

s fia

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Advent and Utopia



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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.

'Come, Sun of Justice...'

This December issue of *Sofia* is called *Advent and Utopia*. Leading up to Christmas at the winter solstice, Advent invokes a Sun of Justice to grow and lighten our darkness. Powerfully and poetically, it expresses the age-old longing for a utopian society where justice and peace shine upon Earth.

Sofia is grateful to *Red Pepper* for kind permission to reprint Mike Marqusee's article *Let's Talk Utopia*. As Marqusee points out: 'We've been taught to fear utopian thinking, which is denounced as not only impractical but positively dangerous.' But, he argues, 'While there are dangers in utopian thinking, the much greater danger is its absence. The reality is that we don't "talk utopia" nearly enough.' In a struggle for social justice we not only need to say what is wrong with the present but to imagine a better future. 'We can draw,' he says, 'on a rich tradition going back to the biblical prophets and found in almost every human society.' He warns: 'A utopia without dissent and argument is a nightmare.' Utopia is a good society, not a perfect one. It must be participatory and 'more of a process, a journey'.

In the last few days (feeling too old and rheumatic to camp, besides being the world's most useless camper) I have been visiting the protest camp in St Paul's churchyard (see picture on the back cover). The camp's main focus is the huge inequality in our society, and the protesters have dramatically raised the issues at stake in a way that none of us can ignore. Camping at the foot of the steps of the great West door of the cathedral, they have challenged the Church and some of the debate has been framed in Christian language. The Christian gospel and language is part of that rich utopian tradition, which belongs to all of us, whether we believe in supernatural beings or not.

Rejecting the supernatural, an important part of *Sofia's* task is to translate that Christian language into secular terms, 'holding fast to what is good' for the sake of humanity. As I write we are coming up to the season of Advent, which not only looks forward to Christmas as a commemoration of the birth of Jesus long ago, but whose liturgy is charged both with the utopian longings of the Old Testament prophets and the

gospel promise of what Jesus called 'the kingdom of God', that is, the coming on Earth of a kind society that is good news for the poor. In my article *Advent and Utopia* I explore this further.

Also in this issue, David Warden takes a critical look at Paul van Buren's classic *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*. From Australia, Peter Bore writes about the 'troublesome priest' Peter Kennedy, sacked by the Vatican because his church was pursuing too much 'liberation theology', and who has set up 'St Mary's Community in Exile'.

In *The Strange Story of Prophet John Wroe* Dominic Kirkham looks at one of the weirder and wackier stories of millenarian expectations and highlights the dangers of the claim to be the 'chosen people', especially when those making the claim are rich and powerful: 'The conviction of a special destiny under God became a defining characteristic of the American psyche with its own historical narrative.' So as with all myths, discernment is needed. Utopian yearnings and expectations must be subject to the criterion of a sane and kindly humanism.

Advent looks forward to Christmas, which celebrates the incarnation of the word, that is the story of the 'divine word' coming down to us, becoming fully human, embodied in humanity and active in the world. Or, we could say the story expresses the utopian desire of humankind to become kinder, less unkind. The way John puts it at the beginning of his Gospel is: 'The word became flesh and **pitched its tent** (ἐσκηνώσεν: **eskenosen**) among us.' That word was Jesus talking about good news for the poor, and the dispossessed inheriting the Earth. Recently that word has been going out more clearly from the tents in St Paul's churchyard than from the cathedral. The Cathedral seems to have realised this, as it has withdrawn its threat of legal action. As I write, the camp is still there.

Let's Talk Utopia

Mike Marqusee argues that while there are dangers in utopian thinking, the much greater danger is its absence.

In 1818, Shelley visited his friend Byron in Venice, where his Lordship was camped out in a decaying *palazzo*, ruminating on the city's faded glories. Their conversations – on human freedom and the prospects for social change – formed the basis for Shelley's poem *Julian and Maddalo*, in which the mild-mannered English rationalist Julian (Shelley) puts the case for hope, and the brooding Italian aristocrat Maddalo (Byron) argues for despair. 'We might be otherwise,' Julian insists, 'we might be all / we dream of: happy, high, majestic' were it not for our own 'enchained' wills. To which Maddalo replies bitterly: 'You talk utopia!'

Snap Dismissal

That snap dismissal echoes down to our own day. We've been taught to fear utopian thinking, which is denounced as not only impractical but positively dangerous: the province of fanatics. In ignoring the lessons of history and the realities of human nature, utopian idealism results, inevitably we are told, in dystopian outcomes. It's a modern version of the myth of Pandora's box: a warning against being too enquiring, too ambitious.

Fear of utopia, a mighty weapon in the arsenal of the ruling powers, has a long pedigree. Since Burke, at least, conservatives have warned that tampering with established institutions, encouraging people to expect too much, leads to disaster. The 'failure' of every social experiment, from the French revolution onward, is seized on as evidence of the perils of utopian thinking. Anti-utopianism was a staple of cold war liberalism and was resuscitated as the 'end of history' thesis following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Increasingly we have been told that a utopian denial of realities lurks in even the most modest demands for regulation and redistribution. When it comes to the apparent dearth of alternatives, I'd argue that social democracy's long retreat into the arms of neoliberalism is as great a factor as the demise of the Communist bloc.

While there are dangers in utopian thinking, the much greater danger is its absence. The reality is that we don't 'talk utopia' nearly enough. We need the attraction of a possible future as well as a revulsion at the actual present. If people are to make the sacrifices

required by any struggle for social justice, then they need a bold and compelling idea of the world they're fighting for.

Critical tool

Utopian thinking is more than just model building: it is a critical tool, a means of interrogating present conditions. We have to exercise that supremely political faculty, the imagination, if we are not to be prisoners of a prevailing consensus.

Utopias provide a perspective from which the assumed limitations of the present can be scrutinised, from which familiar social arrangements are exposed as unjust, irrational or superfluous. You can't chart the surface of the Earth, compute distances or even locate where you are without reference to a point of elevation – a mountain top, a star or satellite. Without utopias we enjoy only a restricted view of our own nature and capacities. We cannot know who we are.

We need utopian thinking if we are to engage successfully in the critical battle over what is or is not possible, if we are to challenge what are presented as immutable 'economic realities'. Without a clear alternative – the outlines of a just and sustainable society – we are forced to accept our opponents' parameters. We cede the definition of the possible to those with a vested interest in closing the aperture into a better future. The neoliberal slogan 'There is No Alternative' had to be answered by 'Another World is Possible', but we need to know much more about this other world.

In our utopian activity, let's learn from past errors. It's important to remember that a significant strand of utopianism, including Thomas More's book, is linked to western colonialism. This took many forms, from dreams of imposing a new order on ancient or (allegedly) empty lands (of which Zionism is a modern case) to Romantic and Orientalist fantasies.

In their critique of Utopian Socialism, Marx and Engels made two charges. First, that the method was wrong: a socialism imposed from above, reliant on altruistic benefactors. Second, that it was not sweeping enough, that it failed to recognise the need to replace the system as a whole.

Vital guideline

Marx described communism as ‘the negation of the negation’ – and our utopianism must remain at least in part a giant negation of exploitation, inequality, greed, prejudice. Marx is criticised for not telling us more about what comes after the negation, but he did leave us with a still vital guideline: From each according to his/her ability, to each according to his/her need.

In our utopia the meaning of work will be transformed; there will be no more precious commodity than a person’s time. ‘Choice’ will be redefined, salvaged from consumerism, and there will be a deeper sense of ownership than the individualist version touted by the current system.

Utopia is the good society, not the perfect society. A perfect society would be a static entity. Our utopia is one that is evolving, revising its goals and policies as circumstances change. It’s an open not a closed system. Which means identifying its governing principles, its driving processes, may be more important than postulating fixed structures.

A utopia without dissent and argument is a nightmare: a community of interminable sweetness and harmony is not for me. In fact, argument will flower on a higher plane, grounded in a shared public domain to which all have real and equal access – politics in the best sense, with no professional politicians. We cannot leave our utopian activity to think-tanks. Nor should it be about some artificial ‘pre-figuration’, an exercise in isolated purity. It has to involve getting your hands dirty: finding places for the utopian in the everyday and learning from the everyday the meaning of utopia.

We need to draw on the utopian elements in our midst. The NHS is far from perfect, but it operates under egalitarian principles, deemed ‘utopian’ in other fields, and enjoys a significant degree of autonomy from the market, which makes it a kind of mini-utopia within British daily life – one reason the government is determined to destroy it. We need to find ways to connect to the utopian yearnings that move millions of people, and which both the right wing and the advertising industry know too well how to exploit. We have to offer something more participatory, concrete and at the same time dynamic, more of a process, a journey, than an end product polished by the

intelligentsia. In doing that we can draw on a rich tradition going back to the biblical prophets and found in almost every human society. In England alone, we can look to Langland, Winstanley, Thomas Spence, Ruskin, Morris and John Lennon – not forgetting More himself, in whose Utopia ‘gold is a badge of infamy’.

Humbler relationship

Our utopia must imagine a new, humbler relationship between humans and their environment. The technoutopias of the past with their dreams of total human mastery over nature now feel distinctly dystopic. On the other hand, the idea of an endlessly renewable energy source, a staple of science fiction, has moved from idle fantasy to urgent necessity. The climate change crisis is a good example of utopian thinking proving more realistic than its ostensibly pragmatic opponents. In the light of imminent catastrophe, utopia becomes common sense.



‘utopian elements in our midst’: NHS nurses with patient

It is the anti-utopians who are guilty of arrogance and presumption in dismissing systematic alternatives as contrary to human nature (or economic ‘laws’). The utopians are more historically grounded. They know that capitalism had a beginning and will have an end. In contrast, neoliberals practise the pejorative form of utopianism: imposing an

abstract blueprint on the human species (and the planet), subordinating diverse human needs to the single compulsion of private profit. We are encouraged to entertain limitless, if narrowly defined, aspirations for ourselves as individuals, but our aspirations for our society are strictly ring-fenced. While it is held to be fatal to ignore economic realities, ecological realities can be indefinitely deferred.

For William Blake, the work of utopia was a daily duty of the citizen. At the end of his *Vala or the Four Zoas*, he envisioned a world in which ‘the dark religions are departed and sweet science reigns’. It’s now up to us to imagine a world free of the dark religion of neoliberalism, in which the sweet science of human solidarity prevails.

This article was first published in *Red Pepper* 178 (Jun/Jul 2011) and is reprinted with permission. As well as books, Mike Marqusee has published articles in countless newspapers and journals. He has campaigned on social justice issues for several decades and was a long-time editor of *Labour Briefing*. www.

Advent and Utopia

Recalling the English radical and utopian tradition, Dinah Livingstone looks at some of its biblical sources, which figure prominently in the liturgy of Advent.

