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Brain, Belief & Behaviour

CONFERENCE ISSUE

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Front Cover image: *Le Penseur.* Rodin statue in the Musée Rodin garden, Paris.
Back cover image: London taxi driver with newborn baby and parents.

Sofia 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.

Something Understood

editorial

This year's SOF annual conference on *Brain, Belief and Behaviour* was held in Leicester in July as usual. This issue of *Sofia* contains shortened, edited versions of the three main speakers' talks. Uncut recordings of the three talks will be on SOF website www.sofn.org.uk

Gwen Griffith-Dickson spoke about the breadth and variety of religious experiences and warned against any kind of reductionism – scientific or religious. Colin Blakemore spoke about neuroscience and its growing capacity to locate specific functions in the brain. Nailing up 7 theses, Alan Allport argued that the functional beliefs which implicitly guide our knowing are more powerful than our explicitly stated beliefs.

The talks were not theological but gave interesting information and insights into how our brains work. With scientific discretion, in their talks all three speakers refrained from expressing an opinion about whether 'religious experiences' – it is possible to view what is happening in the brain while these are occurring – have a supernatural or natural cause. However, all three made it clear that there was no *need* to resort to a supernatural explanation for them and 'religious experiences' cannot prove or disprove the existence of God.

For example, Alan Allport related how in a Quaker meeting, some people thought of certain 'peak' experiences as supernatural, as coming from outside themselves, while others described 'what I suppose are essentially the same experiences as coming from within their own nature.' He carefully did not give his own opinion. However, having remained professionally impartial throughout his talk, at the very end he launched into a passionate declaration of his two most profound convictions: that the two most important things are how to live, and 'being and knowing myself to be part of the communion of all conscious beings.' I found that last-minute breakout very cheering.

Gwen-Griffith Dickson looked at the similarities and differences between psychotic and religious experiences. (I thought of Theseus' speech in *A Midsummer Night's Dream:* 'The lunatic, the lover and the poet /Are of imagination all compact:/One sees more devils than vast hell can hold, /That is, the madman...') Her plea was: 'Don't narrow the scope!'

Colin Blakemore spoke about the big human brain and speculated how this could have evolved. He explained that it was not just a question of size but complexity: 'Elephants and whales have much larger brains than human beings, but the cells are bigger and are more widely spaced, so human beings have twice as many cells as any other species.' He described how the brain can grow *more cells.* Experiments have shown that the hippocampus of London taxi drivers gets bigger when they have passed the fiendishly difficult exam called The Knowledge (see picture on back cover).

This idea of increasing complexity made me think of the German word for writing poetry: *dichten,* which sounds very close (but sadly, is not etymologically related) to the word *dicht,* meaning thick or condensed. We do not have much room for poetry in this issue, but oddly enough two very different writers – Anne Ashworth in her third *Part of a Pilgrimag*e and Stephen Mitchell in his SOF Sermon – both appeal to George Herbert. In talking about simplification, Anne says, 'It would be good to talk with George Herbert, that lover of English words, that freshest of poets, who so well understood the matter.' And in his sermon, Stephen quotes Herbert's poem *The Call:*

> Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life:
> Such a Way, as gives us breath:
> Such a Truth, as ends all strife:
> Such a Life, as killeth death.

He points out that every word is a monosyllable except the word 'killeth', but goes on to look at how concentrated such 'simple' language is. The Herbert poem *Prayer* on page 15 is a string of metaphors for prayer, except for the last two clinching words: **'something understood'.** This most famous of 'list' poems was echoed in the 1960s and 1970s by many 'list' poems beginning 'Love is…'; 'Revolution is…', for example, Liverpool poet Adrian Henri's poem:

> Love is feeling cold in the back of vans
> Love is a fanclub with only two fans
> Love is walking holding paintstained hands...

Gwen Griffith-Dickson ended her talk with Hawaiian song, and explained how in it 'the layer of meaning known as the *manao* and that known as the *kaona* may be self-sufficient, coherent, *related* to the others, and still irreducibly different'. Similarly in other cultures, much love poetry, like the *Song of Songs,* can be read as mystical poetry. Everywhere the best poetry is 'thick' with meaning and resonance.

Having learnt much from the speakers, I came away marvelling even more at how 'thick' our brains are, not because they are the absolute biggest in the animal kingdom, but because they have the most cells, they are the most complex, the most condensed, and therefore the most poetic, with the poetic genius to create all gods.

Don't Narrow the Scope

Gwen Griffith-Dickson spoke about the breadth and variety of religious experiences and warned against any kind of reductionism – scientific or religious.

Pantyhose Woman

A woman temporarily admitted to a psychiatric hospital in the USA told us that God had just spoken to her that day, through an advertisement for tights on the television she had seen in the patients' day-room. Apparently, these tights 'stay with you' throughout the day; no matter where you go, how you twist and turn, they stay close to you and don't bag and come away from you at the knees and ankles. She added that, as a modern urban woman, parables about fishermen and sheep didn't communicate anything to her about God, but 'she really knew about pantyhose.' She asserted that God was speaking to her through this advertisement, in order to reassure her and console her in her present period of distress. The psychiatrists felt confirmed in their diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia, for it is a classic symptom of a such a condition that one feels that God or some other 'voice' is speaking to one personally through the television, radio, electric sockets, wires allegedly planted in the brain, etc. I felt uncomfortably aware that, had the woman been speaking to a different audience in a different room, the reaction could have been very different. Had she spoken in a prayer meeting she would probably have received a positive reaction; her words would have been accepted as mediating a religious insight, perhaps indeed as a 'word from the Lord'.

one feels that God is speaking to one personally through the television, radio, electric sockets...

What does this story show? What someone claims as a religious experience – the parting of waves, miracles, thunderclaps from heaven – is not necessarily overtly 'supernatural' but a completely ordinary experience interpreted in a certain way. The first thing I would want to say is: 'Don't narrow the scope!' Don't narrow the scope of the very different kinds of experiences; the scope of cultures and systems; the scope of interpretations and explanatory frameworks. 'Religious' experiences can include meaningful experiences of nature, ordinary events with a particular significance, dramatic visions and auditory experiences, healings or miracles, 'supernatural' occurrences; they also have a broad emotional range, from quiet serenity, peace, joy, overpowering positive emotions, to terrifying emotions and a sense of evil.

The Breadth and Variety of Religious Experiences

It's very Western to say '*an* experience' – rather than the way the whole of life is experienced. Other traditions and cultures are also interested in the problem of interpreting religious experience; but often they want to see it in a different light. It is not about focusing on specific, dramatic, colourful, out-of-the-ordinary experiences. It is about a whole way of life, probed for its meaning and its messages and lessons. Broadly speaking, psychological accounts of religious experience attempt to explain it in three ways: by the physiological generation of experiences, the artificial induction of experiences, or the motivation of experiences by desire or need.

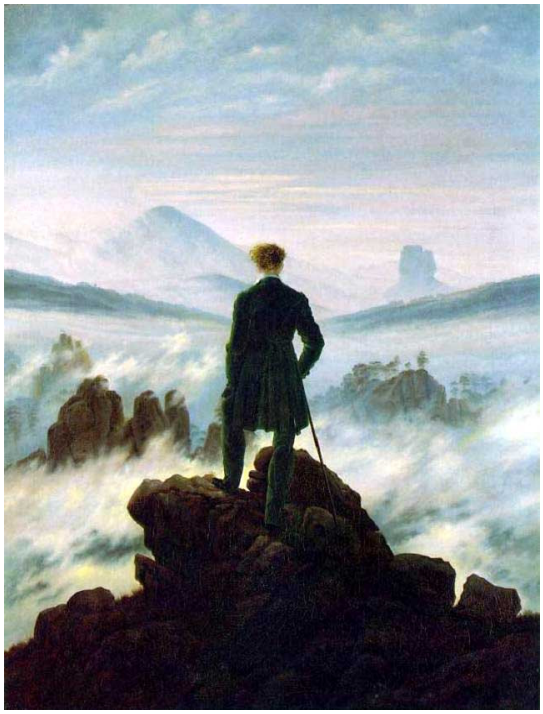
The physiological generation of experiences

Because there can be similar features (or perceived similar features) between religious experiences and pathological experiences, some have tended to conflate the two and explain religious experience as psychiatric disorders. Literally hundreds of studies have sought a correlation or lack of correlation between religion and mental illness, or between religion and mental health. Some telling research showed that whether one found a positive, negative, or no relation between mental health and religion depended on the criteria for mental health used. Equally one can examine both and find features that are different: superficial similarities, such as the sense of a loss of control, or a dissolution of the ego, are not alike on

examination, and are welcomed by the mystic while feared by the psychotic. Religious experiences are 'life-enhancing' while psychotic experiences are not. Finally, the mystic's freedom from the material world and the psychotic anxiety to escape the real world are radically different. So although there can be similarities, 'non-psychotic' religious experiences and schizophrenic experiences do not appear to be identical.

The artificial induction of experiences

Similarly because of the oddness of some reported experiences, one can find similarities with the sort of bizarre experiences that one can have under the influence of drugs. A famous study by Pahnke, called the 'Good Friday Study', involved the administration of a hallucinogenic drug to experimental subjects (all of them theology students), followed by placing them in a religious service.[1] Most of them obliged by having a religious experience. Unfortunately this doesn't get us very far with explaining those experiences that *don't* happen under the influence of drugs. But there are other ways one could induce an experience – intense social pressure, suggestibility, and so on. The latter are less helpful than you might imagine. Psychologists such as Sargant have looked into the influence of intense pressure, e.g. at revivalist meetings. In one major study of 249 subjects of mystical experience only 38 were found to be more than usually suggestible.



Peak Experience
Wanderer above the Mists: C. D. Friedrich

Needs and wishes as generating the experiences

Whether forms of psychoanalysis or more recent attachment theory, the way in which we experience our early attachments might colour our notions about a relationship with God. Psychoanalytic accounts will describe people as being more neurotic for these reasons, and therefore suggest that this makes them more likely to generate the religious experience or feelings as a form of wish fulfilment. It is odd to suggest that because something is a need, therefore its satisfaction is false; what you have to argue here is that people can meet their needs in an inauthentic way by experiencing something that doesn't exist. This would be the heart of Freud's account.

In different ways, thinkers as different as Jung and Maslow have a different angle, which is to articulate in a more positive way the psychological needs that are being met. Humanistic thinkers, such as Abraham Maslow, focus on the happy and healthy individual rather than the unhappy and unwell, on the theory that the end product of growth is perhaps the best way to learn about the growth process.[2] 'Basic needs and self-actualisation do not contradict each other any more than do childhood and maturity.'[3] This growth and self-actualisation are punctuated by 'peak experiences', a moment when 'the powers of a person come together in a particularly efficient and intensely enjoyable way, and in which he is more …fully-functioning…more truly himself.'[4] These experiences Maslow often describes as 'transcendent' but is adamant that they are natural phenomena. They are our moments of greatest maturity, of individuation, they are both the means and results of true growth. Peak experiences constituted the private revelation or ecstasy of the founders of the great religions, and hence are the essence of every religion. This transcendent, ecstatic core of religion is later objectified in ritual, regulated and institutionalised by 'ecclesiastical non-peakers', and the original revelation or peak experience made into sacred objects and activities.[5] There is insufficient support, then, for the suggestion that having religious experiences is by itself a sign of neurosis. On the other hand, it can easily be argued that spirituality meets various psychological needs.

Do causal explanations 'explain away'?

Here is the list (probably not complete) of what has been suggested as the explanation of religious experience: intense social pressure, like

brainwashing, mass hysteria, or parental pressure; repressed sexuality, a projected parent complex, the psyche's process of individuation; the effects of emotional stress or a personal crisis, an overwhelming sense of guilt or perhaps hyper-suggestibility, hypnotic suggestion and indeed auto-suggestion; the effects of culture or social structures, education and upbringing, and expectation; psychological disease or disorder, and psychological well-being; or physiological factors like disease, or the ingestion of hallucinogenic substances. Can you think of many moments in your own life when at least one of these factors *didn't* apply?

The existence of a physiological state is a given. Every moment in our lives will show something interesting firing away in our brain, including moments of conducting scientific or academic research. That alone isn't enough to warrant inferences about truth value. Scientific accounts, e.g. psychological or physiological accounts, can be seen as doing one of two things. They can be *describing* what happens when this happens. They can also be seen as providing the explanation for *why* this happens. We can give a neurological account of what's going on in the nervous system when I feel intense pain. That is not the same as providing the diagnosis of what's causing the pain. The same goes for religious or spiritual experiences.

can all beliefs be explained in purely naturalistic terms?

