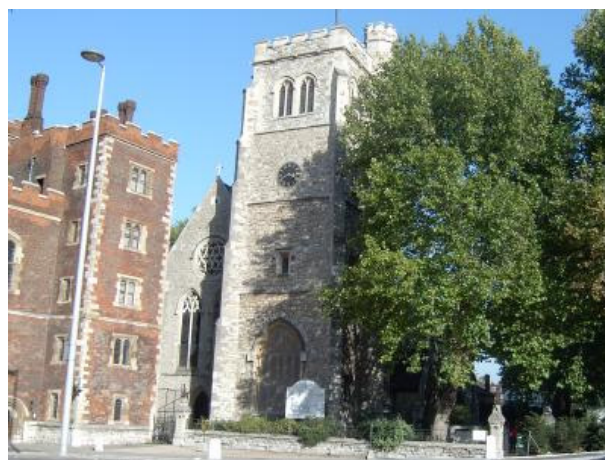
*'The best place to seek God is in a garden. You can dig for him there.'* – GEORGE BERNARD SHAW, *Black Girl in Search of God*

English gardeners owe much to John Tradescant, gardener to King Charles 1<sup>st</sup>. Both he and his son travelled the world extensively in search of rare plants and curiosities and between them introduced into England many favourite plants, including the rose, lilac, acacia and lily, still grown in our gardens today. Father and son lie buried in a splendidly decorative tomb in St Mary's Churchyard, next to the Archbishop of Canterbury's Lambeth Palace and overlooking the Thames. The stone is inscribed:

Both gardeners to the rose and lily Queen  
Transported now themselves, sleep here, and when  
Angels shall with their trumpets waken men  
And fire shall purge the world, these hence shall rise  
And change this garden for a Paradise.

It is this connection that provides the *raison d'être* for the Garden Museum. In its well-stocked shop, visitors can buy an excellent account of the founding of the museum, compiled and written by Elizabeth Fleming, one of the team of volunteers, who in the 1970s helped to save the church from demolition, and who, after restoring and making the fabric of the building watertight, then created the delightful seventeenth-century century-style knot garden, filled with authentic plants of the period. An interested gardener myself, I was fortunate in being able to meet the author during a visit to the museum. In recent times, the building, which stands on the site where a church has stood for over 900 years, had become derelict and was threatened with demolition. Although the main body of the church had been extensively rebuilt in the nineteenth century, the original tower still stands and dates back to the fourteenth century.

The Museum's first purchase was the 1656 catalogue of the *Musaeum Tradescantianum*. A new structure provides an upper floor to the church and serves to house the collection of memorabilia and gardening tools, assembled from gifts and acquisitions. These wonderfully sturdy objects include some that must have been the creation of



imaginative gardeners themselves – like the picturesque, if somewhat cumbersome combined trowel and rake, or the 'daisygrubber'. The Elizabethan thumb pot apparently worked by suction, while the eighteenth-century Dibbler is not unlike those of today, and the chunky seventeenth-century watering pot was made of glazed earthenware. It is suggested the origin of the word 'rose' on a watering can may have originated from the French *arroser*, to water. Among the twentieth-century inventions are a 'sweet pea counter' and the 'bulb measurer'. I was intrigued and touched to read the neat writing on display in the gardener's diary kept by horticultural student Doris Palmer during the First World War, and wondered, as one does, what became of her.

In the adjacent small education room I admired a delightful array of toy boats on show, imaginatively created by local schoolchildren, in homage, I imagine, to the great river that flows past the Garden Museum. The current exhibition, mostly photographs, is devoted to the late Derek Jarman's shingle garden, which he famously created in the shadow of the Dungeness Power Station (another unique garden that I love and have visited often in the past.)

The Garden Museum receives no money from the Government, and is dependent on donations from the public, and on money raised from events such as plant sales and from the cafe, which sells the most delicious carrot cake I have ever tasted – helpings there are generous, as befits the appetite of hungry gardeners.





**The Tree of Life in the Holy City New Jerusalem**  
Reredos Batik, St Botolph's-without-Aldgate