'For really I think that the poorest he that is in England hath a life to live, as the greatest he.' So said Thomas Rainborough in the Putney Debates, which took place in St Mary's Church Putney in 1647. Giles Fraser recently resigned as Canon Chancellor of St Paul's Cathedral because he refused to countenance a violent eviction of the Occupy London Stock Exchange protest camp in St Paul's Churchyard. Before taking up his post at St Paul's, he was vicar of Putney, and there he helped organise an exhibition about these great debates in St Mary's Church.

Two years after the Putney Debates, Gerrard Winstanley, the leader of the Diggers, in his *Watchword to the City of London and the Army*, published 'at the Sign of the black Spread Eagle at the west end of Pauls, 1649', declared: 'The Earth should be made a common treasury of livelihood to whole mankind, without respect of persons'. And this is how Milton concluded one of his few Shakespearean sonnets, written in May 1652 and addressed to 'Cromwell, our chief of men':

Help us to save free conscience from the paw
Of hireling wolves, whose gospel is their maw.

In his *Witness against the Beast*, E. P. Thompson traces how that radical tradition from the time of the English Revolution continues down to William Blake (He speculates that Blake's mother may have been a Muggleonian.) In his vision of London as Jerusalem, Blake denounces those who selfishly promote only themselves and their own family:

Is this thy soft family love
Thy cruel patriarchal pride,
Planting thy family alone,
Destroying all the World beside?

In his vision Jerusalem is welcoming to all:

In my exchanges every land
Shall walk, and mine in every land,
Mutual shall build Jerusalem
Both heart in heart and hand in hand.

Blake wrote two poems called 'Holy Thursday'. In the first everything is sweet:

'Twas on a Holy Thursday,
their innocent faces clean,
The children walking two and two,
in red and blue and green.

Grey headed beadles walked before,
with wands as white as snow
Till into the high dome of Paul's
they like Thames waters flow.

The second 'Holy Thursday' is a furious denunciation of child poverty in England:

Is this a holy thing to see
In a rich and fruitful land,
Babes reduced to misery
Fed with cold and usurous hand?

Is that trembling cry a song?
Can it be a song of joy?
And so many children poor?
It is a land of poverty!

Recently we heard on the news that child poverty is increasing in England so that within a few years nearly a quarter of children will be living in poverty.

This utopian tradition continues through William Morris's *News from Nowhere*, which begins in London and ends up with a wonderful harvest home banquet set in a fine old country house based on Kelmscott Manor in Oxfordshire. And the tradition remains up to our own day, as we are seeing now in the camp in St Paul's Churchyard and all over the world.

It also goes back much further than the seventeenth century and one of its most important sources is the Bible. Advent is a time of expectation and I have been thinking about some of the liturgical texts used in the Church of England and the Catholic Church. (In both, the scripture readings are arranged in a three year cycle, so not all these texts are read in services every year.) The epistle for the first Sunday of Advent from Romans (chapter 13) warns: 'Now it is high time to awake out of sleep.' We do indeed need a wake-up call, both to the massive inequality in our society and to the way we are treating the Earth, for both of which the corporate greed of unregulated capitalism has a heavy responsibility.

Another Advent theme is repentance and a prominent figure is John the Baptist. In the gospel for the second Sunday of Advent John the Baptist appears, as 'a voice crying in the wilderness', quoting the prophet Isaiah, and calling upon people to repent. As one camper in St Paul's Churchyard put it: 'We need a change of heart and mind.' That is a good

translation of the biblical Greek word μετανοια (*metanoia*). Or in Paul's words again: 'Let us put off the works of darkness and put on the armour of light.'

As Marqusee points out, the theme of utopia goes back to the Old Testament prophets. Countering the doom-laden slogan in defence of unregulated capitalism: 'There is no alternative', the World Social Forum replies: 'Another world is possible.' That is what those prophets urgently see the need for, and prophesy in their terms as the coming reign of God. The Advent liturgy is full of this, particularly from the prophet Isaiah: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. . . Lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah: "Here is your God!"' (chapter 40). Or in chapter 61: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the poor ...'

Another prominent figure in the Advent liturgy is Jesus' mother Mary. When the pregnant Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth in Luke's account (chapter 1), with her song the Magnificat she is the first to proclaim the gospel:

He has put down the mighty from their seats and lifted up the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich empty away.

When Elizabeth's son John the Baptist announces his baptism of repentance, he specifically quotes the prophet Isaiah (Lk 2: 51):

The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight...the crooked shall be made straight and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of our God.

Then when Jesus begins his ministry, he goes into the synagogue at Nazareth and reads from the scroll, also of the prophet Isaiah (Lk 4):

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and the recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord.

Jesus repeats this message in his 'beatitudes' (Lk 6):

Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God
Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.
Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.

The core of Jesus' teaching is utopian. He announces the coming 'kingdom of God', a kind society which will be good news for the poor. He insists: 'Another world is possible.'

'Lo! he comes with clouds descending.' In the Advent liturgy this new world is presented as 'the son of man coming on clouds',



Magnificat: the pregnant Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth

Jesus Christ returns to bring in the kingdom, as the Lord whose coming reign on Earth was prophesied by the Old Testament prophets. And since in Europe Advent leads up to the winter solstice, the midwinter Christmas festival also becomes a prayer for the sun to return, now also called the 'Sun of Justice'. So the prayer is not only for the winter to pass and spring to return, but also for the darkness of our age to be over and a new society to come, which is good news for the poor and oppressed. 'Stir up your power, O Lord and come...'

Mary's Magnificat is sung at Vespers (Evensong). At the climax of Advent, in the days leading up to the winter solstice and Christmas, the

Magnificat each day has a special antiphon, called the seven 'Great O antiphons'. The antiphon for 17th December* invokes Wisdom: 'O Wisdom, that came out of the mouth of the Most High, reaching from end to end to arrange everything strongly and sweetly, come and teach us carefulness.' Any attempt to create a kind society will need that wisdom and carefulness. The antiphon for the solstice itself, 21st December, is: 'O Daystar, splendour of light eternal and **Sun of Justice**, come and give light to those sitting in darkness and the shadow of death.'

Those of us who do not believe that a supernatural God will come to solve all our problems realise that if we want to create a good society we have to try and do it ourselves. But these age-old visions and yearnings may still inspire us. They are what Blake called 'poetic tales'.

The theme of renewal extends not only to a new Earth but to a new humanity. Paul develops this as the new humanity 'in Christ'. When we become 'one body because we all share the same bread' we will be a 'new humanity', able to live together in a kinder way. That is the coming of 'the whole Christ'. As Origen put it, Christ is 'the kingdom of God in person

(αὐτοβασίλεια του θεου *autobasileia tou theou*): But we should not take this as the *privatisation* of the kingdom of God into a personal relationship with some imagined supernatural being. Rather, 'Christ' has become the eponymous hero, the *personification* of the kingdom, as a new humanity, a kind society.

The theme of a new humanity was prominent in several twentieth century revolutions, in particular, the Cuban and the Nicaraguan Revolutions. They called it '*el hombre nuevo*', who must treat his fellows well. Tomás Borge was the Sandinista Interior Minister (Home Secretary) after the Nicaraguan Revolution, whose famous 'revenge' was to forgive his torturers when he came to power. In his 'Address to the People of Europe' he said: 'This is the finest utopia ever conceived in the history of Latin America, the new

human being.' He urged the people of Europe to embrace this new humanity, so that 'your own mythical ceremonies can be initiated afresh and rise again from their solemn and wonderful burial ground... for the liberty and enjoyment of all the peoples of the Earth.'

So, though probably most of us in Britain do not expect Jesus Christ to 'come with clouds descending' to bring about the new Earth, we can translate this new Testament image of a new humanity 'in Christ' as a 'change of heart and mind', to create a better – utopian – society, upon which the 'Sun of Justice' shines. But of course utopia remains an ideal, a beacon. We do not want a static, 'perfect' society. It will always be a process with new challenges to face, new art, new stories and new poetry. It will be a much more interesting life than the traditional heaven. And since there are no supernatural beings to bring it about, we have keep doing it for ourselves or it will never happen at all.

*Sung on these days at Catholic Vespers and may be sung on slightly different days at Church of England. Evensong See page 27 for all the Antiphons.

Date for your Diary

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will be on

WORK AND WORTH

Friday July 13 – Sunday July 15

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Speakers to be announced.

WORK COMPETITION

Who wrote the attack on ruthless capitalists printed below?

KATABASIS PRESS is offering prizes of its anthology *Work* – containing all sorts of personal accounts, essays and poems about work – to the first 3 correct answers by email and the first 3 correct answers by post to be received by *Sofia* editor. Answers must give a postal address in Britain.

editor@sofn.org.uk

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*For them the Ceylon diver held his breath,
And went all naked to the hungry shark;
For them his ears gushed blood; for them in death
The seal on the cold ice with piteous bark
Lay full of darts; for them alone did seethe
A thousand men in troubles wide and dark;
Half-ignorant, they turned an easy wheel,
That set sharp racks at work to pinch and peel.*

*Why were they proud? Because their marble founts
Gushed with more pride than do a wretch's tears?
Why were they proud? Because fair orange-mounts
Were of more soft ascent than lazar stairs?
Why were they proud? Because red-lined accounts
Were richer than the songs of Grecian years?
Why were they proud? Again we ask aloud:
Why in the name of Glory were they proud?*

The Secular Meaning of the Gospel

David Warden takes a critical look at Paul van Buren's classic.

Thirty years ago I was intrigued by Paul van Buren's idea that there could be a 'secular meaning' of the Gospel *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*, 1963). Van Buren's book was published in the same year as *Honest to God* and the paperback version carried an endorsement by John Robinson. Van Buren argued that 'modern man' cannot understand the mythological setting of the Christian message and that it is necessary to translate the gospel into modern terms. The 'modern terms' van Buren had in mind were drawn from existential psychology. His argument went like this:

1. There is 'something wrong' with man. Man is in bondage and in need of freedom. Men are bound by fear and anxiety, mistrust and self-concern.
2. Faith must be interpreted as the realisation of man's original possibility of 'authentic existence'.
3. To 'exist authentically' is to be a true man.
4. The true nature of man is 'freedom for others'.
5. Jesus was a 'true man' because of his remarkable and particular freedom from self-concern and openness to the concerns of others. He defines what it means to be a man.
6. Jesus's freedom is 'contagious' and therefore he is our 'liberator'. He sets us free.
7. Today we no longer know how to use the word 'God'. The question about God can only be answered by pointing to the man Jesus.
8. This is the secular meaning of the gospel. We should not try to 'make others into Christians'. Our mission is simply to be 'a man', as defined by Jesus.

In response to item (1), it seems doubtful that the human condition can be reduced to a single diagnosis and a single cure. It's true that we often suffer from insecurity and various neuroses and jealousies, which lead to harmful behaviour towards others but that's what apes are like, particularly chimpanzees and humans. Humans have the ability, however, to try out various strategies which can help alleviate some of these tendencies. For example, we can resolve to be patient and kind instead of intolerant and aggressive.