Interestingly, during the past ten years a number of neurophysiologists (such as Ramachandran), using modern brain-scanning techniques, believe they have identified a physiological correlate of spiritual awareness in the brain. As David Hay puts it: 'If these people are right, then spiritual awareness has a … structural precursor. It is not a mere cultural choice that we can take up or discard according to personal preference. It is not a plaything of language that can be deconstructed out of existence. It is there in everybody, including both religious people and those who think religion is nonsense… The biological precursors of human competences always of necessity express themselves in some cultural form such as a specific language, musical tradition, scientific, religious, humanistic or political belief. From this perspective spiritual awareness is the human predisposition that, amongst other things, permits the possibility of religious belief. Traditionally, spirituality expresses itself through the language of a specific religious culture such as Christianity or Islam. But this is not the only form it takes. Indeed it goes beyond religion in general for it has to include the experiences of people who reject religion.'[6]

So can all mental experience, all beliefs be explained in purely naturalistic terms? Does one prove the falsity of a belief with an explanation in purely naturalistic terms of why it is believed? If one answers 'yes' to both these questions, this viewpoint itself is self-refuting (false): as a belief, it too can be accounted for in purely naturalistic terms, no less than 'religion' can. So if the reductive explainer does not wish to have his own science explained away, he must allow that his explanatory framework does not preclude the truth of a belief – in which case a religious belief about experience might be true, even if his scientific explanation is also true.

One problem I've noticed with 'I've explained it' tendencies in psychological research is that they have only focused on a single type of experience and taken that as the whole. Researchers who equate religious experience with psychotic or pathological experience stress dramatic, quasi-sensory religious experiences such as visions and voices, experiences of demons or other entities – the kinds of religious experience that most resemble psychotic experiences, in fact – but the majority of reported experiences are not like that. Meanwhile, investigators who attribute religious experiences to suggestion or hysteria tend to focus on spectacular emotional experiences such as those that happen at revivalist meetings, prayer meetings with a strong emphasis on conversion and being saved, or on public instantaneous healings. So I repeat: 'Don't narrow the scope!' 'Reductionist' impulses are moving in the wrong direction. What is often misguided about 'reductionist' explanations is the reduction to a *narrower* frame of reference than can provide an adequate and profound understanding of the phenomenon.

When we feel someone is misguided in their understanding of their own experience, we often feel that way because their range of possible explanations is too narrow: they only consider one possible meaning or interpretation. Someone who is depressed and lonely has a dramatic emotional

experience with a friendly group, and thinks this must mean that all their religious claims are true and he must join this new religious movement and break off contact with his family and former friends. If we feel that they have misjudged their experience and drawn a false inference, we would do better to *widen* their interpretative horizons, not reduce them to a different explanatory context which is even narrower. Naturalistic explanations need not conflict with religious interpretations, however. Scientific accounts might 'reduce' the supernatural to purely natural factors, but if a religious point of view insists that God alone is responsible and no consideration of human involvement is valid, we might consider this a form of 'religious reductionism'. A theological account can be given which does not see God as an *alternative explanation to natural phenomena,* but rather as *present in natural phenomena* or working through them. So a believer might see God as working through the phenomena of the natural world to reveal Herself in human experience.

Gabby Pahinui, Hawaiian musician

Nevertheless, in mystical traditions, a sceptical attitude is often taken to florid experiences, as in this story. A monk in Thailand sat down to meditate, as he usually did, for an hour or so in the afternoon. This time though it seemed that he travelled down a long dark tunnel and found at the end someone who took him on a tour, guiding him with his hand. The monk never saw the rest of this person, only the hand on his arm, and heard a voice explain the various bloody and horrific tortures which he saw. This was a vision of a hell-realm. The voice explained what different karmas had brought on the various forms of intense suffering. The tour was long, the place immense and the monk emerged from his experience only when the dark night sky was full of stars… When he told his Teacher about it, the Teacher's comment was, 'Why didn't you find out *who* took you on the tour before you followed?'

Interpretation is interactive – within ourselves, between ourselves, but also within families, wider culture, traditions, communities, world; history. Experience is multi-layered. For example in a Hawaiian song, the layer of meaning known as the *manao* and that known as the *kaona* may be self-sufficient, coherent, *related* to the others, and still irreducibly different. 'Making sense' of our experience is always going on, with everything. Perception itself is already 'interpreted', whether you're a Kantian or you talk in terms of pattern-matching in the brain. Much of this is 'unconscious', whether you're a Freudian or talking in a very different way about consciousness and its limits. We contribute a lot to what we perceive, but we are not constantly hallucinating.

1. W. N. Pahnke, 'Drugs and Mysticism: an analysis of the relationship between psychedelic drugs and the mystical consciousness'. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, 1963.
2. See Abraham Maslow, *Religions, Values and Peak Experiences* (Ohio State University Press, 1964) and *Towards a Psychology of Being* (Litton Educational Publishing, 1968). On the question of the relation between science and religion, see *Religions, Values and Peak Experiences,* Ch. 2, 'Dichotomised Science and Dichotomised Religion'.
3. A. Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being,* op. cit., p. 24.
4. Ibid., p. 91.
5. Ibid., Ch. 3.
6. David Hay, 'The Spirituality of Adults in Britain – Recent Research'. *Scottish Journal of Healthcare* Chaplaincy Vol. 5 No 1, 2002, pdf pp. 5-6.

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Neuroeverything?

Colin Blakemore spoke about neuroscience and its growing capacity to locate specific functions in the brain.

Location in the Brain – the Beginnings

The notion of trying to locate in our heads the origins of the most noble aspects of human behaviour is not a new one. You're all familiar with this kind of picture (fig.1); this a phrenological map of the human brain, based on a very serious suggestion by a Viennese physician and anatomist, Franz Joseph Gall at the end of the 18th Century that functions must be localised in the brain. It was a fallacy that the size of the bumps on your head correlate with the size of underlying brain structure; they do so very poorly and only in certain parts of the skull. For instance, the front of our head's shape is largely determined by air-filled spaces underneath the skull and has very little to do with the shape of the brain below. The worst aspect of this sort of approach was the absence of any notion of statistics. So Gall often based claims on two, or even one, observation. For instance, for the area which he called the organ of amitiveness – nothing to do with brain, by the way, it's just an enlarged bit of skull – he discovered during a soirée while interviewing a particularly engaging young lady.

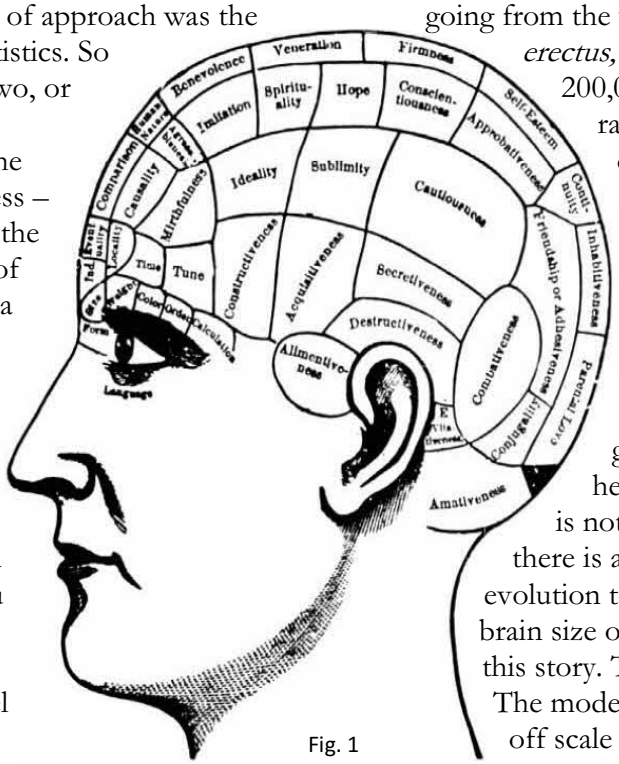

Fig. 1

Nowadays the sorts of things that people would ask if they were looking for localisation of brain function would be: 'How well can you see? Can you hear? Can you distinguish different accents that are spoken? Can you feel this touch on your skin?' There is just a creep back towards thinking that things like hope and spirituality and so on might be interesting things to look at in terms of brain localisation, because localisation is a kind of key to functional organisation. Hence the interest in, for instance, the god-spot. For is it really fundamentally different to say that there is a bump on your head that corresponds to spirituality and to say there's a red little blob in a MRI scan that turns on when someone is praying, let's say, which might correspond to the localisation of a kind of prayer centre? So we're creeping back towards this kind of approach which hasn't been fashionable for a long time. In the American version of this, by the way, there is an area for Republicanism.

Relative Brain Size

On facing page 9 there is a graph showing the relative brain size – corrected for body size: the encephalisation quotient –- for a whole lot of primates (fig.2). There are South American monkeys, African and Asian monkeys, apes, gorillas, chimpanzees and so on and then hominids, different species of early human beings, going from the very earliest through to *erectus,* which survived until about 200,000 years ago. They are ranked side by side in terms of relative brain size, so the smallest one is an Old World monkey of some sort, then we've got an ape – actually it's a gorilla. Gorillas have a relatively small brain, the absolute brain size is large but gorillas are very big and heavy so relatively their brain is not that big. But you can see there is a general trend through evolution towards a gradual increase in brain size over the 20 million years of this story. The interesting thing is this. The modern human, *homo sapiens,* is off scale compared with the others.

The total number of nerve cells in the human brain is estimated, very accurately now by literally counting them all, as twice the number of any other brain. Some species have much bigger brains. Elephants and whales have much larger brains than human beings, but the cells are bigger and are more widely spaced, so human beings have twice as many cells as any other species. Four times as

many as chimpanzees, for instance. So it really is an extraordinary thing that happened in the transition between *homo erectus* and modern man. That transition took place about 200–250 thousand years ago. There are no intermediate examples in the fossil record.

You might say it's hard to understand how such an enormous change can have occurred; it would be like going from a reptile to a bird in a single individual. It's not how we normally see evolution. But in genetic terms it would have been very easy to achieve. You can make mutations in mice that can double or quadruple the size of their brain in a single generation, because the size of anything in your body is just determined by how many cells you make during development and that's simply determined by how many times the stem cells that produce you go on dividing. So the stem cells that are going to make your brain have to know – which is a real mystery – when to stop dividing to make a brain of just the right size, whether you're a mouse or a human being. The total duration of generating cells is much longer in human beings than in animals with small brains and we don't know how that's regulated, but it could be by a single gene.

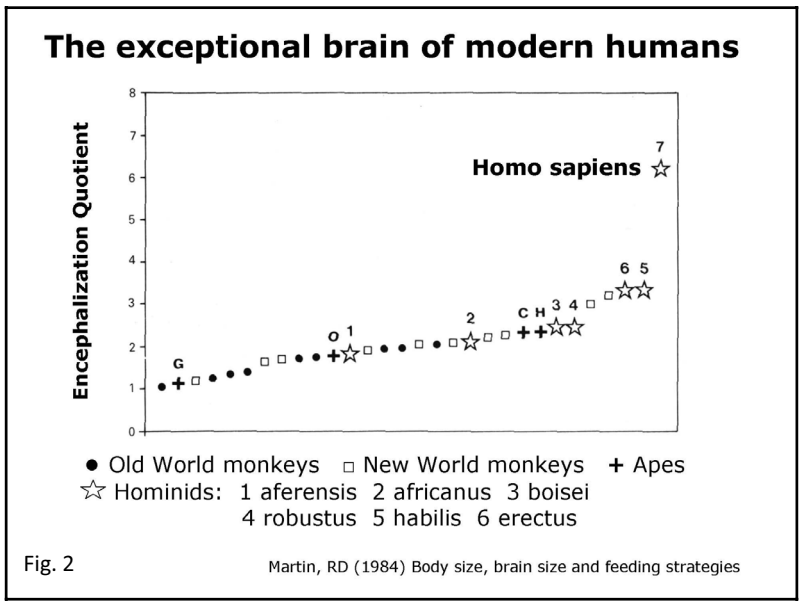

Fig. 2

The Big Human Brain

Now, those who are interested in the special nature of human beings and its potential mystical origins will be having their 'Ah-ha!' moment at seeing this and saying there must have been some sort of intervention, divine intervention, in the evolutionary process at this point, which generated such a unusual creature. A Darwinian would look for other explanations in terms of the selective advantages of a big brain. I think both of those approaches are dubious. I have thought in the last couple of years about how a simple Darwinian approach could explain our big brain. It would be easy to explain how it was suddenly generated but why wasn't it immediately suppressed by natural selection?. You see, brains are very expensive organs to maintain. Your brains are consuming about 25% or more of the oxygen and glucose circulating in your blood. They're hungry organs and that's why, in general during evolution, brains have been kept very small; they've been kept as small as is compatible with running the body they belong to. There's been no obvious tendency for brains at the ends of evolutionary lines suddenly to explode and get much bigger. Presumably it's happening all the time, because of the ease of genetic mistakes that do that, but they're wiped out by selection. So that is a puzzle: why weren't our big brains eliminated by the evolutionary process?