With practice, we can become better apes. Looking at items (2) and (3) on van Buren's list, it's true that human apes do have a natural tendency to conform to social norms and therefore live 'inauthentically'. This behaviour can be highly rewarding: we can all think of infuriating examples of people who get promoted on the basis of conformity rather than ability. For many people, however, conformity to social norms creates an intolerable tension between what is felt to be the 'true' self and the 'false' self. People who have completely lost touch with their 'true self' sometimes report feeling dead inside. Rediscovering or 'coming out' as our true selves can be an exhilarating and liberating experience. It can also, of course, lead to social ostracism and even physical danger. Items (4) and (5) on Van Buren's list seem to be expressing the idea that the man or woman who has discovered his or

her 'true self' is no longer at the mercy of external judgment; they are serene and self-contained. Such a person has little need of a defensive shield and they are more open and compassionate towards others. Coming to points (6) and (7), we have no need of a perfect historical exemplar of this



'Simply to be human': Morris dancers at Oxford Circus, London

mode of existence and to imagine one is to create an idol. We do not need a mythical liberator. All we need to know is whether the theory works in practice; whether, if we practise being true to ourselves we will increasingly experience states of ecstatic freedom.

Van Buren writes that we no longer know how to use the word 'God'. I think we know all too well that 'God', conceptualised as an omnipotent person, is an infinite threat to human freedom and that atheism is now a spiritual necessity. But we can cultivate 'divinity' in ourselves and in others to the extent that we have the courage to be ourselves. Our mission is simply to be human and to encourage others to do likewise.

David Warden studied theology at the University of Kent and he is chairman of the Dorset Humanists.

Troublesome Priest

From Australia Peter Bore tells the story of Father Peter Kennedy, sacked by the Vatican from St Mary's Catholic Church Brisbane.

There are two St Mary's churches in Inner Brisbane suburbs on the Southside of the river. St Mary's Anglican Church at Kangaroo Point is one of the oldest churches in the region having been built first as a wooden structure in the 1840s and subsequently rebuilt in stone in the 1870s. (White settlement of Brisbane began in 1828. The aboriginal inhabitants and their sacred sites have been here for tens of thousands of years.) St Mary's Anglican Church is small but thriving by today's standards, in part because it has a renowned organist and is home to a similarly renowned choral ensemble.

St Mary's Catholic Church, South Brisbane, is a large concrete, though not unattractive, building opened in 1893. Until two years ago it had a congregation of almost a thousand. Father Peter Kennedy who led the church for the last 30 years has nurtured a community which showed concern for the homeless, for the role of women and for homosexuals, indeed anyone who might be described as marginalised, dispossessed or treated unjustly by society. Perhaps predictably, he eventually came into conflict with the Vatican and much publicity ensued. Peter's status as a Catholic priest was revoked and he had to leave St Mary's Church. Most of his congregation left with him and established the St Mary's Community in Exile, (in the language of today, SMX.)

concern for the homeless, the role of women, homosexuals... came into conflict with the Vatican

In 2009 Sea of Faith in Australia wrote expressing its support for Peter's attempts to make the church inclusive, for encouraging people to think for themselves and question dogma from any source. We included, as a token, a copy of David Boulton's book *Who On Earth was Jesus?* David was due to speak at our conference in late 2009 and was subsequently invited by St Mary's to give the homily at their services the weekend he arrived in Brisbane. David and Anthea were staying with us and thus Judith and I attended St Mary's that weekend.

That was our introduction to St Mary's and since

then we have been occasional attenders, never knowing quite where or how we fit into the community but always feeling welcomed and accepted.

Peter Kennedy was the son of a drinking, gambling and sometimes violent Irish Catholic who nevertheless was committed to providing the best education he could for his son by sending him to St Joseph's College, a Catholic boarding school in Brisbane. He went on to the seminary and after completing his time there he was assigned to the Navy, where he spent seven years as a chaplain. On leaving the Navy he used his accumulated pay to spend a year in the United States at a Jesuit centre for spiritual reflection. In 1980 he was appointed prison chaplain for South East Queensland. At that time the principal jail was close to the parish of South Brisbane, then a not very salubrious inner city suburb, and which had recently lost its parish priest.

Peter became the administrator of the Church of St Mary, South Brisbane. It had about 50 regular attenders and was no longer considered to be a parish. The church was also close to Musgrave Park, a significant site for the local Jagara aboriginals. In 1986 Peter was joined by Terry Fitzpatrick. Terry, some 20 years younger than Peter, had had some difficulties with the Catholic Church when as a young priest he became a father. The Church was prepared to retain his services and move him to a remote parish but required him to forgo any contact with his son Jordan. Terry declined, insisting that he must accept responsibility for his son, and has thus, for some 20 years, been on 'leave of absence' from his diocese. Terry and Jordan's mother have shared the task of bringing up Jordan.

Terry has a background in nursing and social work and he enthusiastically joined Peter in his task of making the St Mary's community into one which is open to all comers (their mantra is 'no one is turned away'). The running of St Mary's Church was democratised and there has always been a strong emphasis on social justice. Women, priests who had left the Church to marry, and homosexuals were welcomed and invited to participate at Masses. As the social justice aspects expanded, a partner organisation was established, the Micah Projects. This is now a highly regarded social service, sometimes given the task of dealing with extremely difficult problems like finding accommodation for people on their release after long periods of imprisonment for paedophilia. It

is still supported in part by St Mary's but is now able to attract substantial government funding.

The Archbishop of Brisbane, John Bathersby, who had been a long time associate of Peter, chose to not make a fuss about the St Mary's unorthodoxy but it seems that within the Catholic Church there are groups for whom rigid doctrinal orthodoxy is supreme. Members of these groups complained first to the Archbishop and then to Rome. There were a number of exchanges between the Archbishop and Peter; some, according to Peter, were amicable, others less so. Peter was eventually told that he was guilty of failing to wear the correct garments at Mass and of using unauthorised words in the baptismal service (creator, redeemer and sustainer instead of father, son and holy ghost). Peter does not wear formal Catholic attire because several of his congregation are unsettled by the sight of people in vestments, a result of having been abused by Catholic priests when they were children. The Archbishop never visited St Mary's. No formal enquiry was set up. Peter was dismissed as the administrator of St Mary's without any process, which would have been a credible imitation of natural justice.

The congregation at St Mary's was by now about 800 and Micah Projects used the parish house as its offices. Fortunately, Micah Projects had been established as an entity separate from the Catholic Church and thus its work could continue but it had to find alternative office accommodation. The St Mary's community has continued to have their services in premises loaned to them each weekend by the Trades and Labour Council (TLC). The majority of the congregation moved with Peter and Terry to the TLC building with only about 50 continuing to attend St Mary's Catholic church. The St Mary's Community in Exile is now a not-for-profit business depending for its modest operating expenses on donations and the weekly collection. It is looking for alternative premises, which would be available on weekdays as well as weekends. To be realistic, its future is uncertain, particularly when one remembers that Peter is now in his seventies. However the community continues to talk about social justice and this theme is prominent in the liturgy it uses at its services. Here is a fragment from the St Mary's Eucharistic Liturgy (L= Leader, R = Response):

- L: What do we bring to Christ's table?
R: We bring bread, made by many people's work, from an unjust world where some have plenty and most go hungry At this table all are fed and no one is turned away.
- L: What do we bring to Christ's table?
R: We bring wine, made by many people's work, from an unjust world where some have leisure and most struggle to survive. At this table, all share the cup of pain and celebration and no one is denied. These



Peter Kennedy with parishioners

gifts shall be for us the body and blood of Christ, our witness against hunger, our cry against injustice, and our hope for a world where God is fully known and every child is fed.

At the start of every service, St Mary's acknowledges the traditional aboriginal owners of the land and it continues to support the aboriginal community. It still makes contributions to Micah Projects. It is gradually expanding its interactions with other progressive groups such as the Progressive Spirituality Network and Sea of Faith in Australia. The Community is theologically diverse but the overarching philosophy of acceptance of the other means that this causes few problems. Terry and Peter are comfortable with the view that religion is a human creation but one whose mythology has provided models, guidelines and food for thought that has been useful to humanity.

Peter and Terry are, without doubt, gentle, thoughtful and sincere individuals who have quietly gone about the business of living out a Christian ethos to an extent which few could match. Their activities have meant a great deal to the dispossessed and marginalised and it could not be credibly claimed that they present a threat to anyone. They are self-effacing people, who are always willing to let others step into the limelight. Peter describes his separation from the Catholic Church not as an expulsion but as a liberation, though it is evident in this quiet, somewhat shy, man that his freedom carries with it much incidental sadness. Whilst some would describe him as a martyr, he would be more at home with the description 'He's just a naughty boy.'

It is a sad comment on the hierarchy of the Catholic Church that even such a civilised and gentle expression of 'liberation theology' cannot be tolerated and the practical living out of the Christian ethos is regarded as less important than liturgical words and vestments. I wonder what Jesus would make of an organisation which seems to regard the control of others as its highest priority. Dostoyevsky's ruthless

Grand Inquisitor did have the honesty to acknowledge his real motives and showed, at the end, a glimmer of humility and compassion. I find it hard to find in the grand inquisitors of today (the Prefects of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) any remnant of that humility and compassion.

Sea of Faith has always had problems in deciding what it can support in any practical way. The St Mary's Community is an example of something which we can unequivocally support. Our decision to offer support to what is still in large part a Christian Church did not generate any opposition from our members, which of course include a few fundamentalist atheists from the Dawkins mould.

When Don Cupitt was in Australia he was asked: 'Is Sea of Faith a church?' His reply was along the lines of: 'No, it is not, but – who knows? – sometime in the future it may become a church.' If Sea of Faith was to become a church, St Mary's is the kind of church it might do well to emulate.

Retired surgeon and academic Peter Bore began life in Yorkshire, now lives in Australia and is the current chair of SoFiA (Sea of Faith in Australia).

The St Mary's Community in Exile and Micah Projects have websites with contact details.

[www. http://stmaryssouthbrisbane.com/](http://stmaryssouthbrisbane.com/)

[www. http://www.micahprojects.org.au/](http://www.micahprojects.org.au/)

Stateless

The brown-faced boy in the garden
is shooting down cherry-blossoms;
like tiny perfections of marble
they fall to the ground and shatter.

The bare-foot boy in the garden
has walked here on a path of splinters,
the bones and homes of his parents;
a splinter has lodged in his heart.

The bare-faced boy in the garden
is too young to remember before
when olive and almond trees
flowered and then bore fruit.

Kathleen McPhilemy

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

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The Visionary's World

Dominic Kirkham tells the strange story of 'Prophet' John Wroe.

The story of John Wroe, a rather obscure nineteenth century 'prophet' and visionary, centres on the small Lancashire town of Ashton-under-Lyne, a former mill town situated on the edge of Pennines. Its old industrial character now long gone, it remains the centre of the Metropolitan Borough of Tameside, which has some claim to fame as being the most efficiently administered borough in the country. But this is as nothing compared to what John Wroe prophesied for it: that this was to be the New Jerusalem, foretold in the last book of the Bible (Revelation), the place of the second coming of Christ, where the eschatological Kingdom of Heaven would begin. As I live nearby, I can assure readers this has not yet happened!

John Wroe was a woolcomber, who was born in 1782. A difficult and abusive childhood left him partially crippled and with a stammer. During an illness in 1819 he took to reading the Bible. Like many people who do so under fraught circumstances, he began to feel himself consoled and specially directed with 'illuminations' or private revelations. These made clear to him that he must learn Hebrew, join the Jewish faith and gather together the lost tribes of Israel in readiness for the end of the world and the Second Coming of Jesus, which was imminent. The movement, of which he became leader and prophet, would be known as the Christian Israelites.

At its peak, in the 1830s thousands flocked to hear his message and be baptised in the local river, the Medlock – presumably the nearest equivalent to the River Jordan. A sumptuously furnished Sanctuary was built for worship in Ashton town centre, at the then phenomenal price of £9,500 (twice the cost of the Town Hall). This was just the centrepiece of his visionary messianic city. Just outside the town – though now demolished for the building of a motorway – he purchased a house on Ashton Moss, which would become one of the 'gatehouses' of the New Jerusalem, as depicted in Chapter 21 of the Book of Revelation. I remember it as the old folk's home that it later became. Other 'gatehouses' of the citadel later became pubs. And the field in which he prophesied to large crowds of the light which would shine forth from the city 'to enlighten the Gentiles' was to become, perhaps appropriately, the site of a gas works, which would provide street lighting of a different sort.

If all of this is beginning to sound rather

improbable, it is reassurance of sorts to know that in the long history of Europe's millenarian movements (cf. Ronald Knox's *Enthusiasm* and Norman Cohn's *The Pursuit of the Millennium*) John Wroe was nothing if not typical. Inspired by enigmatic biblical prophecies, he himself drew much of his support from a similarly inspired group of followers of Joanna Southcott, another visionary and prophet of the Second Coming who preceded him by a decade. Joanna Southcott had also received special divine communications, which she recorded in her appropriately named book, *The Strange Effects of Faith*. Published in 1801, it brought her widespread national fame. The particular gist of her revelations was that she would bear a son, conceived of the Holy Spirit, who would usher in the Messianic Age.

After a phantom pregnancy, which came to nothing but intrigued the medical world of the day, she died on 27th December 1814. Her numerous followers immediately declared her to be 'the woman clothed with the sun', mentioned in the Book of Revelation, whose child had been snatched back to heaven for safe keeping. In a manner which shows how faith can manage not to be disappointed, her followers declared Joanna's son would shortly return – on 14th October 1820 to be precise. When this did not happen, word went out that God was only testing people's faith, but would not fail them. It was at this point that John Wroe saw his opportunity, declaring before a meeting of Southcottians, that he had received a vision in which he was commissioned to act as a prophet. From then on he would be their leader, renaming the movement the Society of Christian Israelites.

Though much of this story may seem bizarre and eccentric, it is not without a wider significance. In fact Wroe's movement can be located within a larger national context of British Israelites. According to seventeenth century antiquarians seeking to unravel the origins of Albion's ancient inhabitants, and using the Bible as a window on the ancient world, the most plausible explanation seemed to be that they had been dispersed here after fleeing from the Flood. It seemed clear, from biblical evidence, that our ancestors were no less than the remnants of the lost tribes of Ancient Israel. In his *Britannia Antiqua Illustrata* of 1676, antiquarian Aylett Sammes has a detailed map of the journey taken by the ancient Britons across Europe from Ararat to England. He argued vigorously that the



Joanna Southcott

island of Britain had been providentially set aside for the safety of these people in a land that 'abounds in all things, both for the necessary delight and support of Man... a distinct World, by it self.'

So now we have moved from the supposed

providential designs for a northern industrial town to those for a whole country. It is a view that became widely held in the eighteenth century. In fact, so persuasive was the feeling of special providential election, that it became a seminal element feeding into the optimism underlying Britain's imperial expansion – the British Empire being seen a chosen instrument of God for the advancement of mankind. So the first professor of Geology at Oxford University, Rev. William Buckland, could proudly proclaim that the great mineral wealth of the nation was 'no mere accident of nature; it showed rather, the express intention of Providence that the inhabitants of Britain should become, by this gift, the richest and most powerful nation on Earth.' At the end of his lectures he would invite the audience to sing 'God save the Queen!' This conviction of Britain's progressive destiny was admirably symbolised in a *Punch* cartoon of the time showing Queen Victoria handing a Bible to an Indian Maharajah with the caption: 'The secret of our success'.

It is not a story which ends there either. In a recent book, *Chosen People*, by the former Religious Affairs correspondent of *The Times*, Clifford Longley relates how this concept has morphed to become a central element of modern global politics. A sense of 'chosenness', based on a reading of the Bible, was central to the self-understanding of the first English settlers in America. From the outset many of the colonists who went to New England were, like John Wroe, Biblical visionaries and idealists. Such was the first governor of Massachusetts John Winthrop, with a vision of also creating a godly 'City on a Hill' – there seems to be something inherently messianic about cities on hills! Not only had these settlers the prime motive of establishing a more perfect biblical-based Christian kingdom, but they had the driving conviction that they were 'chosen' for this task.

The conviction of a special destiny under God became a defining characteristic of the American psyche with its own historical narrative: after smiting the latter day Jebusites (native Indians) – so the narrative goes – God's chosen people went on to overthrow Magog, the false king (George III and the Hanoverian dynasty), and with the eventual demise of the British Empire, the United States of America has become the main repository of the idea of sacred destiny. Promoting this vision is the daily fare of numerous powerful media networks in the United States and beyond. TV channels beam impassioned tele-evangelists expounding biblical themes of predestination and imminent apocalypse; influential political commentators like Glenn Beck expound their own inflammatory brand of Christian Zionism.

Their message is still basically that of John Wroe: of the Bible's dramatic call, of the imminent end, the possibility of salvation, the reappearance of Jesus with the chance of being 'raptured' up to heaven, and, of course, the opportunity to fund 'the Lord's work' and invest in its rewards through support of the 'prophet'. How John Wroe would have envied the formidable power of the modern media to reach into people's lives, though it is rather cruelly ironic that his Sanctuary in Ashton would later become a cinema for popular entertainment.

In fact this enigmatic story has come full circle with the world's only superpower – its status being 'confirmation' of George Washington's belief in a 'special providence' – fostering the resettlement of the original Chosen People (the Jews) in the original Promised Land. Even the biblically-based reasoning for the colonial land grab of the 'Wild West' is eerily reminiscent and anticipatory of that now going on in the West Bank – specifically encouraged by the Christian Zionists, who see this as a decisive preparatory step for history's final consummation in the Second Coming. Thus the visionary's narrative of chosen election shapes our world.

As with all visionaries, John Wroe never became disillusioned with his interpretation of the world: the vision filters the world in such a way that there is always some further 'evidence' to support it. In seeking to understand the visionary impulse we must look to the dynamics of the wider cultural environment: times of significant social change and uncertainty create widespread demand for some directional voice. Cognitive scientist Merlin Donald provides an insight into this phenomenon when he likens human culture to 'a gigantic search-engine that seeks out, and tests, various solutions to the many cognitive challenges faced by people.' Where there is confusion, the visionary, as a product of his culture, articulates solutions, which as Donald notes, are 'ultimately products of our own attempts at self-

governance.’ There is no reason to think John Wroe set out to deceive others, any more than he may have thought himself to have been deceived.

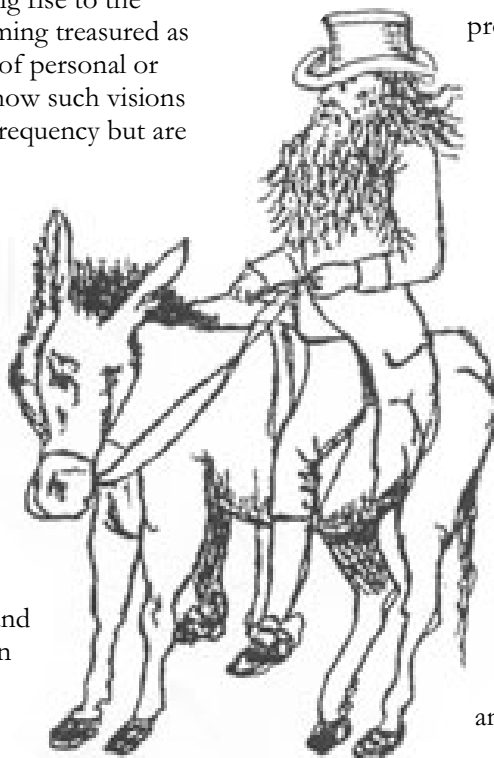
But there are deeper reasons for the visionary’s world than the mere interpretation of temporal events. This is to do with states of mind. As the neuroscientist Gerald Edelman has pointed out (in, *Bright Air, Brilliant Fire*), consciousness is not a single, unitary state. Rather it is spectrum of grades from focused attention, reflectiveness and reverie to meditative states and on into the dream-world. These states can vary according to degrees of emotion or stress, physiology (e.g. epilepsy and schizophrenia) or environment. But the information conveyed in these different states of mind is no less real to the cognitive subject; in fact, dream-like visions can seem even more real than normal rational comprehension, giving rise to the impression of being revealed – becoming treasured as insights into the real world. In times of personal or social stress it has often been noted how such visions and revelations not only increase in frequency but are more likely to find wider acceptance.

If, as Donald says, the search-engine of human culture provides the necessary solutions for people to construct a meaningful world and live ordered lives, the corollary is that in times of cultural upheaval the need for new visionary solutions becomes paramount. And so we find a common thread running through the previously mentioned eras: the early Industrial Revolution, through which Wroe lived; the Reformation and Civil War, during which the American colonies were seeded. American writer, Elmer Clark summarises the situation perfectly: ‘Pre-millennarianism is essentially a “defence mechanism” of the disinherited; despairing of obtaining substantial blessings through social processes, they turn on the world which has withheld its benefits and look to its destruction in a cosmic cataclysm which will exalt them and cast down the rich and powerful.’

And so the prophetic voice and visionary message becomes not only an attempt at self-governance but the tool for the manipulation of others. For, no prophet is ever content to stay silent on the mountain – or, as in the case of Wroe, in bed – where he received his visions. The immediate vision, whether real or simulated (a spying neighbour caught Wroe, whilst reputedly being in a twelve day trance, sitting up in bed eating pickled cabbage and oat cakes) is nothing if not communicated. This in itself brings rewards, as

willing devotees provide the power and privileged status that become a self-sustaining intoxicant to the visionary.

Disillusionment with his message came from other, more mundane events. After a missionary tour in 1830 with his seven elected virgins, which it had been revealed should accompany him at all times, two of them charged John Wroe with, ‘indecent and things not fit to be spoken’. This caused shock waves throughout the movement. After a trial, in which he was acquitted, there was a riot in the Sanctuary, from which Wroe barely escaped with his life. He fled the country but continued his missionary career in America and Australia, where he founded other Christian Israelite communities, some of which still survive.