So what are big brains good for? Well, it's obvious, big brains are clever. In general, very loosely, there is a correlation between brain size and the richness of the repertoire of behaviour in animals. You have to be very careful in making that point these days, partly because of the work of people like Nicky Clayton at Cambridge, who has inexorably worked through the list of things that psychologists said were uniquely human. Things like episodic memory, memory of personal experience, deceit and such. He has shown that scrub jays, birds of the crow family, can do them all.

Big brains are clever brains. Perhaps, but certainly not without knowledge or experience. If you think about the things that you do which you would think of as being clever – like reading and writing and doing maths or whatever, or understanding politics or reading *The News of the World* – all of those things require experience and learning and changing your brain. You can't read and write without having learnt how to read and write, you can't do science or maths without having studied them. So, it's not enough just to have a big brain, it's actually got to have information pumped into it and organised within

it, which is basically what education is all about.

Location in the Brain – Ongoing Research

Let's go back to the phrenology question. What do we know about the localisation of functions in the brain? What was known in the middle of the 19th century, as soon as scientists stopped worrying about bogus phrenology, was that there were certain areas in the same place in all individuals, pretty much in the same place, concerned with absolutely basic automatic functions, robotic sort of functions like controlling the movement of the muscles. There is a strip that runs down the middle of the brain. If you get damage to that – it is quite often damaged in stroke – then it produces a paralysis and inability to make skilled movements. Directly behind it, the next strip along receives information from the body surface and the deep tissues. Those two areas are interconnected so when things touch you, or when you get feedback from muscles, it can modify your movements. At the back of the brain there is the very well known visual area – the pole of the occipital lobe. If that gets damaged – again it can be damaged in stroke – it produces blindness. And then there is a region in the temporal lobe for hearing, for understanding sounds.

There is lots of evidence for that strict localisation. Anatomical evidence for where the nerve fibres come from, the effects of damage, the effects of electrical stimulation of the brain. We now know that the whole of the cortex is filled with specialised regions, many of them actually continuing the processes that are started in these early sensory areas, particularly extending the analysis of visual information. About a third of your cerebral cortex is devoted virtually exclusively to vision and there are comparable areas for hearing and for touch.

In a fairly recent study (fig.3), each of the coloured regions of the brain shows the result of a different stimulus in the brain-scanning studies. The person was put into the scanner, different things were shown to them, and each coloured region shows the part of the brain that was most activated by one particular thing compared with another. We have areas for static, simple basic movement, and for biological movement. So what is the purple bit on the right for? The answer is *verbs.* That purple region lit up when people listened to spoken verbs or read verbs displayed on the screen. The point I want to make is that the capacity to understand language could have evolved in relation to a kind of processing stream for detecting and analysing movement. Many verbs are verbs of movement or concerned with movement and probably in primitive languages most verbs would be like that, rather than abstract things. And it's not just spoken verbs, which is the essence of language, it's written verbs. We've only been writing for 5,000 years, so this could not be genetically determined., it must be based on individual acquisition of knowledge.

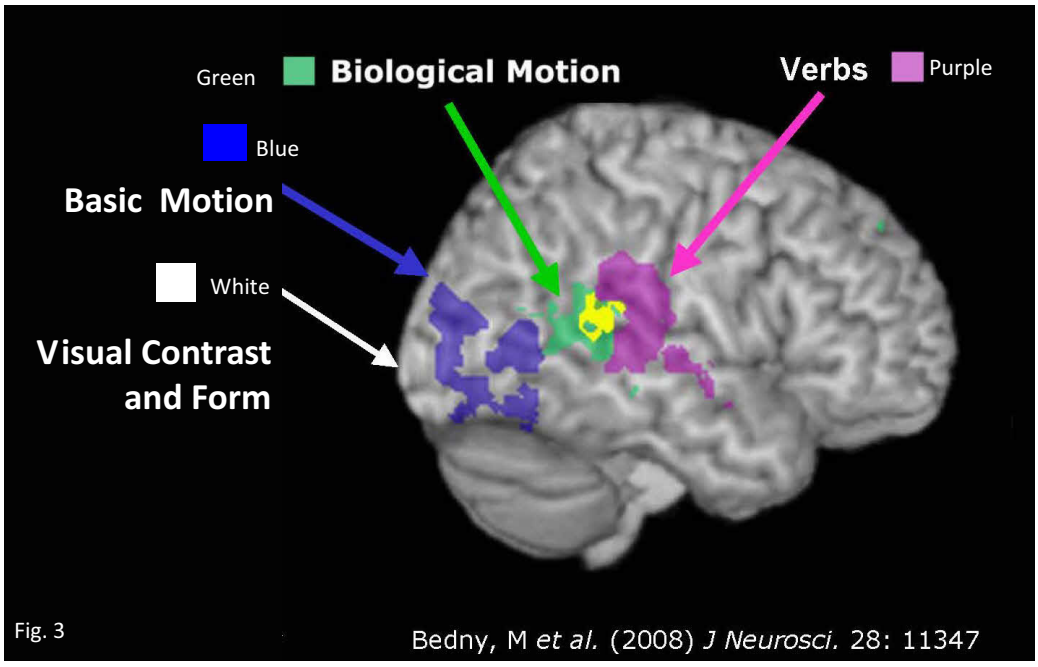

Fig. 3

Consciousness

Thinking of neuroeverything, one of the issues is whether brain research will ever tell us about the basis of conscious experience. Francis Crick published a book a few years ago, basically a rallying cry to neuroscientists saying now is the time to get interested in consciousness. If we could just define which nerve cells were active when you're conscious, whether their activity took a particular form, different from when you're unconscious, that correlate of consciousness would be a very useful bit of information.

The discovery – and this is an

experiment done in my lab – that there are different bits of the brain which respond to looking at objects and looking at faces made us interested in what would happen if you looked at this (fig. 4). It is a well-known figure, which of course part of the time looks like a pair of faces and part of the time looks like a chalice, a white chalice in the middle. You look at it and it flips backwards and forwards every few seconds between the two. Of course, any change of consciousness could have nothing to do with the physics of the outside world – the image was always the same – it had to be something happening in the brain. So what we did was put people in the scanner and said: 'Press the button when it has just changed into a face,' and 'Press the button when it has just changed into a chalice.' Then we looked in their brains, focusing just on those two regions, and asked: would the change of consciousness correlate to anything happening in these areas? And it does, especially in the face area. The face area turns on. In fact, if you just looked at that face area with your computer alone, you could estimate with something like 90% reliability whether the person was seeing it as a face or seeing it as a vase.

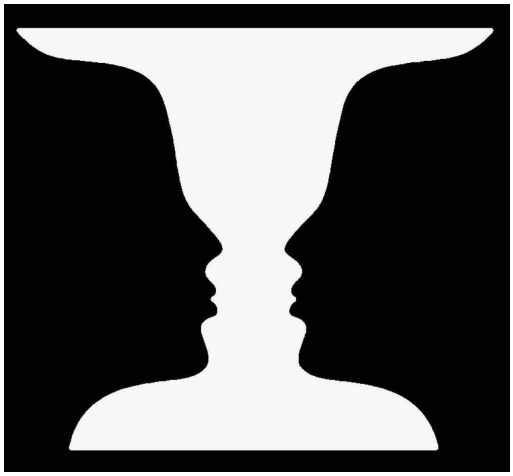

Fig 4

Memory

Memory is obviously the most immediate and vivid example of the influence of personal experience on you, on your make up. You are the constellation of memories you have of the past, to some extent. We know quite a lot – not all – about how that's done. We know it depends on this thing called the hippocampus underneath your temporal lobes. Interestingly, it took quite a long time for people to show really convincing evidence from brain scanning that this region of the brain was active during the formation of memories, but there is a very good example of that produced by Eleanor Maguire at the Imaging Centre in London. She asked: what happens to this region of the brain in people who develop their memories and have quite exceptional memories for places? So she looked at London taxi drivers and found that the back part of the right hippocampus is enlarged in taxi drivers. You might say, 'Aha! maybe it is people with big hippocampuses who are attracted to the job of being a taxi driver.' No. She showed that the hippocampus gets bigger as they learn, as they do this long period – two years typically – before they take the examination to become a licensed taxi driver, The Knowledge, as it's called. The brain can grow. There's now lots of evidence for this. If you learn any particular task – juggling or computer game-playing or playing the violin or whatever – the brain reorganises incredibly rapidly over the course of a few days. And the grey matter can get thicker, the white matter can get thicker.

Based on individual experience, we have to think of our brains as being highly modifiable, the most modifiable bits of our body. That's a complete change in thinking about how our brains work over the last thirty to forty years. New nerve cells are being born in the hippo- campus. There are stem cells in our hippocampus even now, in yours, making new nerve cells, and, by the way, one thing that drives them is physical exercise.

Neuroeverything?

I've tried to give you a flavour of this amazing and still very rapidly changing field of science. Even though it is easy to laugh at some of the hype and some of the simplistic interpretations, increasingly neuroscience is going to impinge on all the aspects of how we think of ourselves and the world as being special, as being spiritual creatures, as being morally determined, maybe, in some cases, being believers in God. We are going to see brain research increasingly illuminating how those things happen in our head and I think that has to make us at least re-assess the explanatory power of science in informing us about ourselves and the undeniable capacity of science to inform us about the outside physical world.

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This is a shortened, edited version of the talk he gave to the SOF Annual Conference 2011. The Editor would like to thank Oliver Essame for transcribing the recorded talk.

Beliefs and Behaviour

Nailing up 7 theses, Alan Allport argued that the functional beliefs which implicitly guide our knowing are more powerful than our explicitly stated beliefs.

I'm going to focus on some of the interrelations between belief and behaviour. I'll try to illustrate some examples of how beliefs, in a sense which I shall define shortly, play out on our behaviour. Most of the examples I'll give you are relatively low level examples of cognitive processing; but one of the theses I'll try to develop is that the same basic functional principles operate at low levels of the cognitive processes as operate in much higher levels.

Imagine that you have a very large piece of paper and you fold it in half so that it is now double the thickness; then you fold it in half again, and you keep doing that; you do it fifty times (you need a very large piece of paper). How thick would you suppose the resulting folded paper would be? It would be 2^{50} – it would reach the sun. Suppose you fold it once more. How thick will that be? Yes, the answer is to the sun and back.

Now here's a little story. Just listen carefully and see how it goes:

> In the courtroom it was hot and stuffy. It had been a long day and at times the judge had struggled to stay awake But now the last case was finished. Time to pack up, hang up the wig and gown and get home. By this time the lobby was empty. The judge looked around anxiously, then nipped into the ladies toilet, re-emerging some time later. There was the judge's son waiting in the lobby. 'Hello Mum!' he said.

Did some of you do a little double take? Are there some beliefs operating there? You probably don't claim explicitly to believe that all judges are male. But there is somebody in there listening to the story who is interpreting it that way. There is some functional belief system that is operating to that effect. So that in practice these functional belief processes operate as though you believed such and such, which may be substantially different from your explicit beliefs. I'm going to put up a number of theses – here is thesis number 1:

1. Our functional beliefs – that is the beliefs that directly but implicitly guide our cognition, our understanding of things, our perception and our actions – often differ from the explicitly stated beliefs that we have.

I suggest to you that our functional beliefs are normally implicit, that is to say, they operate without awareness. A while ago (in the days when there were clock or watch repair shops and you didn't have to just chuck your broken one away and get a new one), I took my watch into the watch shop, gave it to the assistant and pocketed the little docket, to collect it again when it had been repaired. And then I thought: 'Is there just time for me to nip across the road to the co-op?' What did I do? Of course, I looked at my wrist to check the time! There was a functional belief operating: my watch is on my wrist. At the same time at another level I knew I had just handed it over to the assistant.