Contemporary drawing of John Wroe on a donkey

But for the biblically-minded prophet there is a lingering paradox: whilst the written word of the book that is the Bible can be used as the basis for the revealed, restorative vision, it is often the very proliferation of printed words, the ideas they convey and the books that contain them which cause the disturbance in the first place. As in our own time, chaotic and torrential floods of information can be overwhelmingly confusing. The visionary grasps, and clings, to particular texts like a drowning man to straws; absolute conviction draws strength from the Bible text, but as numerous millenarian and fundamentalist movements have shown, the Bible can teach anything that is demanded of it. Its ambiguity can address any eventuality.

And so it did for John Wroe, pondering its pages on his sick bed or listening to the voice coming from the second bar of the fire grate, its persuasiveness was immediate and forceful. In the quiet of one’s room its direct voice becomes almost another, personal presence. John Wroe, in his solitary musings, felt illuminated and inspired to go out with his ‘message’, which of course was not just ‘his’ message but the message that had been given to him – or so he was convinced. And so it is with every visionary and prophet: we will never be without them. In the meantime Ashton-under-Lyne awaits its destiny.

Dominic Kirkham is an interested follower of SOF. He now works for a Home Improvement Agency providing services for older people.

A Perspective from the Whirlwind

Job and the Package-Deal

Frank Walker considers the biblical *Book of Job*, a re-working of a very ancient Middle Eastern folk tale about the patient Job.

At a recent *Oldie* literary luncheon Melvin Bragg discussed his latest book on the cultural influence of the 1611 Authorised Version of the Bible. Seated between two unknown mature ladies, I asked them whether they read the Bible? Like most people these days they did not. Did I? they enquired. Yes, and I had been re-reading the book of *Job*, a great poetic drama, and entirely a work of fiction, I explained. One lady seemed surprised by this, and smiled hesitantly as if I were possibly joking or trying to shock.

I was entirely serious. To say something is fiction is not necessarily to demean or dismiss it. Fiction can be great, and much of the Bible, more than most people commonly suppose, is fiction. *Job* is great fiction. There is nothing else like it in the Bible, except perhaps Psalm 104 with its vivid evocation of the wild creatures who share the Earth with men and women. It is a depth-charge lurking in the middle of the Bible, an unexploded bomb ticking away, always ready to explode and shatter traditional views of God, Judaism and Christianity.

In the story of *Job*, God and Satan are simply fictional characters.

Myths, for good or ill, may have a much longer life than many scientific theories. They cannot and should not be taken literally, but they can be hugely influential. They can offer a sense of meaning, of value, of direction; they can change our mood or outlook: enthuse, challenge, entertain, console, perplex, confound, inspire, enlighten, obfuscate, depress, poison, heal – and so on. Myths may be disabling, as in many ways messiah myths are, suggesting that only help from some supernatural ‘outside’ will be of any use. The role given to Jews in the story of the Passion of Jesus has poisoned subsequent centuries with its murderous consequences. On the other hand, the Genesis Creation myth pronounces life to be good, very good, and the story of *Job* is also ultimately encouraging.

It has a fairy-tale beginning and ending. In between

is a long-running argument about suffering, injustice, and the difficulty – or impossibility – of knowing God. There follows a grand and passionate poem about the marvels of the universe uttered by ‘the Unnameable’ a mysterious Voice out of the Whirlwind.

All the actors in the drama, including God and Satan, as well as *Job*, his comforters and his wife, are fictitious characters. (I must confess to a sneaking admiration for Mrs *Job* who advises her stricken husband to ‘curse God and die.’ She strikes me as one of the most honest and sympathetic figures in the Bible).

God and Satan here are simply fictional characters. Satan is in no way the Devil of medieval imagination. In this story he lives with God and is a member of the heavenly court as the Counsel for the Prosecution. The Bible’s *Job* is the re-working of a very ancient Middle Eastern folk-tale about the patient *Job*. None of the three central characters, God, Satan, or *Job*, is presented in a realistic or naturalistic manner. They are necessary elements in a plot designed to illuminate permanent aspects of the human situation. The implications of all this for the Bible as a whole have seldom been openly faced; *Job* with its so patently fictitious ‘God’ forces us to realise that every reference to ‘God’ in every other biblical book is also part of a story, and so the ‘God’ referred to is necessarily presented in a fictional way.

Such stories make us aware that God language is inherently fictitious and remind us that, as St Thomas Aquinas argued, all language about ‘God’ can be only analogical, and that of all the varieties of theology the apophatic is the best (or the least misleading). In attempting to speak of God, is it the case that ‘in much madness is divinest sense’? Must we inevitably tell it ‘slant’? If so, fiction is inescapable (and the analogical is only another mode of fiction). The most modern theologians, we are told (in Gavin Hyman’s *A Short History of Atheism*), ‘speak of a God beyond or without being, a God who bestows existence but who doesn’t himself exist, a God whose reality is far removed from what we understand to be reality in the physical world.’ If all this is more than unintelligible and paradoxical obfuscation, it may point to an

unnameable mystery beyond our grasp such as Job confronts. But Job becomes silent. He does not theologise, and simply accepts his mortality.

The Unnameable who declaims his majestic poem at the end seems to me to be a different character from the cruel 'God' of the opening story who so nonchalantly allows such a monstrously dirty trick to be played on Job and his family .

Job is a mythical person – the completely honest and upright man who has done no wrong. He has to be such a one for the story to make its point. Nowadays we do not expect men who amass vast wealth – and Job is the richest man in the East – to be guiltless. Joseph Kennedy, for example, who became immensely rich, wealthy enough to bankroll his sons' campaigns to become senators and President, had unsavoury connections with the Mafia and organised crime. He was not an innocent man. It is often claimed that Jesus was the only completely sin-free human being. This is to overlook the Bible's claim for the innocence of Job. Job, of course, is an imaginary character, and for the story's purposes he has to be completely genuine and upright, for the point the writer is making is that, even if you are one hundred per cent pure and innocent, you will not because of that escape suffering. (The story of the Passion of Jesus makes a similar point.) Do not imagine that just because you are rational and honest you will find the world reasonable and just. (Though we may well reply that in that case it is up to us to make it as reasonable and just as we are able).

The nasty trick, engineered by Satan with God's approval simply mimics in extravagant fashion the horrific bludgeonings of chance that afflict people totally indiscriminately and undeservedly. This reflects *Job's* unflinching tragic realism. Do not suppose that however good you are you will escape suffering, even of the most extreme kind. You will not deserve it, nevertheless it will remorselessly come upon you.

This is a bleak message, but the writer does not flinch from it. The good news is that you are not guilty, you are innocent, you do not deserve many of the miseries that afflict you. So you need not become like the victims of some Stalinist show-trial who were brainwashed into confessing to crimes which they had not committed and could not possibly have done. The cynical extraction of such false confessions marks a very low point in human degradation. Job's comforters constantly try to brainwash him into confessing his



Job's Comforters by William Blake

guilt, but he will have none of it.

Satan persuades God to allow him to play an appalling trick on Job in order to test his loyalty and devotion. Suddenly, everything that makes life bearable and worth living is stripped from Job: his children are all killed, he loses all his wealth and possessions, and his health is totally destroyed. He has become unaccommodated man, a bare forked animal. (Shakespeare's *King Lear* was later destined to re-enact much in Job's story). His comforters preach to him the theology and philosophy of the day, hoping to drag some sort of confession from him, but all to no avail. They convince neither Job nor the reader. In the face of the ocean of human suffering and the insolent proud prevalence of injustice there is no adequate answer. Theology and philosophy avail nothing.

Even God is forced to admit that Job's comforters, so keen to support and defend accepted views of God, have not said what is right, whereas Job has told the truth. Not for a moment would Job have accepted St Paul's argument in *Romans 5* that death entered the world as a result of human sin. Although he himself has not sinned, Job is bold enough to stand up to God on behalf of humanity and say, 'If I have sinned what do I with thee, O thou watcher of men?' *Job*, though keenly aware of human evil, injustice and wickedness, and intensely realistic about them, nevertheless does not espouse Augustinian notions of original sin and of total human depravity. The story insists that Job's afflictions are undeserved. It reveals God's complicity in a heartless trick, and so even God himself cannot be seen as blameless.

The answer from out of the Whirlwind is no direct answer, because there cannot be an answer in the

sense of some fully satisfying explanation. Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upwards. Suffering is a brute fact of existence.

Apart from the beautiful image, 'when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy', the revelation from the Whirlwind is utterly naturalistic and not at all supernaturalist. The Unnameable, the Voice from the Whirlwind, simply describes the beauty and terror, the awesomeness, the weirdness, the sheer otherness, the magnificence of the universe, which human beings have not created and can never control. They can never 'bind the sweet influences of the Pleiades or loose the bands of Orion.' Yet they have all this as a gift. On Earth they are surrounded by a vast diversity of creatures, who go their way with their own amazing lives to live, displaying a blessedly non-human wisdom, serenely and refreshingly indifferent to humanity – ranging from the simple wild goats to the incredible Behemoth and Leviathan.

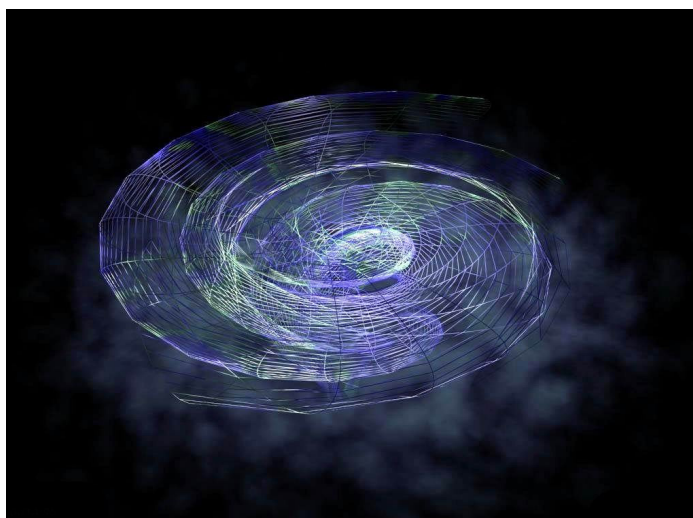
The shabby trickster 'God', who so shamefully colluded with Satan, would have no moral right to declaim the poem that celebrates the wonders of the universe. The Voice from the Whirlwind is therefore what? The voice of utter unnameable mystery? The voice of That Which Is? It is more the voice of the *Deus sive Natura* (God or Nature) of Spinoza than of any more conventionally conceived deity.

The Hebrew text of *Job* is notoriously disjointed and corrupt, often almost impossible to translate. No wonder that the 1611 translation is sometimes inaccurate, misleading, or unintelligible. The most serious mistranslation occurs when the seventeenth century divines try to make Job speak like an Augustinian or Calvinist Christian. At the end they make Job say, responding to the Voice from the Whirlwind, 'I abhor my words and repent in dust and ashes.' This is wrong and goes completely against the whole argument of the book. It makes Job become someone like the pathetic victim of a Stalinist show-trial, falsely 'confessing' to a guilt that is not his. We need a more accurate and unbiased translation. In Stephen Mitchell's version Job says, 'I am content that I am dust.' Wonderful words! Words of the simplest deepest wisdom. How we could all wish to become so

content – a consummation devoutly to be wished. Truly it is the supreme wisdom – a contentment that may finally come to all, however unlearned and unlettered, wise or foolish, good or bad, of every religion and of none.

Nothing has changed, but now Job sees everything differently. In the face of the vision Job becomes silent, awe-struck before overwhelming beauty, strangeness and dread. He acknowledges the experience but gives no theological explanation; he

simply accepts his mortality. Because he has achieved this moment of insight, his misery is at an end. The fairy-tale conclusion restores Job's health and prosperity, gives him back his beautiful children, allows him to see many generations of his family, and to die fulfilled, full of years.



The Voice from the Whirlwind, the Unnameable, the Unsearchable, offers us

life alongside a fantastic diversity of fellow-creatures, so hearteningly different from us, in an extraordinary, marvellous, weird, terrible, magnificent universe. All this goes together, though, with suffering, chance, accident, tragedy, disease and death. We cannot have the magnificence without the suffering. Job, who had been near to rejecting life completely, now accepts the package-deal, and free from resentment, is content to be but dust.

Some modern popularisers of science such as Brian Cox enthusing over the wonders of the physical universe, and David Attenborough delighting in the vast diversity of living creatures, are implicitly sharing the perspective of the Voice from the Whirlwind, even in their atheism.

The *Book of Job* subverts traditional theism and the customary theology of both Judaism and Christianity, seeing no need for messiahs or for personal immortality. It is profound, subversive, deeply religious, and life-affirmingly humanistic. In another great story, Ivan Karamazov, understandably and entirely honourably, gives God back the ticket; Job, in spite of everything, on behalf of suffering humanity, equally honourably, says Yes.

Frank Walker is a retired Unitarian minister.

Sofia welcomes comment and debate.

Please send your letters to:
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From a Different Direction

May I join you? I have come from another tribe to SOF, the tribe of atheist non-believers. For all my adult life, until I 'came home' to the openness and questioning of Quakers, I had nothing to do with any God-centred religion.

Your Conference in Leicester renewed my faith. Yes I have a 'faith' – in the human rather than the Holy Spirit – which I was taught as a child. I go to a Meeting for Worship (I prefer to call it worth-ship as I see the worth of an evolved human spirit.) The word 'evolved' is used although I do see this spirit as being the consequence of both nature and nurture. With regard to the latter, this spirit is vulnerable.

Religions were a necessary vehicle for the human spirit. However this is being drowned under the ever increasing flood of self-interest over that of community. We all need communities – SOF is now one of mine. I saw the Conference (*Brain, Belief and Behaviour*) as being focussed on truth – as science healthily and sceptically sees it. This was confirmed when I met the last speaker the following weekend at our Quaker Yearly Meeting Gathering.

Nevertheless such truth may serve to drive us away from traditional religions as long as they keep emphasising faith in an external Lord. Religions did provide communities – we still need them.

Bob Booth
 bboobboo@btinternet.com

In Defence of the 'Boring'

In the first paragraph of her letter (*Sofia* 101) Julia Nicoll puts on record her appreciation of this year's Conference and in so doing performs a valuable service for the Network. In going on to report and to some extent support the flippant-seeming negative throw-away remarks of Anon (just one delegate) I think she does us a great disservice, condemning next year's event before it has even taken place!

Whilst I am all for freedom of speech, whoever

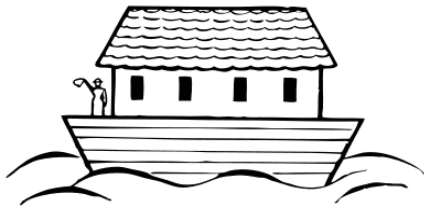
made 'the comment' seems to reveal a certain lack of care for his/her fellow man which, if genuine, really does both sadden and annoy me. I too have days on which I find my job unsatisfying, and there are some aspects which I shall be glad to escape from if I am lucky enough to live until retirement . But, above all, I am profoundly grateful that I have had a life-long job, profoundly grateful for the good pension which will flow from that, and profoundly conscious of the plight of the very many who have no job, may never have a job, and certainly not the eventual cushion of a good pension.

As with our 2010 conference on Social Justice (another rather under-attended gathering for reasons which I fear, judging by Julia's letter, that I understand only too well... 'boring' perhaps ?) the Trustees decided some time ago that work, in its many forms, was a worthy area for some serious reflection.

Doubtless most of us are more at ease with 'sexy', crowd-pulling topics such as 'Brain, Belief and Behaviour', whetting and satisfying the appetites of the navel-gazers amongst us, (and I confess to rather enjoying such discussions myself when they come along). But I strongly agree with and support those who feel that the Network must also be seen to address the pressing issues of the day. Only through this last approach, I suggest, can we hope to be taken seriously by a wider audience, not least the young, facing as they do some of the very concerns which we hope to explore. As far as we can tell at this distance *Work and Worth* goes ahead in 2012, because we think it should, albeit with a different title if anyone out there can suggest a more inviting- seeming one. I strongly urge readers to come along please, when the time comes, and to bring a friend or two!

John Pearson
 Chair of Trustees
 Newcastle-upon-Tyne

PS. Incidentally, we intend to make a personal approach to all non-members who attended Conference, as we have in the past, inviting them to join and play a part in the Network



SoFiC Day Conference

BEING CHURCH – on a rising tide?

London, 10 March 2012

Sea of Faith in the Churches provides a meeting place for those SOF members – and their friends – who find themselves in the midst of or, more commonly, hovering on the edge of the Christian Church.

- ▶ Could we really prepare to move off from the place where we've been marooned for so long?
- ▶ In what direction might we head?

This conference will investigate flotation and course-setting on the Sea of Faith.

Please put the date in your diary and *notify your interest immediately* to helen@hbellamy.me.uk or by phoning Helen on 01226-711745. The conference will be held close to Notting Hill Gate tube station. Full details will be distributed before long, always supposing there is a good response.

Being Commissioned to Write a Poem

Look at this Oscar, I've been invited to write a poem on 'space.' I'm lucky, I've already written two

on that subject. Stop that, I've told you it's rude. The Psychoanalysts asked me to write about 'inner' space.

That took me a long time, I had no idea about inner space, it sounded a bit hocus-pocus. I came up

with a poem, but I didn't understand what I'd written. They said it was just what they were hoping for –

something revealing about the inner self. Then the Aerospace boys asked me to write a poem

on 'outer space'. That was easy. I swotted up by digging out my old Eagle comics. They were really

pleased, even praised my innocent and joyful approach to the world. Anyway, I propose to take

the best lines from each and fuse them together into a cohesive whole. No one will see the joins. I'll steer

the narrative towards 'personal space'. Most readers will empathise with that. Even you Oscar, like a bit

of peace in your kennel and I adore personal space, so the poem should turn out alright. With luck they'll

love it and pay me promptly – we're getting low on the red, aren't we? Don't worry, I'll buy you a bone.



'I adore personal space'

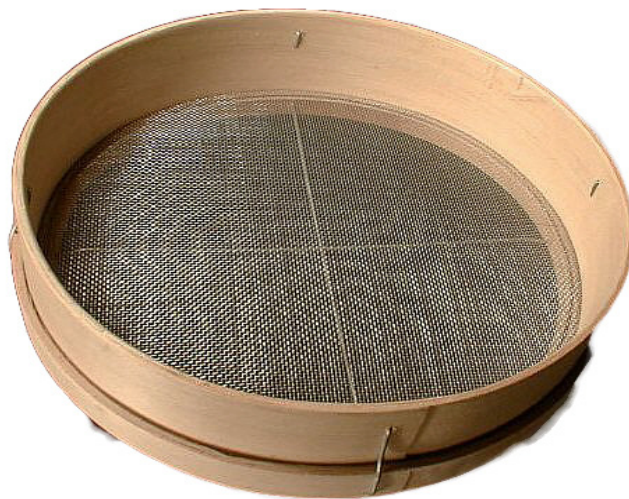
Peter Phillips

is a London poet and playwright. His latest poetry collection *No School Tie* was published in 2011 by Ward Wood Publishing.
www.wardwoodpublishing.co.uk

SOF Sift

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

Digby Hartridge, Bristol



Unhelpful Words

In 1955 during Confirmation lessons I was in principle happy to accept authority. But I couldn't 'get' the Creed, didn't understand a single phrase. Then I took social anthropology at College. And then, as I lived in (as it was) Rhodesia, events alerted me, alas, to the way people refuse to look facts in the face and justify terrible deeds to themselves and cling angrily and all-too-expediently to undeserved privilege – and I wondered if religious belief, also, was self-delusion.

So far so standard SOF. But soon I began to have trouble with words. One of them, contrarily, occurs in the name of the Network I now belong to. What did 'Faith' mean? I consulted the dictionary. None the wiser, I tried empirically to work out what people meant when they used the word. Was it a set of aspirations or vague hopes or a resolution to some philosophical debate I hadn't been party to? Was it a sort of ungrounded certainty about the Meaning of Life? Discussing Faith with People of Faith, to reciprocal incomprehension, it became obvious it called for a turn of mind you either had or didn't have, as with a sense of humour.

'Faith' (either the personal feeling or a particular organisation), I decided, was an Unhelpful Word. (Incidentally, to champion plural 'Faiths', à la Prince Charles, or a singular portmanteau 'Faith', as in Tony Blair's set-up, is illogical.) At best 'Faith' was shorthand for a convenient body of ready-made opinions. 'Belief' was less confusing, but still an Unhelpful Word. If you try with all the means at your disposal to unravel a mystery, as you do, without clear result, you don't pretend to any belief, you put the whole thing on the back burner. Equally, you don't find the need to say, for instance: 'I believe in the sea.' (Which incidentally deals with the second half of the name of the Network.)

Soon other redundant words cropped up, such as 'Spirituality' and 'Mysticism' (apparently heightened states of perception). It were better such words hadn't been invented. 'Revelation' was more promising (a sudden realignment of unresolved conflicts). 'Religions' were clearly social institutions of great

diversity, with disparate customs and codes of behaviour, some weird. 'Religious', however, denoting a kind of sensation, was a woefully imprecise qualifier.

Like an autistic person puzzled by empathy, I continued to study the deployment of these words and discovered they were sclerotically overburdened with countless individual past interpretations, dating from when animists tried to move on and barked up the wrong tree. Ruminations in isolation. More usefully, over the years in Australia and Britain, I made some headway tackling Compassion, Love, Self-Awareness, Sacrifice, Moral Frameworks, even Humility (arguably). Come 1990, John McDonald Smith recommended a book by Don Cupitt. And all the while I thrilled to the sunset over the veldt, bush or wold.