These things operate at many different levels, so let me offer a demonstration at quite a simple low level. I'm going to put a written question on the screen. Please answer the question. (It's a question about what you plan to do at lunch time.) Here's the question (see fig. 1). Did you

Fig. 1

notice anything funny about the lettering? Generally not! Look at the U of 'you' and the H of 'have': they are identical; look at the Y of 'you' and the the V of 'have' (again identical); that's the F of 'fish' and the C of 'chips'.

It's really hard to see because the context guides your beliefs, mapping into one particular

set of belief structures. These are belief structures at the level of English spelling that you have probably never formulated as an explicit belief: there are no words in English like 'cish' or 'fhips'. Indeed you have an even lower level functional belief structure that there are no words in English that begin FH. It couldn't map into any belief structure that you have and therefore you don't see it, you simply do not see what doesn't fit. So that's my next thesis to be nailed to the door:

2. We tend not to notice – not to see – the things that don't fit into our functional belief structures.

What do I really mean by functional belief structures? To a first approximation, a functional belief structure is a framework of ideas into which – in terms of which – experiences are encoded and hence that's how they are interpreted, understood and consequently acted on. To a second approximation, a functional belief system of that kind is embodied in, realised in, a neural network, which operates as a constraint satisfaction system. Everything has to agree together, everything has to fit with all of the encoded relationships within that belief structure. Where there are things missing, it will fill them in for you.

I think it's impossible to overstate how important to our mental lives, to our mental processes, these cognitive structures are. They are not something you have or might not have as an optional extra; you live inside them, they are fundamental to how you cognise everything. Rather than something you have, they are what you are. For the philosophers amongst you they are a little bit analogous to the Kantian categories, of time, space and causation. We finite humans cannot cognise things except through the metaphorical spectacles of time and space and causation. We can't see things in themselves, we can't experience reality except through those lenses. And similarly, but much more comprehensively, we can't cognise things except through the spectacles, the transformative processes, of our functional belief systems.

Perhaps a helpful metaphor here would be a language. Supposing someone is attempting to speak to you in Turkish and you don't have Turkish. All you hear is a set of honking sounds. It has no possible meaning to you. But if it's a language that you *do* know, it's impossible *not* to hear the meaning of those words.

It's also the case even when you have multiple languages, you are going to hear or read them in one language but that will depend on the language context that you're in. Consider the words **'chat'** and **'coin'**. If you are in an English language context, you 'have a chat' or 'toss a coin', but if you are in a French language context you think 'un petit chat' or 'dans un coin'. You encode those same letter strings in a totally different way. The context can be very minimal; '*un* chat', '*le* coin' is quite enough to compel how you interpret it. The current context has to match the belief structures and, vice versa, the belief structures have to mesh with the context. If there is something that doesn't properly mesh then the whole system skitters or even collapses.

Here's another little demonstration. When you look through this small peephole, all you see is a variety of circles, squares and stripey bits (fig 2) :

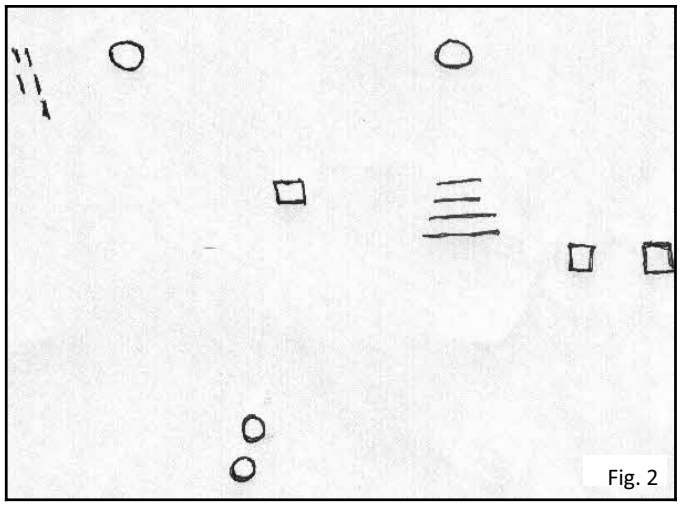


Fig. 2

Individually, they don't make a whole lot of sense. But when you can see the whole picture, the elements provide a context for each other. Then you can't help but map it into all those belief structures that you have about boys and scarves and paths and suns and balls, hats and ships (see fig. 3 overleaf). It depends on the context how you read all of it. So here is another of my theses:

3. The structure in the input and the structure in the belief systems have to match, have to resonate together, and when they do, then they lock together and that's your interpretation.

And another: .

4. In the absence of an appropriate belief structure, things fail to make sense.

And I'd like to reiterate something I said near the beginning with two more of my theses:

5. Our functional beliefs are normally implicit. They function without the necessity of awareness.

6. The same fundamental cognitive mechanisms operate at many – I'm inclined to say all – cognitive levels.

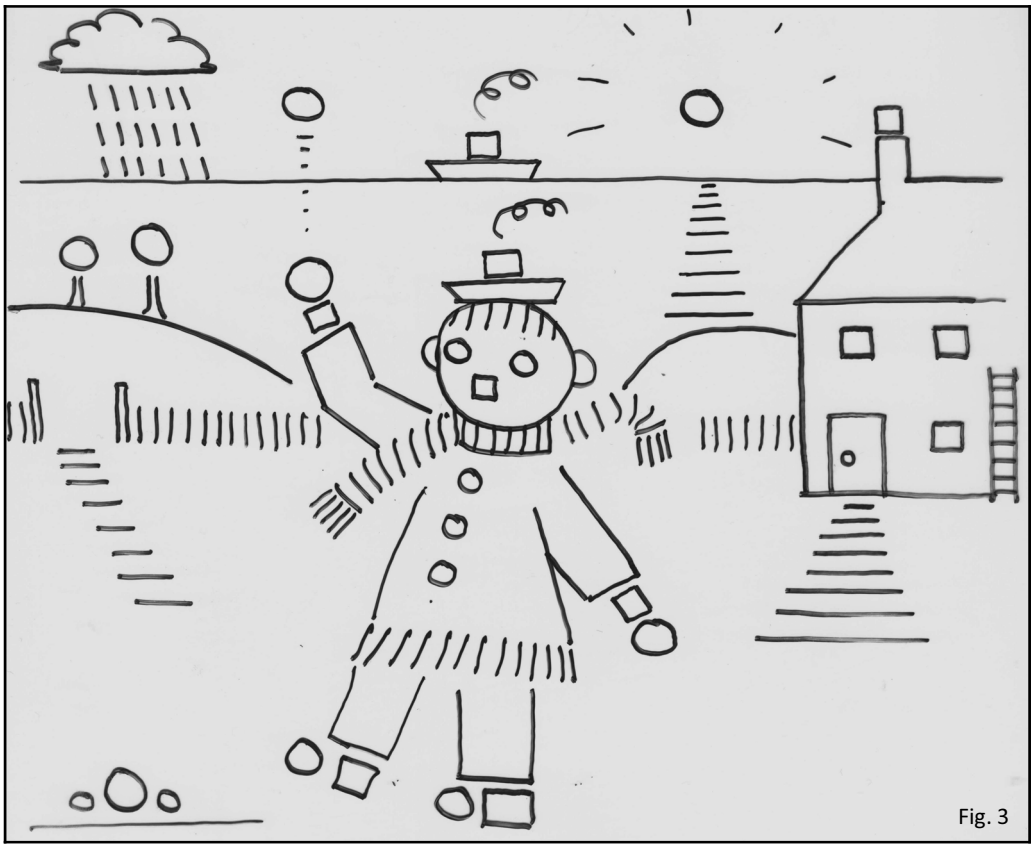


Fig. 3

The illustrations I'm giving you are mostly rather low-level or intermediate-level cognitive processes. It's extremely difficult, if not impossible in a talk like this to illustrate the high level ones. But let me just gesture to the kind of thing I'm talking about. In a Quaker meeting for worship – doubtless, in many other similar situations – people frequently have experiences which they might characterise as inner serenity or joy, sometimes of intense emotion or of oneness with everything, or occasionally a compelling impulse towards some course of action. Theistic Quakers interpret these kind of experiences that you all know about very differently from non-theists. They tend to interpret them as the presence of God or as divine forgiveness or a call from God. I think characteristically there the source or origin of the experience is felt as, or interpreted as, coming from outside, from beyond the individual. On the other hand, I suspect that most non-theistic people in the same context interpret what I suppose are essentially the same experiences as coming from within their own nature. That seems to me to be an important difference.

That's the sort of level of things I'd like to be able to talk about but I don't have the skill and I certainly don't have any professional knowledge in that area. So I am going to tell you about how functional belief systems are operating at much lower levels. But my proposition is that broadly the *same* mechanisms operate at all levels.

Returning to my earlier proposition that functional beliefs are normally implicit, it is not at all easy to contrive demonstrations of unconscious beliefs. You can see why this is a very difficult thing to demonstrate! But I can illustrate, at least indirectly, unconscious perceptions. I'm going to give you a task.

[Here the task was to read only the red letters in lists of superimposed pairs of red and green letters. One of the things the speaker demonstrated was how it was typically quicker to read a list when the ignored green letter was always the *same* letter, even though members of the audience were unaware that the green letters were repeated, than a list in which the ignored green letter was the same as the red letter in the next pair.]

My first thesis was: Our functional beliefs often differ quite radically from our explicitly stated beliefs. There are very often differences, discrepancies between the two and perhaps most strikingly in our beliefs about ourselves and our own capabilities.

[Here the speaker referred to the famous social psychology experiments on obedience to authority, conducted by Stanley Milgram in Yale University several decades ago, in which well over half the subjects proved

willing to inflict high levels of what they thought were electric shocks on a 'learner'. However, when other people were shown a video of the experiment and asked whether they themselves would be willing to inflict such shocks they *all* said no. This is a systematic shared delusion. He then gave another example of a 'guards and prisoners scenario', in which within 24 hours the subjects had slipped into their roles and showed either brutal aggression as 'guards' or signs of depersonalisation as 'prisoners.']

Finally, let me mention an experiment on students at Princeton Theological Seminary, conducted by John Darley and Daniel Batson. The theological students who volunteered to take part were asked to prepare a 3-5 minute talk. Half were given the topic 'the role of professional ministry' and the other half's topic was the parable of the Good Samaritan. When their talks were prepared, each subject was told to go to another building to record his talk. They were given a map and half were told: 'You're late, you must hurry,' and the other half: 'You have plenty of time to get over there.' On the way each subject encountered a figure slumped on the ground, groaning and coughing and in a bad way. The main dependent variable – of course – was what did each subject do about this?

Some of them merely stepped over the body. Some of them had a swift look and carried on. Some asked, 'Are you OK?' Some genuinely stopped to help. What determined what the response was? Was it the topic of the talk they had prepared? No. The *only* significant factor was whether you were in a hurry. Of those in a hurry only 10% stopped and attended, while of those not in a hurry 63% did. This illustrates my 7th thesis:

7. Our explicitly held beliefs are often less important in shaping our behaviour than our philosophical traditions have tended to suppose.

Conclusion

I need to end up. For me the big question is not 'What do I believe?' but 'How to live?' In looking for practical answers to that big question how to live, two things seems to be of fundamental importance. To me at least, what is much more important than 'What do I believe?' is: 'How do I understand myself?' How do I understand my own nature? What kind of a being am I? If I recognise myself as a spiritual being then I immediately see deceit or theft or murder or all the rest as simply unworthy of me. They are unworthy of what I am and what I seek to be. There's a lovely French philosopher Alain, *aka* Emile Auguste Chartier, who wrote: 'Ethics is neither more nor less than a sense of dignity.'

The second thing, closely linked to that first one, is what I'll call Perspective. How far do I see the world through or from my own point of view and in terms of my own interests? Or how far do I see it from the viewpoint of any other particular individual, or perhaps even from the perspective of my participation in the communion of all conscious beings, through my being and knowing myself to be a part of that communion? I think that *Perspective,* in this sense, rather than beliefs, is what is fundamental to the key question of how to live.

Alan Allport is a former Professor of Experimental Psychology at the University of Oxford, currently reinventing himself as a field naturalist. He is passionately concerned about the future of humanity in a warmer world.

This is a shortened, edited version of the talk he gave to the 2011 SOF Annual Conference in Leicester. A recording of the whole talk will be available on SOF website: www.sofn.org.uk

Prayer

Prayer the Church's banquet, Angels' age,
God's breath in man returning to his birth,
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,
The Christian plummet sounding heaven and earth;
Engine against the Almighty, sinner's tower,
Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,
The six-days world transposing in an hour,
A kind of tune, which all things hear and fear ;
Softness, and peace, and joy, and love, and bliss,
Exalted Manna, gladness of the best,
Heaven in ordinary, man well dressed,
The milky way, the bird of Paradise,
Church-bells beyond the stars heard, the soul's blood, The land of spices, something understood.