Lots of true Dawkinsesque sensibility here. Indeed, in my old age, with leisure to reflect, I'm becoming enraptured by rigour and incline towards atheism. Why categorise by 'belief' or 'disbelief' in 'God' (another nebulous concept)? Why isn't a theist called, let's say, an a-humanist? Though, as a pessimist and ex-original-sinner, perhaps I'm one of those? Which dithering reminds me, if there were a God, then 'believing' in him would be a heresy, wouldn't it, proclaiming with arrogant absence of any doubt his Existence? An Archbishop put me on to that: be undecided. Mind you, starting from scratch, there's no reason to invent the word 'God'. Has anyone said different?

Funnily enough, I still 'worship' (formally celebrate life) and 'pray' (map my daily progress) – alone or in small groups only, please, to avoid hysteria – although of course I've been conditioned to do so. There lingers within me a cosy affection for the good old C of E (when census-filling) and the Sea of Faith. Please don't tell me I'm out of place in the latter, for I assure you I'm sensitive, even non-cost-beneficially contemplative. Contrary to first impressions, I *can* think metaphorically and laterally, which I attribute to short circuits in the brain.

Now I'm wondering (rather belatedly): what's the practical application, in a world wilfully wounded, probably dying, of all this speculation?

Radio Rockall



Post Mortem

My wife and I each lost a parent last year. Early in the year I lost my mother, aged ninety. Later in the year my wife, Margaret, lost her father, aged 97. Our families have been very different but the outcomes have been so similar.

My side of the family enjoyed a mixed religious background. Mother had been high Anglican but that had long since lapsed, although she retained a vague worry about God and latterly cleaned the brass in her village church. My sister Sarah and I had been through evangelical conversions in our teens. Mine had long since lapsed. Sarah's has meandered into a vague high, liberal Anglicanism. She is a Reader and likes to regale us with the high moral ground of her sermons, and hates to be challenged. We each lived two hours' drive from mother.

Sarah and I were joint executors of the Will but on the day mother died Sarah was in hospital undergoing a hip replacement; she was out of commission for six weeks. Margaret and I dealt with the immediate wave of phone calls, the post-mortem, alerting our solicitor, cleaning mother's cottage for sale and arranging her funeral at the crematorium. Naturally, this involved many three-day trips. We couldn't live there since we had to manage our own home lives. Most people will understand this and the usual problems around probate, multiple bank accounts, two pensions, complicated share-holdings and tax. Mercifully, the Will was straightforward.

Sarah's three children offered to help. We suggested cleaning and gardening. They never came apart from a nod at the crematorium. Sarah recovered quickly from her operation. I anticipated some assistance, suggesting she take on the marketing of the property. Instead she went on holiday, while expecting updates from me. When she finally visited mother's cottage with her elder daughter, it was carefully arranged not to coincide with one of our visits and certainly not to work. They came to mark the items they wanted but they couldn't remove anything; Margaret and I had found a local estate agent who needed the house fully dressed for viewing.

The house sale finally went through. Sarah and daughter slipped across to remove their chosen items, not to help with disposing of the mass of unwanted

furniture, clothes, ornaments and paraphernalia to charities, council or the interminable tip-trips. They did not even open the mail. Sarah thought I enjoyed opening letters.

As autumn deepened, the business was concluded. I had tried to be meticulous in executing the Will and ensuring Sarah had her half but she had the temerity to try to manipulate the estate away to children and grandchildren. She failed. There seemed to be very little of the moral high ground she proclaimed. Our communications, which had become shorter and sharper, ceased.

As winter came on, Margaret's father died. He had been a member of the Brethren. Margaret and brother Stuart had been brought up in fear of hellfire. They made childhood professions of faith. Mother and father made mirror Wills in the 1980's. Their children were treated equally, although Stuart had quickly overthrown his teenage faith, married and divorced, gained a new partner and had a daughter. Margaret kept the faith while her work took her all over the country until she met me, when we married.

Margaret's mother was already dead, then father died. Stuart had always lived within five miles of them and assumed responsibility in their old age. As an accountant he looked after their finances with very close care. We visited when we could but when Margaret offered help at their deaths she was refused. Father's funeral by a freezing graveside was marked by a speech from a Brethren acquaintance speaking of father's deep faith, his expectation of heaven and his love for his family.

Two days later a letter arrived from Stuart for Margaret. There had been a new Will: everything went to Stuart's daughter. Margaret had been kept in the dark for ten years about machinations between father and son, as patriarchal power passed on. Stuart assumed total financial control as trustee and executor, nominally with his daughter, but neither mother, sister, wife, partner nor daughter ever had a voice. Stuart offered crumbs from the table but Margaret was incensed. Normal communications ceased as legal proceedings ensued. As I type, matters are getting interesting.

How death and money can damage families! If you are likely to die, please arrange a simple Will and don't keep it secret.

Philip Feakin reviews
*Christian Atheist:
 Belonging without Believing*
 by Brian Mountford

O Books (Winchester 2011). 132 pages. £9.99

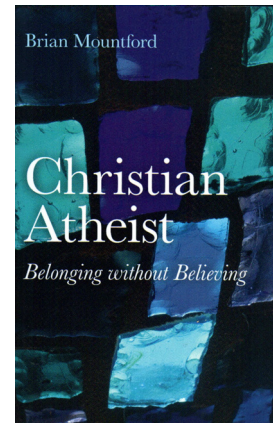
The Revd Canon Brian Mountford has been Vicar of the University Church of St Mary the Virgin in Oxford since 1986. He has written a number of books, including *Happiness in 10 Minutes* and *Christianity in 10 Minutes*.

The title of his latest, *Christian Atheist*, arose from a public discussion that he had with Philip Pullman where the latter began by declaring, 'I am a Christian Atheist; a Church of England Atheist; a Book of Common Prayer Atheist. You could add a King James Bible Atheist, if you want. All those things go deep for me; they formed me; that heritage is impossible to disentangle, like a piece of barbed wire fence in the bark of a tree. I've absorbed the Church's rituals and enjoy its language, which I knew as a boy, and now it's gone I miss it.'

The phrase, 'Christian Atheist' remained with Mountford, as it seemed such a good description of all the people he knows who value the cultural heritage of Christianity without believing in God. The book explores what he describes as the hinterland between Christianity and atheism, both through his own developing theology and thoughts on the subject and by interviews with ten interviewees. Although they are a disparate group, they could all be described as intellectuals. He is clearly drawing upon those who would be expected to come into contact with the vicar of the university church in Oxford. There is no one amongst the interviewees who comes near to Jan Coggan in Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd*, who having professed to be 'staunch Church of England' goes on to say, 'Yes; there's this to be said for the Church, a man can belong to the Church and bide in his cheerful old inn, and never trouble or worry his mind about doctrines at all.'

At the beginning of the book he mentions his surprise at finding, 'Christian Atheism' on a BBC website and gives an abridged version in the book. He follows this with, 'This account centres on a "non-realist" understanding of God and seems to be based on the "Sea of Faith" movement, which can be accessed on line and advertises meetings in twenty-six British towns and cities.' There is only one further reference to the 'Sea of Faith' movement and it would appear that Mountford is somewhat unsettled by it

when he writes, with reference to Sea of Faith, 'What is curious to me is that that always seemed a sadly denuded form of religion at the time, yet is extremely close to some forms of Christian Atheism I am now encouraging Christianity to embrace.'



It might be that the sub-title of the book would have made for a clearer understanding of what it is about, viz, *Belonging without Believing*. From his own point of view Mountford stresses praxis compared to belief, as when he states, 'I think the Church continues to be gravely mistaken in prioritising creed over action' and he affirms the statement that Christianity, 'is a way of life, not a system of beliefs. It tells us how to act, not what we ought to believe.' And 'increasingly, personal experience suggests to me that this is true: God is better expressed in action than in a shrine, whether that shrine is physical or doctrinal, a cathedral or a book.'

Thus it is the inclusive model of Church that Mountford wants, as compared with the narrowly doctrinally defined Church. This is one where there is room for doubt and, as he expresses it, 'an incongruity at the heart of mainstream Christianity, the paradox that God is said to be knowable in Jesus Christ and yet is so obviously unknowable.'

The book is well worth reading and I think that there much in it with which SOF members will concur. However I feel that it is somewhat ragged in places and it could have benefited from a good editor to tighten it up and remove such things as the repetition of a large section of one of his interviews. It is certainly not to be confused with another book with the same title that I found on Amazon, which is by an American, Craig Groeschel, who is described as a recovering Christian Atheist!

Philip Feakin is a Day Chaplain at Southwark Cathedral and a keen, but fallible, student of New Testament Greek. He is a member of SOF.

Barbara Burfoot reviews
*An Enlightened Philosophy.
Can an Atheist Believe Anything?*
by Geoff Crocker

O Books (Winchester. 2010). 122 pages. £7.99.

When a book comes with recommendations from Penny Mawdsley and David Boulton, a member of the SOF Network is bound to take it seriously. Unfortunately I was unable to attend Geoff Crocker's workshop at this year's Conference. I think we might have had an interesting discussion. I am a humanist celebrant conducting between 20 and 30 funerals each year. I think humanist celebrants as a group have a claim to be pioneers of atheist spirituality, although I know some of my colleagues would be uneasy about the word 'spirituality'.

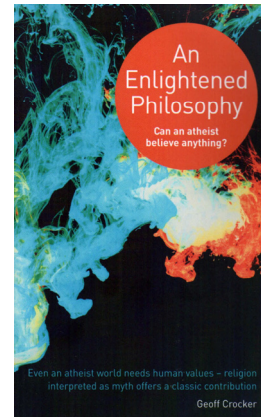
Mr Crocker's subtitle, *Can an Atheist Believe Anything?* may have been ill-advised because it prompts the answer: 'Of course they can'. Atheists have been Marxists and a very few were Nazis even though Himmler wouldn't have them in the SS because he believed, correctly, that they couldn't swear a valid oath. The South Place Ethical Society has been pursuing the matter of non-theistic human values since the middle of the 19th century, as the British Humanist Association and the International Humanist and Ethical Union do today. Geoff Crocker ignores their work completely.

To attempt a synthesis between recognition of meaningful metaphysics in philosophy with a recognition of the power of myth in religion in 117 pages is an ambitious undertaking. His survey of religious, philosophical and scientific thinking to form a 'holistic history of humanity' is inevitably a bit broad brush and breathless. I am not sure it's true that the period following the decline of the Roman Empire was really 'a long period of dark and middle ages when the light seemed to have gone out'; not when one thinks of Viking exploration, Saxon poetry, the Book of Kells and the Lindesfarne Gospels, to give just a few examples.

He contends that two of the Enlightenment's great concepts – cause and choice – are actually incompatible. His exploration of the limits on human freedom of choice is interesting and illuminating. Maybe he will be able to discuss it more fully in a future publication

It will be interesting to see how much of his 'paradigm of postmodern society' with its emphasis on celebrity and consumption stands up to the present

economic crisis. We can already see the effect of the decline in rampant consumerism on people's livelihoods. Perhaps one of the great challenges of the future will be to find worthwhile work, paying a wage, that isn't fuelled by ever growing consumerism. Something the SOF Network may be discussing at our 2012 Conference.



reviews

living
Something the SOF Network may be discussing at our 2012 Conference.

I was interested to discover that the Greek and Hebrew words translated 500 times in the Bible as 'righteousness' actually mean 'justice', a translation used only 140 times. Certainly the force and meaning of many well-known passages changes significantly if 'justice' is substituted for 'righteousness'. Perhaps only the Methodist Church has come close to understanding the centrality of justice for Christianity.

Using a Hindu story, that of Rama and Sita and the demon king Ravana, Geoff Crocker illustrates how the power of the great stories is diminished by being taken literally and specifically. Literalism cheapens them and can make them dangerous. In this instance it led to the burning of the only mosque in Ayodhya, the city with the most Hindu temples in India, in 1992. Geoff Crocker does acknowledge that not all the great stories need come from religious sources. Secular literature, art and music can provide us with equal and sometimes greater sustenance.

In seeking a host for his new synthesis, Geoff Crocker looks to the Churches, even though he has been quite critical of them and almost apologises for being so. Even he is not hopeful, admitting that 'today's church would have to change its emphasis and preconditions substantially' to fulfil this role. Perhaps the synthesis doesn't need a 'host'. After all feminism has never had one. Maybe the power of 'an idea whose time has come' will be enough. We might carry it along on the Sea of Faith.

I did enjoy this book. I was arguing with Mr Crocker all the time I was reading it and I very much look forward to exploring the extensive bibliography.

Barbara Burfoot is a humanist celebrant and Secretary to the SOF Board of Trustees.

Sebastian Barker reviews *A Thorn in the Flesh:* *Selected Poems*

by Eddie Linden

Hearing Eye (London 2011), 52 pages. £7.50.

Eddie Linden's poems are distinguished by a directness derived from simplicity of conception. This might even amount to an art that can seem artless. Certainly, the poet never dresses the nakedness of his art with anything that could be called artful or knowing. He is the very opposite of knowing; and this is his greatest attribute. What registers on the white page is a transparency to the world of immediate experience undergone by a sensitive, observant, and passionate spirit.

Eddie Linden is not his reputation, which is extensive, nor his opinion of himself, which would be sure to be a modest one. He is a poet in whose work as a whole we can single out a decent number of poems no discerning critic would wish to change. These are, as in A.E. Housman's formulation, 'secretions' of a creative urge, which deliver perfect form without any great concession to the school books of prosody. This is what helps to make Eddie Linden's poems so free from literary cant or paper cherry blossom. Every word, in his best poems, carries a substantial weight. This can be both heard and understood in his public recitals. His written work is a million miles from a creative writing class or a writers' circle. In each case, it is the residue of an eruption, which makes the word 'secretion' seem a little tame.

Because of this, in a long life (he is 76), we do not have a great number of poems to consider. There are 37 in *A Thorn in the Flesh*. 17 of these appeared in *City of Razors* (Jay Landesman, 1980). The other 20 have not been printed in book-form before. And we have 15 from *City of Razors* not included in *A Thorn in the Flesh*. So a certain amount of editing and re-jigging has been going on, but to no very great moment. We have 52 poems in all. As this editing and re-jigging may indicate, the quality varies considerably. The best poems were clearly forged under extreme emotional pressure. They were formed, it would seem, as much in the unconscious as the conscious mind. For when this poet attempts to put a poem together, without such extreme emotional pressure, the results are demonstrably less effective.

The question whether his good poetry is worth bothering with can be easily answered by the word yes. We do not often get genuine nuggets of poetry placed in our hands, but we do with this book. The simplicity

of conception I mentioned is not to be construed as naivety or lack of depth. Such simplicity is one of the hardest things to achieve in the arts. It is akin to the simplicity of being struck by

the arrows of adult love. But with Eddie Linden this is the love of God, of man, and of individual persons. That this love also embraces a wide and thorough grasp of life in the ecclesiastical and political arenas is simply one more credit to this wholly exceptional man.

This beautifully presented book has a fine foreword by James Campbell of *The Times Literary Supplement* and a superb front cover portrait of the poet by Gerald Mangan. I would name Eddie Linden's best poems as: 'City of Razors', 'The Miner', 'Peace', 'The Slum', 'Hampstead by Night', 'A Sunday in Cambridge', 'Where Lovers Never Meet', 'Editor', 'The Man in the Black Suit', 'Night Time in a City', 'For a Dublin Artist', 'For Philippe Jamet', 'To Archbishop Roberts', and 'Breaking Bread' (which is set in Greece). The most surprising of his poems is 'Peace' and it deserves to be read in full:

Peace

Let us walk
among the trees
and think of days
long far away.

Let us walk
among the trees
and play the games
we played when young

Let us walk
among the trees
and think of things
we often thought.

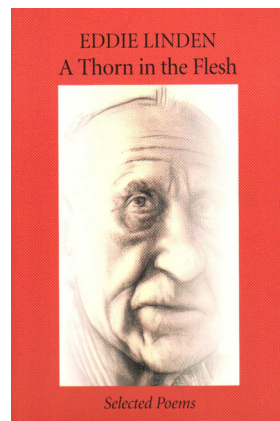
Let us walk among
the trees
and look for things
that must be true.

Let us walk
among the trees
and find the answer
to our pain.

Let us walk among
the trees
and find the peace
we long to have.

The subtle repetitions and variations in the first two lines of each stanza are remarkable.

Sebastian Barker is a former editor of the London Magazine and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. His latest poetry collection is *The Erotics of God* (Smokestack 2005). His biography *Who Is Eddie Linden?* was published by Jay Landesman in 1979.



reviews

On Dance

Cicely Herbert visits the *Dance Umbrella 2011* Festival and reflects on the importance of dance throughout history.

Dance is one of the earliest and most natural ways for humans to express conflicts and emotions. Throughout history, dance has been performed as a celebration of life, love and sexuality. According to a book I have borrowed from my 'soon-to-be closed down' local library, the Belly Dance developed from the practice of ancient fertility rites and has long been associated with the process of giving birth.

It is difficult to be accurate in tracing the development of the art of dance, since it must have its origins in the very beginning of human history. Our ancient forefathers celebrated their lives with song and dance, as they did when a period of hunger ended, when the sun returned after a long absence, or when some outside danger had been overcome. Ancient Egyptians 'danced their babies into the world' and performed dances at worship, at harvest time, for specific religious festivals and at betrothals, funerals and births. This tradition continues, world-wide in different forms. In some parts of the world, dance is performed as a rite in veneration of the Mother Goddess. Ferocious war dances are still enacted in some primitive societies.

This autumn the festival of *Dance Umbrella 2011* brought a whole month of 'New Dance' to London and included work by some of the most innovative choreographers working today. Caterina Sagna's *Basso Ostinato* was performed at

The Place, off Euston Road, by a cast of three and with almost no props or scenery. The choreographer's notes tell us that 'three men sit, drink, smoke, dance and talk' and that the piece ends with the men 'stuck, looking for a way out, foraging through the masticated pieces of their first conversation.' These notes give little idea of the brilliance of the men's dance movements, nor of the apparently limitless energy required from the performers. The three dancers converse (in several languages), act and dance, with such intensity, that one is left marvelling at the sheer ingenuity, skill and physical prowess on display.

Years ago, in the early 1960s Stravinsky's experimental ballet *Persephone* was performed in London, but as far as I know, has never been revived there, since it requires a dancer/actor who can speak Gide's words in impeccable French, and dance to a rhythmically difficult score. I remember that on the first night, Svetlana Beriosova's throat microphone unfortunately picked up messages from an outside cab driver, causing distress to the dancers, and much inappropriate mirth in the audience.

One book I treasure above all others is my copy of the illustrated *History of the Russian Ballet in Western Europe 1909-1920*, which, in 1961, cost me my week's wages of £10. That period in the history of ballet has never quite been equalled, before or since, for the sheer innovative brilliance of the designers, choreographers, composers and dancers involved. At the time of my purchase I little guessed that I would one day be lucky enough to appear, as an actor, in the performances of *Romeo and Juliet*, which starred Margot Fonteyn and Rudolph Nureyev after the latter's defection from Russia. It was through that experience that I gained a deep respect for the performers, who inevitably suffer injury and exhaustion during performances, and who are required to convey a sense of effortlessness that is hard won.

Performances at prestigious theatres like the Royal Opera House are inevitably priced high, but today there are various schemes, such as the 'Chance to Dance' programme which are introducing schoolchildren to the art, by giving them dance workshops, and access to performances at one of the world's most beautiful theatres, whilst ensuring that the next generation of interdependent audiences and performers is nurtured.



The 7 Great O Antiphons

O Wisdom, that came out of the mouth of the Most High, reaching from end to end to arrange everything strongly and sweetly: come and teach us carefulness.

O Adonai, guide of the house of Israel, who appeared to Moses in red flaming fire and gave him the law on Sinai: come and redeem us with your arm outstretched.

O Root of Jesse, that stands as the peoples' banner, at which kings shall shut their mouths, the one the nations will invoke, come and set us free, now do not delay.

O Key of David and sceptre of the house of Israel, that opens and no one closes, closes and no one opens: come and release from prison the captive sitting in darkness and the shadow of death.

O Daystar, splendour of light eternal and sun of justice: come and give light to those sitting in darkness and the shadow of death.

O King of the Nations, and the one they long for, cornerstone that makes both sides one: come and save humanity, which you formed from mud.

O Emmanuel, our King and lawgiver, whom the nations await, their Saviour: come and save us, Lord our God.

Repeated after each antiphon:

Verse: Skies, drop dew and clouds rain down the Just One.

Response: Open, Earth and sprout a Saviour.

These special antiphons to the Magnificat are sung each day at Vespers from 17th to 23rd December. Translated from the Latin by Dinah Livingstone.

New Year Snow

Light snow is forecast for fifteen hundred hours
skeins of geese unravel in the sky
and right on cue, so light you might not know,
snow dusts your head and shoulders.

Spiky trees extend their yearning gestures
above your head; they reach but do not touch,
their buds are speaking beyond your register;
you do not hear their polyvalent anthems.

The stones have laid themselves beneath your feet,
so many shades of brown and blue and ochre,
textures of water, granite, leafy satin
mere grey and grit as you walk on regardless.

At every step, the birth and death of angels,
tiny atomies, flickering so intensely
you neither see nor hear, but you may sense
outside your power to sense them.

Kathleen McPhilemy



‘The word became flesh
and pitched its tent among us.’ —

John 1: 14