George Herbert

Part of a Pilgrimage 3

Anne Ashworth continues her pilgrimage into a painful a-theology.

January 1991 (continued)

Theology has led me into a-theology; liberal Christianity has become Cupittian non-realism. So I am now paralysed by the impossibility of using traditional church language, and conscious as a preacher of the most blatant dishonesty of speech and apparently assenting silence. This is a most painful experience. Yet the pressures upon me to remain, to continue work which I know sustains people and allows a platform for things which need to be said – these pressures are real, and good. A crisis of honesty, and one with which almost no one I know can help me.

But then I may not stay for the rest of my life at this point. I have moved often in my pilgrimage. As soon as I crystallise ideas into language, as soon as I assent to this particular brand of a-theology, I know at once how much I am yet again excluding: The known life of the spirit, known to all cultures and all centuries, not to be lightly dismissed with a puff of Freud and a squirt of Jung. I know well enough the folly of dogmatism.

There is another factor. In poetry, in work and love and friendship and everyday living, I have consciously loved life, celebrated life – been, if not always optimistic, certainly positive and joyous at heart. It may be no more than advancing years, but I find this to be no longer the case. I see the human race as irredeemable, and the planet it lives on as doomed. Even compassion takes a setback when I realise that there are too many of us and the Earth would be better rid of us – and a million years hence (or much less?) it will all have vanished without trace, our words and our aspirations melted as though they had never been. Ultimate pessimism. It is too large a view; it destroys, or at least threatens, any sense of purpose in one's life. But life can only be conducted with any degree of sanity if we have some immediate hope – personal, political, ecological or some other. My *raison d'être* as a leader of worship is to celebrate life, to support and encourage and challenge people as they strive towards the improvement of life. I have to offer them hope of some sort. One cannot be honest in optimism, for optimism is an ostrich. One cannot be honest in pessimism, if one's own life is comfortable and happy.

The result is that I am enduring a lengthy period (possibly an endless one?) of knowing that I have *nothing to say.* Nothing to write a poem about, nothing to preach a sermon about, nothing about which I feel sure enough to venture a statement; and if I did feel sure, the statement wouldn't come out right. It is as though a mainspring had snapped, somewhere quite deep inside me, too deep for examination. The clock continues to tick, but probably can't be relied on much longer. It no longer chimes or shouts: 'Cuckoo!'

So far this has been an attempt to articulate the negatives that seem to be dogging and paralysing me. However, in my experience every statement has its reverse and obverse. (Come to think of it, this is probably my only settled conviction! It preserves me from being opinionated, on the whole, though also makes me indecisive and too easily persuadable by opposing arguments.) So what is the positive of this negative state? Perhaps it is the urge to simplify, an urge first given rein when I acquired my little cottage Poustinia. This is not exactly the ascetic longing to simplify life to its bare necessities. That is a kind of perverse blasphemy against the rich prodigality of life in this complex amazing world. But it is a strong wish to sort out priorities and winnow away the falsities which so easily beset us. Philip Toynbee quotes Neville Ward: 'We can live with dignity only if we live on a few things, chosen for the way they speak deeply to us. We cannot live at all if we do not select from the plenitude of possible experience. We are simply distracted by meaningless shouts, whispers, pulls, wounds, nudges.'

This applies, amongst other things, to the life of the mind. I'm still avid for books and ideas, yet conscious that it is a kind of silly greed. In late years, how foolish it is try to cram one's mind with all possible equipment – for what? Better to learn to relax, to think more slowly, using fewer words. There is a sense, apart from the superficially obvious one, in which poetry is too difficult, too complicated. Words fail, and the cleverest words, the most seductive words, the successful ones, even these are not good enough. As I was saying in the poem 'When you come to the edge of words…'

Eve's fruit was none other than language. That was the fall, as well as the ascent, the glory, the thing that made us human. Contemporary philosophers say we live inside language. That is our glory and our misery and our alienation from earth and animal. I hope to live closely with words until I die. Yet I also hope to learn how to ration words.

At the beginning of the Gulf War, I, with others, was briefly plunged into angry despair about the human race, this barbarous species that enjoys destroying its own kind. Have we learnt nothing? Must these boys be at their war games forever? On reflection I realised that not everything is as bad as ever. There is a true wish for peace, for civilised negotiation; a true aversion from maiming and killing; a genuine concern for the waste of resources which could be used to feed, house, educate, solve environmental challenges. And these, however we fail to implement them, are good desires and fresh insights. They were not available to the miscalled 'noble savage'. Notions of human rights, of care for the disabled, of anti-sexism and anti-racism, of peaceful persuasion prove that some human thinking does advance, and advance morally. But towards what?

If, as seems 90% likely, there is no *telos*, if our planetary system will simply burn out and erase all memory, then we have the most appalling tragedy of pointlessness imaginable, without even a spectator to weep. Was it not the cruellest trick of the gods, or chance, to give us minds and words to think with?

My own death troubles me not at all. If it were tomorrow, I would meet it with equanimity, saddened only for the one person who would be affected by it. If I have nothing more to say, and have no further biological or social function, I am expendable. I have no wish to wither slowly into old age. But I do not long for death: life is still sweet and rich. Nor does the universal fact of death worry me. I rejoice in the cycle of life, the amazing re-use of molecules. Yet the prospect of the eventual death of humanity paralyses me. Is this ridiculous? Apparently so.

To return to the question of simplification. It would be good to talk with George Herbert, that lover of English words, that freshest of poets, who so well understood the matter. He was forever refining his poetry in the direction of simplicity precisely in order to cope with the ineffable. And I have known, as he, the stab of pain, the surge of joy which no biology, psychology or sociology can explain away. It seems that only for myself, or very occasionally for a few others, my poetry has been a vehicle for that Otherness. Certainly my lack of recognition as a poet argues that I have failed to convey its suchness – or that editors are not listening for such things. Either way, it is unwanted. So why add to it, now that the fires are dying down and my waning energies are unlikely to make a better job of it? Especially now that I feel I have no more statements to make. Statements falsify. What an absurdly paradoxical enterprise, to try to explain in words why words are deserting me!

March 1992

With pain and many a backward look, I have slowly detached myself from most of my church commitments. It eventually became necessary, quite recently, to write to my Lay Preachers' Commissioner and indicate briefly my a-theological position. It was almost a relief to do it. It was also a surprise to receive a warm and almost understanding reply, actually supporting me in the need to follow my own personal integrity. And I have become, it seems, some sort of adviser to others sucked out on the receding tide of the Sea of Faith. Do the blind lead the blind – or is the one-eyed woman queen?

Ahead: the void. For one who loved God with heart and mind and soul and strength, the most devastating of bereavements. And that it more or less entails the loss of the human support of the church community (and this when on the verge of retirement I contemplate another void) compounds the desolation. It is an irony that for long I suffered the church as a duty laid upon me by my love for God. Latterly, I have seen and experienced the solid worth of that human community, but now cannot bear to be part of it because its language is false for me.

But if I was indeed for so much of my life an ardent lover of God, what was I in love with? That awareness of the divine presence: what was I then experiencing? Primitive peoples, as anthropologists have observed them, believe that at night, in dreams, they move in other realms. They project outside themselves their own internal processes. Similarly, they reify their fears and guilts; projected outward, these become external demons to be propitiated. Very well, then – how do such mechanisms differ from god-consciousness? We revere, we aspire, and we project outward that which we revere and aspire to, calling it god or gods. And we dress our projection in the cultural clothing we have to hand.

Having finally, without evasion or pleading, faced the apparent fact, I find I can no longer make the magic work. This is not the classic sense of God's withdrawal, God's absence, hard to bear but carrying the hope of God's return. This time, it is as though I had struggled through a thorn hedge and have no way back. I am out of the thicket, like it or not, and out upon a dusty plain in the full glare of the sun.

Yet I am what I was, a lover of God. What can that mean now? It seems that at least I must reverse Simone Weil's instruction. What she called 'the forms of the implicit love of God' – love of nature, art, science, other humans – should never, she said, be loved for themselves until after the direct experience of God: then only might they be loved for God's sake, as God could be encountered within them. Now, rather, I am forced to turn all my love directly upon the 'implicit forms' and love them not for God's sake but their own. Shall I find the strength for that? This must be a task for my retirement. To look, to listen, to read; to paint, to write, to respond; to take time to appreciate; and to be glad and thankful at the last for the privilege of having lived in this wonderful world. Thankful? Oh! to whom?

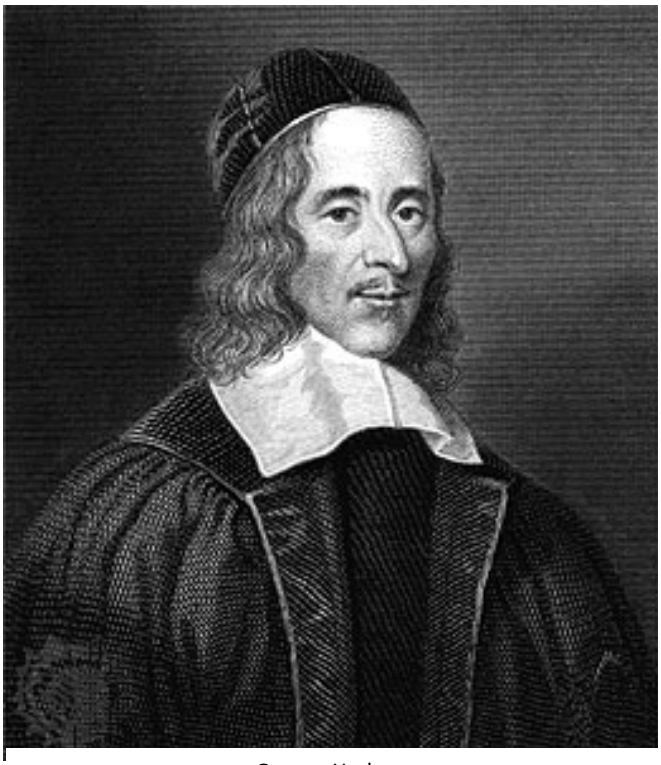
Sermon

Stephen Mitchell preached this sermon at St Mary's Church Dalham on Sunday 29th May 2011, Rogation Sunday.

A hundred years ago this year in 1911, Vaughan Williams published *Five Mystical Songs.* They received their first performance the same year at the Three Choirs Festival in Worcester Cathedral. The *Five Mystical Songs* are settings of five poems by the mystical 17th century poet George Herbert. We are singing an arrangement of one of these, *The Call,* during the service.

That same year, 1911, also saw the founding of the English Folk Dance Society (later to become the English Folk Dance and Song Society) by Cecil Sharp. Cecil Sharp toured the English countryside carefully noting down morris and folk dancing tunes and folk songs which were on the point of extinction. The fact that we can see morris dancing on every village green is down to Cecil Sharp. And to Vaughan Williams, who also went around collecting English folk songs, particularly here in East Anglia. As we know, Vaughan Williams' music – pieces like *The Lark Ascending* and *Fantasia on Greensleeves* – is highly influenced by his interest in English folk music.

Across Europe, composers were taking an interest in national folk music. Composers like Bartók in Hungary, Janáček in Czechoslovakia, Dvořák in Czechoslovakia and later America were all turning for inspiration to national music. And perhaps that's not surprising. If you think of music from Beethoven to Brahms to Wagner to Schoenberg, music in the nineteenth century became more romantic, more chromatic, more complicated and perhaps more remote from the common musical language and from audiences. Looking to folk music was not looking to a simpler form of music. It would be quite wrong to say that folk music was simple because folk music is quite capable of expressing the full range of our emotions. Turning to national folk music was a way of re-connecting with the soul of a nation, with audiences and with the common language of music.



George Herbert

Now it doesn't seem to me surprising that when Vaughan Williams was looking for poems to set to music he should look to the poetry of George Herbert. His poetry, particularly in these poems, is quite uncomplicated. *The Call,* which we are singing during the communion, is written entirely in single syllable words

> Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life:
> Such a Way, as gives us breath:
> Such a Truth, as ends all strife:
> Such a Life, as killeth death.

Every word is a single syllable word – yes, except for one word you spotted: the word 'killeth'. It is almost as if Herbert is saying complication kills. But the poem is anything but simple:

> Come my Way, my Truth, my Life:

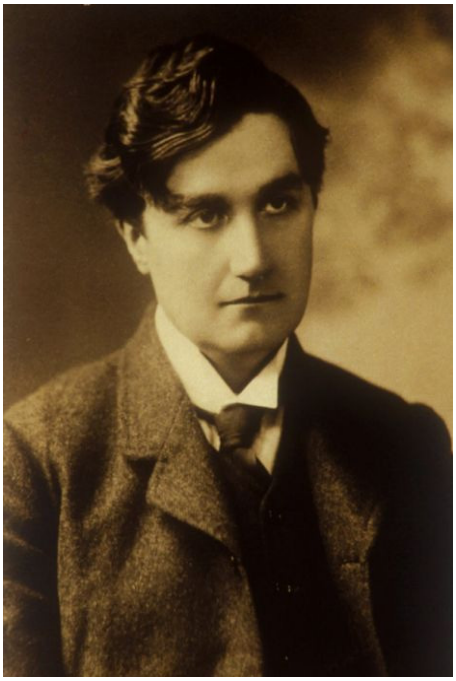
The line reminds us of Jesus in John's Gospel saying, 'I am the Way, the Truth, the Life.' But it's more than that. What are the things we need to live life? We need that which will enable us to flourish as individuals, to be our true selves and to live life 'our way' or, as the song says, 'my way'. We need to live life free from illusion and falsehood, to live in the truth. And we want to enjoy life in all its fullness. Herbert goes on to explore these in the next three lines:

> Such a Way, as gives us breath:

It speaks to us of the breath of life, the breath that breathes over the face of the waters at creation, a way that breathes inspiration and life into our lives:

> Such a Truth, as ends all strife:

What is truth? Not the 'I have to tell the truth



Ralph Vaughan Williams

whatever the reception. I'm the sort of person who tells it like it is.' Not the 'We have the truth and you are in the wrong.' Truth is that which ends all strife, that brings people to a common mind:

Such a Life, as killeth death.

The life worth living, the true life, the life which enables us to flourish is the life that accepts death, that accepts the vulnerability and fragility of life.

The words are uncomplicated, the thought profound. We don't need complicated words to speak profound truths. But more than that, there isn't a single theological word in the whole poem. Yet it speaks to us of our faith. We don't need theological words to talk of God and our faith. This doesn't come as a surprise. After all Jesus taught in parables, through common everyday tales. This is encouraging and should make us suspicious of those who over-jargonise our faith.

But it also comes with a rather unsettling truth. And it's this: If we speak of God without theological words, if we can talk of faith in common language, then the difference between belief and unbelief, between believers and unbelievers, may not be as great as we think.

Today is my birthday, my sixtieth birthday, and I was rather amused to see that the first reading was about Paul's visit to Athens and his speech to the Athenians about The Unknown God and Epimenides' description of the God 'in whom we live and move and have our being', which, happens to be the starting point of my book *God in the Bath.*

And it reminded me of Vaughan Williams. Ralph Vaughan Williams was the son of a clergyman, the vicar of Down Ampney (and hence the name of the tune he wrote for *Come Down O Love Divine* – which incidentally again has very, very few theological words). Vaughan Williams wrote a great deal of religious music, wrote and arranged many hymn tunes (all the hymns we are singing today are by him or arranged by him). He also edited one of the most influential hymnbooks in the English language, the *English Hymnal.* But Vaughan Williams was an agnostic. Would any of us not sing *Come down O Love Divine* or *For All the Saints* because of that? Surely not.

True faith, true belief, true belief in God, goes beyond atheism and theism, true faith brings us together because we all 'live and move and have our being' in God. We all share the one life that flows through us all in our common world.

And the other surprising thing is that if common, uncomplicated language can speak of God, then there is no division between the sacred and the secular, between the sacred and profane. There are no fences (pro-fane means outside the fence) outside of which, beyond which God's call, God's spirit, God's influence cannot reach.

Stephen Mitchell is the Vicar of Gazeley, together with four other parishes, and Rural Dean of Mildenhall, Suffolk. He is a former Chair of SOF Trustees.

Two's Company, One's a Crowd

(in memoriam F.S.)

The power of solitude is lost
if we're aware of absences.
Time then becomes loneliness
and it is wiser to share silence
with one who understands the need
sometimes to feel alone.

Solitude should be absolute.
Resting on Eden's rocks
above an iridescent sea,
I cannot free my mind of one
who will not leave my thoughts,
and still is part of me.

I'd gladly grant her half
of what this day has given,
but more than distance makes the gift
impossible. There are some halves
time never can make whole
or bonds of love now heal.

Edward Storey

The Editor would like to apologise for the printing error in Edward Storey's poem *Earth Story,* published in *Sofia* 100, which read 'tile the bars of space'. The correct line is: 'or tilt the bars of space to prove'. The whole poem is printed correctly on SOF website: www.sofn.org.uk/sofia/100storey.pdf

Sofia welcomes comment and debate.
Please send your letters to:
Sofia Editor: Dinah Livingstone,
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letters

You Can't Kill the Spirit!

Congratulations on a fine 100th issue of *Sofia.* I found your article and your poem – and Edward Storey's – most inspiring. Kenan Malik's discussion about ethics and science raised horrible possibilities. To limit human freedom by artificially 'conditioning' our behaviour through chemical means is to consider practices that remind me of the worst excesses of the Third Reich. I can't see that Christian ethics are in any way comparable. The Ten Commandments are good guidelines, whether divinely inspired or not, and surely the commandment to love is beyond dispute.

Incidentally, I was interested to see your reference to the song 'You can't kill the Spirit'. I remember chanting it with some women at Greenham Common when I went there with my daughter to 'embrace the Base'!

Joan Sheridan Smith
joansheridan@madasafish.com

Sofia Arts Reviewer Cicely Herbert and I, with my daughter, were at Greenham on that day too (December 12th 1982), together with 30,000 other women, singing 'You can't kill the Spirit. She's like a mountain..!' – Ed

Conference

A very interesting conference where the speakers opened up an important area of knowledge which throws a little light on 'knowing ourselves'. Nice to welcome eighteen new people. I spoke to one who was looking for somewhere to enrol as a member but no luck. Have we missed out on eighteen new members?

Also on hearing that the next conference is on *Work and Worth* the comment was 'how boring – don't think I'll come to that, I hated work.' Must say that I also thought it unappealing. I hope any advance information is more attractive.

Julia Nicoll
Hemel Hempstead

An Enlightened Philosophy

I'd like to thank the SOF Conference Committee for the kind invitation to lead a workshop at the recent SOF Conference. I really enjoyed meeting people there. Thanks especially to those who came to the workshop and contributed to such an interesting discussion. For those who would like a copy of the presentation, a more extensive version can be downloaded from the book's website at www.anenlightenedphilosophy.com where there are also several interviews and reviews. The book is also available on Amazon.

Since the weekend I have been giving some thought as to how our debate can be more widely shared. We have tried to do this through a Facebook page for *An Enlightened Philosophy*, which is at www.facebook.com/anenlightenedphilosophy. The Facebook method has two advantages in that it naturally proliferates, and does invite feedback and debate. I wonder whether in the first instance members of SOF might like to stimulate more debate on the *Enlightened Philosophy* book page, and beyond that whether there is scope for a SOF Facebook page to act as a point of proliferation for SOF and widely networked debate? I'd be interested to discuss this.

Geoff Crocker
geoff.crocker@3wa.co.uk

Museum of Garden History

I can't tell you what an exciting feeling I had when I opened your large envelope yesterday. It is really so good of you to have sent me the 100th Birthday edition of *Sofia.* I never really expected this, and, moreover, the very kind reference to my book on how the *Museum of Garden History*, renamed *the Garden Museum,* was brought into being. This was to put on record the Nicholson's (John and Rosemary) achievements. They were both such wonderful people, I was so fortunate to have known them…

What a lucky chance my friend Monica and I met you and your friend Cicely in the Garden of the Museum! How did we come to speak, I wonder? I think it was in looking at the tomb of the Tradescants, father and son.

I was so interested in reading through the *Sofia* magazine. There are some good and thought-provoking articles there… I hope you will forgive me for taking this opportunity to enclose an article I wrote quite recently…

Elizabeth Fleming
London

Elizabeth Fleming's article on *A Corner of Lambeth* is on page 26.

The Fountain: Form and Flux

Grenville Gilbert responds to *The Fountain* by Don Cupitt

I enjoyed reading Stephen Mitchell's review of Don Cupitt's latest (final?) book *The Fountain – A Secular Theology*. In the penultimate chapter of the book, Don echoes the thoughts of Friedrich Nietzsche concerning the needs of every philosopher to satisfy himself that 'the vision of the world in which after many years of toil I have at last felt able to come to rest' is the correct one for him. For Don, this involves seeing life as 'a temporal process, a flux of events that continuously pours out, scatters, and passes away', a world that is 'lovely but is always disputed, and above all is very transient'. I have no problem with either of these conclusions.

The problem with Don's philosophy, for me, is that it denies the possibility of the continuation of a person after his or her physical death; it denies the possibility of any eternal 'I'. He sums this up in three words (p. 78), 'I am flux'. For Don, everything is flux and everything passes away into nothingness, including 'I'. 13.7 billion years to produce conscious, living forms capable of appreciating beauty, music, art, literature, poetry and nature; to show tenderness, compassion, forgiveness and love; and, to build machines for exploring the universe itself and then - total darkness. Don's universe is conscious of itself for an instant and then no more – ever.

Over the years, I have greatly valued reading Don's books, none more so than his *Sea of Faith*. He has certainly provided me with many years of toil. However, one other book that has had a profound effect upon me is *Grammatical Man*. Like *Sea of Faith*, it was published in 1984. It was written by Jeremy Campbell and published by Pelican Books. It introduced me to the idea that there are three components of the universe: matter, energy and information. The first two are physical and capable of objective measurement. The third component is not; it has to be read – it presupposes subjective activity in the form of writing and reading.

Jeremy Campbell describes how 'the universe, and the living forms it contains, are based on chance, but not on accident'. By 'chance', Jeremy Campbell means 'possibility'; the possibility that something in-form-ed, designed or intended can be read, actualised or realised out of chaos and uncertainty. Possibilities become certainties. Language is a good example; the contents of a message get more and more resolved the further the message is read. Out of a finite store of words and a set of rules (grammar), endless messages, stories etc. are possible. The same reasoning would apply, in physics, to fundamental particles and scientific laws; all kinds of matter and energy can be realised. In biology, the genetic code, with its alphabet of four chemical bases, A, C, G and T, provides the instructions for creating millions of different life forms; from heucheras to humans. In all these examples, the non-random element or information, exploits the uncertainty or chaos which is present to produce new structures and to inform the world in a myriad, novel ways. It makes me think, here, of Don's flux of events – reality in the process of realisation. I think, also, of his thoughts about language creating the world.

However, Don's 'chance' I take to mean 'accident'. For Don, everything happens unintentionally and unexpectedly – without any cause. It is and then it isn't; and that is that. The question that I would like to ask him is how does he account for an informed universe? I suppose it is the old question of 'how do you account for there being order rather than disorder?' Did the vastly complex instruction manual for the creation of conscious life just begin to write itself shortly after the Big Bang? I would of course share Don's view that we humans have created meaning and purpose (and religion too, of course) but then, we in turn, are a part of the universe. The possibilities of human language, meaning and purpose must themselves also have been present in the first few seconds of its creation.

My conclusion is that Don is wrong. I say that respectfully because I value greatly his life's labours. I believe that the universe is more than matter and energy. It also has spirit (or information, if you want to call it that). There is, indeed, flux; without flux there would be no life. But I do not see myself as flux; I feel that I am the product of flux. From second to second, I cannot be certain of life. Religions provide road maps; Christianity seems a very good and life-enhancing one. I share Don's view that God does not exist and is not real. For me, however, he is the very Existence and Reality within which I live and move and have my spiritual being. He transcends, pervades and is encountered through the vehicle of matter and energy, but, in the words of the title of Keith Ward's latest book (published in 2010 by Lion Hudson), he is *More than Matter'* I believe that being alive after physical death remains a possibility. Quite what form we shall take, no one knows.

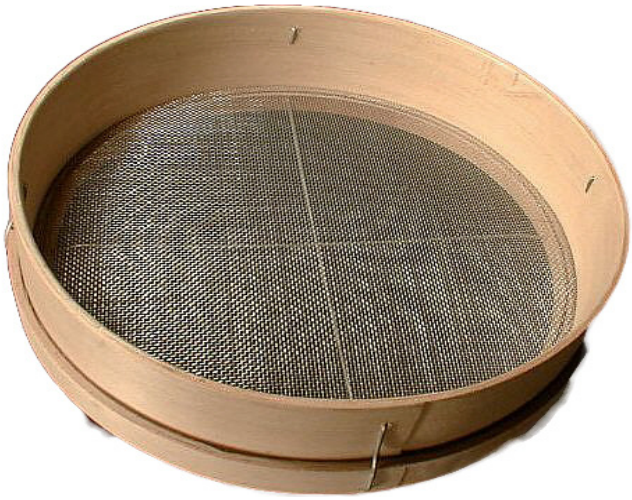
Grenville Gilbert is a SOF member living in Devon.

SOF Sift

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

Hilary Campbell, Kidlington, Oxfordshire

Clothed in Story



I'm not sure whether it was the words that drew me into church. I think it was more something about finding a place to belong, be ordinary, and find friendship. The wrestling with words has been an ongoing theme, however. At school there was our form teacher (a young nun) leading us to question the themes in Simon and Garfunkel's songs, for example: I am a rock. There was also angry debate with her after a visiting evangelistic group called on people to come forward and commit themselves to Christ. What does this mean? At university the challenge came from a flat-mate: 'Are you born again?' Again – what does this mean? For a while I was a fairly hardline evangelical and looked rather sniffily on folk in my home church, who didn't look committed or born again to me. But, something didn't quite fit. The story, the words of faith, didn't match with the words, the story of life. I felt it was like trying to live in two different worlds.

It's been people who helped me continue this human exploring and crafting, to bring faith down to Earth. The vicar at my home church who was so patient with me showed me an unostentatious, committed and unselfish way of living out the Christian faith, that maybe one day I'll get close to copying. Becoming a mother was a life altering experience that once again shook up the story I had about myself. I needed another language for the 'work' I was doing.

Friends within and without the church helped in this discovery and mining of words, including the discovery of a range of descriptors for God that were not limited to male. Questions and doubting, metaphors and ideas, pushed the boundaries and opened the possibilities of faith for me. Being introduced to SOF while David Jenkins, Bishop of Durham, was opening my eyes to the metaphorical language and story of faith, continued to show me a way of communicating faith that felt life-giving. Attending SOF conferences has been a refreshing encounter with fellow word crafters and seekers of the story of faith as an integral part of the human experience.

I value the writers and thinkers familiar to these pages (Holloway, Borg, Crossan, Pullman, even Cupitt sometimes!) Poetry is an important element to telling the story of faith and life. And I sometimes wonder where the women are? (Apart from Editor's input, her promotion of poetry and encouragement of male and female contributions.)

And now I find myself in the role of an ordained minister in the Church of England. Was this a naïve and backward step to take? What does this mean for the story of who I am and the work I do? I work to find words, story and language to lay alongside the life experiences of the people I am with, in their times of celebration, loss, commitments and new beginnings. And I hope that people will find for themselves a way into a story where they belong and become the truest of themselves. So I have to end with a story that I told a few years ago at the 2006 SOF conference:

Truth and Story

In the beginning Truth went about among the world naked. It was not a pretty sight. In fact, it was quite scary, and people were frightened by his nakedness, and ran away, and kept their children indoors, so that Truth was forced to go about the world only under the cover of darkness. One day, a stranger, appeared, a beautiful woman dressed in the most beautiful clothes. At first people were cautious of her and shied away, but soon discovered that when they talked with her or even just touched her clothes, they dreamt the most amazing dreams. These dreams changed them. They became more open to learning and grew in love for themselves and for others. One night, Truth crept up to the stranger who was creating such change. He asked her, 'Who are you?' The stranger smiled and said, 'Do you not know me? We have been companions for many years, though you have not recognised me. My name is Story.' She gave Truth a gift. She gave him her cloak to wear. And from that time on people were not afraid to encounter Truth, for Truth always went about the world clothed in Story.

Hilary Campbell is Team Vicar of the Parish of Kidlington with Hampton Poyle.

Radio Rockall

Where There's Life There's Hope

Euthanasia surfaced in my mind again just as the BBC reported that Dr Jack Kevorkian had died, Radio Times splashed Sir Terry Pratchett's programme including *Five Minutes that will Change our Lives* and I heard of the *Eastenders'* euthanasia storyline. Now we have the much-criticised enquiry by Lord Falconer.

When I was still teaching I rashly predicted that Voluntary Euthanasia would be legal by the time I retired. Lord Joffe's Assisted Dying Bill of 2006 was pending. It contained the key phrase 'Voluntary Euthanasia' but it failed. Minette Marin in the Sunday Times said deletions of such key phrases partly explained the fatal objections to the Bill.

The nearest to euthanasia in the Bible appears to have a similar fatal end: The wounded King Saul asks his armour-bearer to kill him (1 Samuel 31). The armour-bearer refuses, afraid to kill the king. Saul falls on his sword and dies… or does he? Saul begs an Amalakite to finish him off. He does so (2 Samuel 1). David commands the Amalakite to be executed.

Ahithophel also requests death (Judges 9) and several suicides are mentioned. Generally, we are warned not to 'play god' because God alone dispenses life and death. However, today we plan our lives, including scientific medicine to maintain ourselves so why not similarly plan our deaths?

Our 1961 Suicide Act removed 'attempted suicide' as an offence and since suicide and euthanasia are deemed so similar, the one justifies the other [J. Fletcher] especially as the sodium pentobarbital, which clients drink in solution at Dignitas, is now available in tablet form [Dr Philip Nitschke, Exit, Australia]. However, anyone 'encouraging or assisting a suicide' could be imprisoned for fourteen years.

In 2002 Diane Pretty's request for release from her motor neurone disease was refused, while a Miss B was taken off life-support. In 2006 Dr Anne Turner with supranuclear palsy succeeded in dying with Dignitas in Zurich because she could afford it. Switzerland is not the only country that has legalised euthanasia but it is the only one that will allow access to non-citizens for this purpose. In 2007 Daniel James, 23, broke his neck playing rugby. He said, 'I have nothing left to live for.' Knowing he would be denied euthanasia in Britain, Daniel also travelled to die with Dignitas, but his parents were afraid that they would be prosecuted for assisting him. Baroness Mary Warnock gave the Jameses her support: 'We must try yet again to change the law, *not by excluding from criminality those who assist death by taking the suicide abroad, but by liberalising the laws of our own country.*'

In 2008, Debbie Purdy, with multiple sclerosis, found the courts would not confirm whether her husband would be prosecuted if he helped her to die. In 2009, Director of Public Prosecutions, Keir Starmer QC, said that 'financial benefit', 'persuasion or pressure' or 'if the patient were deemed incompetent' would prejudice the defence of anyone assisting a suicide. In 2010, he updated his guidance by re-introducing that key word 'Voluntary' in the patient's decision.

Voluntary Euthanasia is now in the collective psyche but the media still says it means bumping off grandma, the disabled, gays, Jews – name your 'slippery slope' spectre of Nazi eugenics – yet if you have an incurable condition a doctor may legally give doses of pain-killing morphine that also shuts down organs and kills you very *s-l-o-w-l-y*. This is the palliative care used in hospices that offer an alternative to euthanasia, if you do not wish to die in your own time. You may write an Advance Directive to add to your Will, if you wish to die should you have certain conditions: the medics will ease your passing.

The BMA is against Euthanasia and the GMC struck off Dr Michael Irwin who has long campaigned for Dignity in Dying. Then in 2010 Dr Ann McPherson, dying of pancreatic cancer, set up Healthcare Professionals for Assisted Dying. She quickly gained 340 significant names simply by word of mouth. With surveys polling 80% of us wanting to change the law in favour of Voluntary Euthanasia, the nettle is being grasped. The basic needs are:

1. Making choices for our death as we do for our life.
2. Choosing help to die if I am unable to help myself: Voluntary but Active Euthanasia.
3. Protecting our selves, families and trained personnel against prosecution.

So where there's life there's still hope of a change in the law.

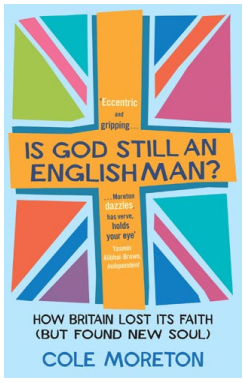
David Paterson reviews

Is God Still an Englishman?

How Britain Lost its Faith (but Found New Soul)

By Cole Moreton

Abacus (Little, Brown Group). (London 2011 pbk). 384 pages. £9.99.



I took to this book from the first few pages, and it continued to move and thrill me right through to the end. The author is a journalist, and brings to his subject the clarity of non-judgmental observation, and the ability both to involve himself deeply, and also to stand back, reflect and assess the meaning and consequences of what he has experienced. The book covers events in England from 1980 to the present, and repeatedly made me gasp at the clarity of Moreton's descriptions of things in which I too had taken part; he also challenged my memory of things I had refused to take seriously enough at the time – notably the Hillsborough disaster and the death of Diana. Turning points in the development of England's new soul. He interweaves this with vividly described personal experiences 'to inform the bigger story of the soul of England'.

In the 1980s England was still Christian, and – though adherence to the Church of England was already waning – we were 'on the verge of a great revival'. The marriage of Charles and Diana was a fairy tale and a disaster, and the Archbishop of Canterbury (Runcie) knew, 'but simpered along with the illusion'. A moving chapter about a deep tragedy, from which neither the Royal Family nor the Church of England came out well.

In relations with Margaret Thatcher Runcie did much better, standing up to her over the Falklands War ('The boss is spitting blood,' said her husband), and challenging her with the *Faith in the City* report: 'altruism against egotism, community against self-seeking, charity against greed' – Norman Tebbit was 'like a Rottweiler with a chewed-up dog-collar between its bloody paws'. And there were the protests against nuclear weapons: CND, and Monsignor Bruce Kent. And the miners' strike which added to the loss of respect for authority (it's hard to respect a bobby when he's charging at you on horseback, wielding his baton like a demented cossack), and David Jenkins pulling no punches in his criticism of the government.

Interwoven with all this is Moreton's own spiritual journey, from Billy Graham through John Wimber and David Watson, and speaking in tongues. (The teenage Moreton found this hard, till he was told to say 'shecameonahonda showaddywaddy' very fast. He describes the joy that resulted very movingly.) Then the Toronto blessing, and Holy Trinity Brompton and the Alpha Course. Services no longer a boring duty, but an expectation of thrilling fulfillment – unless those expectations were disappointed. And the fraudulent claims and abuse of power!

I admired Moreton's ability to see through the claims of powerful spiritual experiences, with hindsight, and without decrying their significance. The old God is losing his place in English society, he says, and the Church of England is no longer the church of the nation, but something else is growing up. The Church of Everywhere is our new national church. (I was reminded of Don's 'everyday speech' books.) The description of the events at and after Hillsborough are powerfully told; and the failure of either organised religion or the Queen to respond adequately. A new way of ritualising tragedy with flowers was born, and would grow until it has now become the norm, notably in the public reaction to Diana's death.

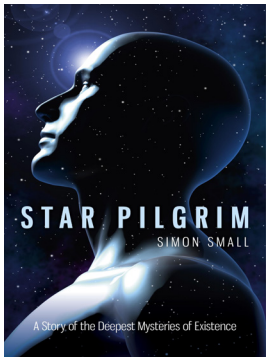
So where is the soul of England? Everywhere. In the traditional English villages that survive, actually or in fantasy (Dibley, perhaps), but much more in the huge variety of our nation. Is God still an English–man? Yes, but He (or She) is also 'an Afghan, a Bosnian, a Croat, a Djibouti, an Ethiopian,….'.and all the way to 'a Walloon' (Moreton gave up on X). 'Monoculture is over; but then we have always been a rainbow nation; now there is no denying it.' The rise of Paganism is excitingly described, as one way in which the new freedom can be expressed, and a relationship with our land recovered in the global ecological context.

Moreton started with the story of his friend Ali, a young mother dying of cancer. 'Where am I going?' she asks. 'Someone said, "You'll always be there, watching the kids grow up". That's awful. You'd just have to watch, pressed up against the glass, unable to be heard or to touch. Is that what it's like?' The book ends with the author making a cairn, as Columba did, in silence on a beach. 'No words, because I didn't have them'. 'We must find our own answers, and live and die by them.'

Former SOF Chair and Trustee David Paterson took part with Cole Moreton in the BBC tv *Big Questions* programme in January 2011 on: *Is it possible to be a Christian and not believe in God?*

Richard Wood-Penn reviews
Star Pilgrim
By Simon Small

O Books (Ropley, Hants, 2011). Pbk. 371 pages. £12.99.



Metacognition – the activity of stepping back and thinking about one's own thinking. 'Anything which alters consciousness in the direction of unselfishness, objectivity and realism is to be connected with virtue. Virtue is the attempt to pierce the veil of selfish consciousness and join the world as it really is' (Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*).

I have just experienced an exposition of 'Virtue' in a most powerful spiritual and intellectual manifestation in a book, a work of fiction: *Star Pilgrim* by Simon Small. The author, who has lived in Glastonbury for a number of years as an ordained priest in the Church of England, has just been appointed Chaplain of the Abbey House Retreat Centre. His book is the story of a journey that transports the reader from a present-day England redolent of William Blake's *Albion,* complete with its own dreams and visions, through a fascinating series of sojourns before returning 'home'.

The journey is described in three threads: the geographic, the intellectual and the spiritual, but the most significant and paradoxical element is the concept of 'home' to which all three threads return.

> He had never left home. The deepest truth of who he was still danced in love with its source, as it had from the beginning of time. Nothing else was possible. The created could not leave its author. Existence was one and could contain no gaps. Yet within that oneness another part of him swirled, enraptured in its own dance. He was called also to create for he was an expression of the eternal creative impulse. So he was the dance and the dancer.

This book works on many levels. Like Pullman it moves effortlessly from action adventure to considered science fiction to a most intelligently contemplative dimension that it defies simple appreciation.

Anamnesis – literally loss of forgetfulness – also plays a very significant part in the story:

> [He] knew in that moment of anamnesis that something with roots deep in the past was coming to fruition, through the present, into the future and that he was at the centre of whatever it was. For a few seconds the sense of hidden purpose to his life felt overwhelming.

T. S. Eliot – in *Little Gidding* – explored a similar theme nearly 70 years ago:

> *We shall not cease from exploration*
> *And the end of all our exploring*
> *Will be to arrive where we started*
> *And know the place for the first time.*
> *Through the unknown, unremembered gate*
> *When the last of earth left to discover*
> *Is that which was the beginning;*
> *At the source of the longest river*
> *The voice of the hidden waterfall*
> *And the children in the apple-tree*
> *Not known, because not looked for*
> *But heard, half-heard, in the stillness*
> *Between two waves of the sea.*
> *Quick now, here, now, always –*
> *A condition of complete simplicity*
> *(Costing not less than everything)*
> *And all shall be well and*
> *All manner of thing shall be well.*

Simon's characters are totally convincing and have a strongly positive and optimistic quality. This is not a Panglossian optimism of the ego but much more spiritual in nature, as in the words of Julian of Norwich, borrowed by T. S. Eliot in the last two lines of above quotation. The characters are somewhat reminiscent of those created by Nevil Shute – ordinary people drawn into acts of great courage and tenacity by circumstances that they wouldn't have chosen but simply accept as their lot, and with the support of disparate strangers who join the action because they choose to.

Whilst nothing, I guess, is new there is always someone out there who can take a timeless concept and express it in a way that is new, fresh and possibly in the spirit of the zeitgeist of the day. I believe that Simon's *Star Pilgrim* will satisfy this desire for many people. In my case I had the most disconcerting feeling that *Star Pilgrim* had been written specifically for me – a bit like viewing a portrait whose subject's eyes seem to follow one about the gallery. The story works on so many levels that I think that every reader will have her or his own 'take' and find a personal meaning in *Star Pilgrim*, a meaning which will endure.

Richard Wood-Penn is a SOF member living in Northampton.

A Corner of Lambeth

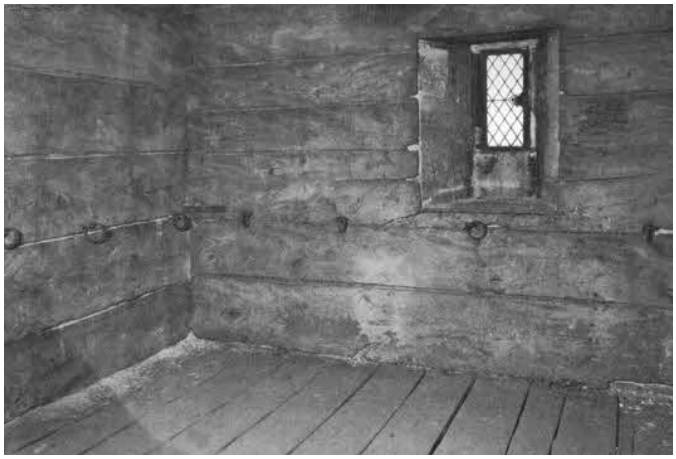
Elizabeth Fleming invites us to take a stroll round historic Lambeth.

The name of Lambeth immediately brings to mind the Palace. Once this was the manor of Lambeth, a Priory, held by the monks of Rochester, but in 1197 it was acquired by Archbishop Hubert Walter to provide the Archbishop of Canterbury with a London home – Kent being a long way off from Westminster. Lambeth was convenient, being beside the river which, before the 1880s embankment was built, ran close up to the Palace walls. Still standing are the Lambeth Stairs, four solid steps up and five down, used by bargemen and their passengers when ferrying across and back. The Palace's impressive gateway, Morton's Tower, was built around 1490, Cardinal Morton's doing, and added to the Lollards' five storey structure, whose name came from prisoners kept there who were followers of the fourteenth century religious reformer, John Wycliffe, as well as others who criticised the Church with its wealth and use of images. – they were deemed heretics. In a room at the top, iron rings can be seen welded into the stone walls where prisoners were shackled. The Tower has a Tudor entrance and porter's lodge.

Mary of Modena, second wife of King James II, sought shelter, it is said, at Morton's Gateway whilst waiting for a coach to take her to the coast in her escape to France. James II had two Protestant daughters, Mary and Anne, both married and living abroad but then Mary of Modena gave birth to a son – Roman Catholic! James' daughter Mary's husband, William of Orange, was asked to invade and take joint power with his wife, so in November James II fled the country. Mary did the same at the beginning of December. She crossed the river at Horseferry Road and landed at Lambeth Stairs. It was a wet and windy night and shelter was needed, because she was carrying her baby of six months 'wrapped round like a bundle of washing' (Terry Waite, *Travels with a Primate*).

The church of St Mary the Virgin, adjacent to Morton's Gateway, also has an absorbing history. A small wooden (it is believed) building was erected here by Countess Goda (c.1001-1055) , sister to Edward the Confessor, and mentioned in the Domesday survey. A stone church replaced this three hundred years later and rebuilding and restoration took place in 1851. Five Archbishops are buried here, and one, Thomas Secker of Canterbury, was buried outside (his wish) in 1768. In the garden at the back of the church is the carved stone tomb of the seventeenth century royal gardeners, the Tradescants, father and son; also the family tomb of Admiral William Bligh FRS, who died in 1817.

Just a few steps down Lambeth Road, turning left leaving by the garden's back gate, still stands



Lollards' Prison with wall shackles in Lambeth Palace

Archbishop Tait's Church School of 1837: Mercy Weller became its first headmistress – later she was buried within the church. The school's Victorian building (listed Grade 2) is long and low with a ridged roof, chimneys, gabled church-like windows and a stunted turret at one end. This building is now Fairley House Upper School with its name on the central glass-panelled door. Children with special needs are taught here.

The original church School had closed in 1970 and two years later the parish church was deconsecrated; this was all due to the depopulation after the bomb damage of World War II and the church was in a bad state of disrepair. In 1976 plans were being made for the church, including its medieval tower, to be demolished but, due to the ever amazing efforts of Rosemary and John Nicholson, this order was lifted and the church was saved. At the end of 1977 the Museum of Garden History was created within the old walls. Money was raised to do the needed repairs and volunteers readily came forward to help man the shop and the cafe inside and see to the garden outside. The people who worked under such difficulties, and in very cold surroundings at first, were part of this incredible story.

Just a short way along Lambeth Road is the entrance to the Archbishop's Park, once part of the Palace grounds but then given to the public. The Council has made a wonderful children's playground here with swings, slides and frames for climbing. At the millennium a curving elegant pathway was laid out over the trodden-down footpath across the big grassy area. Sixteen roundels were set in here to show some of the important people and happenings in Lambeth's last thousand years. The first one reads:

> 1000. Lambeth is mainly marshland and open countryside punctuated by Roman roads and a few settlements.

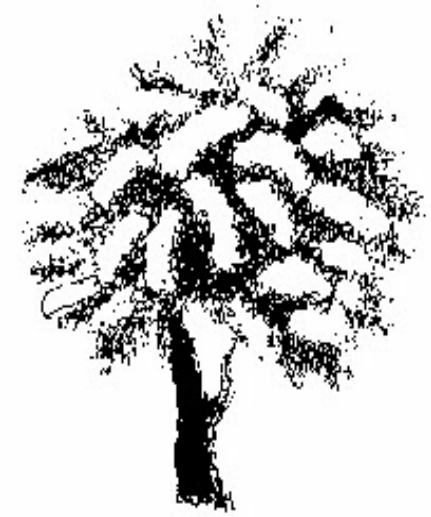
Elizabeth Fleming's book *Founding the Museum of Garden History* was published in 2006 by the Museum of Garden History and costs £5.

Mayday Notes

The Taoiseach Speaks up for the Abused Children of Ireland

Most English newspapers have only quoted fairly briefly from Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Enda Kenny's speech in the Dáil on the Cloyne Report into clerical abuse of children in Ireland and the Catholic Church's cover-up of it. However, this tremendous historic speech, delivered on July 20th 2011, is widely available online – both audio and text – e.g. www.rte.ie/news/2011/0720/cloyne1.html and all who can should read or listen to it in full. It is an epic confrontation between Church and State with echoes resonating over more than a millennium. And unlike in the confrontation between King Henry II and Thomas Beckett, there can be no doubt who stands on the moral high ground. Here are few extracts:

> The rape and torture of children were down-played or managed to uphold the primacy of the institution [the Church], its power, standing and reputation. Far from listening to evidence of humiliation and betrayal with St. Benedict's 'ear of the heart', the Vatican's reaction was to parse and analyse it with the gimlet eye of a Canon lawyer...
>
> The Cloyne Report describes how many victims continued to live in the small towns and parishes in which they were reared and abused. Their abuser was often still in the area and still held in high regard by their families and community...
>
> This is the Republic of Ireland in 2011. It is a republic of laws, rights and responsibilities and proper civic order where the delinquency and arrogance of a particular version of a particular kind of morality will no longer be tolerated or ignored...
>
> As a practising Catholic, I do not say any of this easily... Today, that Church needs to be a penitent church, a Church truly and deeply penitent for the horrors it perpetrated, hid and denied – in the name of God, but for the good of the institution...
>
> Through our legislation, through our Government's action to put children first, those who have been abused can take some small comfort in knowing that they belong to a nation – to a democracy – ...where the law – their law, as citizens of this country – will always supersede canon law that has neither legitimacy nor place in the affairs of this country...
>
> The then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger said: 'Standards of conduct appropriate to civil society or the workings of a democracy cannot be purely and simply applied to the Church'. As the Holy See prepares its considered response to the Cloyne Report, I want to make it clear, as Taoiseach, that when it comes to the protection of the children of this State, the standards of conduct which the Church deems appropriate to itself cannot and will not be applied to the workings of democracy and civil society in this republic – not purely or simply or otherwise, because children have to be and will be put first.



Rome's reaction to the speech was to recall the Papal Nuncio.

Religion as a Human Creation

SOF's brief is to explore religion as a human creation. The fact that religion is a human creation means that it has no *supernatural* authority and, like other human creations, is a mixture of good and bad. It is no part of SOF's brief to defend the indefensible: neither cruel, inhuman doctrines or laws, nor acts of cruelty, arrogant pride, deceit or anything of that ilk committed by religious people, particularly religious authorities of any kind. This applies to the Christian religion, the Jewish and Muslim religions and any other. On the one hand, we must treat each other with respect as fellow citizens, listen and try to understand one another so that we can live peacefully together in a kind society. On the other, when we see abuses perpetrated, advocated or condoned by religious authorities – priests in black gowns – we should not be afraid to speak up. These are two complementary, rather than opposing, tasks in exploring religion as a human creation, and we should not confuse them out of a fuzzy attempt at 'niceness'.

London Taxi drivers' brains grow bigger when they get The Knowledge.

This cabbie had to deliver a baby in his taxi on 2nd September 2010.