



Hip height for
modern adult *homo*
sapiens 1.75m tall



1 metre tall
homo floresiensis
discovered on the
Indonesian island of
Ebu in 2004

Earth Fellow Creatures



sof is the magazine of the Sea of Faith Network (UK), an informal network of individuals and local groups 'exploring and promoting religious faith as a human creation'. It is published in January, March, May, July, September and November.

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Typographical Note

To avoid confusion SoF (roman upper and lower case) is used to refer to the Sea of Faith Network and *sof* to the magazine. *sof* is the root of the Greek word for wisdom (*sofia*: also *sofe* (f), *sofos* (m): wise).

Back Cover Image

from *Words of Paradise: Selected Poems of Rumi*, edited by Rafiq Abdulla (Frances Lincoln, London 2000).

Earth Fellow Creatures

Human beings are part of life on Earth. We are Earth people.

We humans belong to a single Earth ecosystem and are fellow creatures with all Earth's other life forms. We have a special responsibility because of our consciousness and capacity for making moral choices, combined with our enormous and increasing technological power to nurture or destroy.

In this issue Margaret Ogden starts from the recent discovery of one metre tall *homo floresiensis* on the Indonesian island of Ebu and goes on to consider what it is to be human, that has developed out of a long process of evolution. She stresses the urgency of our present situation and that our capacity to drift into our own destruction is very *insapiens* human behaviour. She ends with an open question about the future.

Dominic Kirkham's article *We're All Animals Now* traces the fascinating story of the discovery of the age of the Universe and the time span of evolution. We are 'bacterial froth', 'star-dust'. His subtitle is *The Advent of Post-Biblical Thinking*: the biblical paradigm is far too small to accommodate what we now know. David Lee's article *The Biblical God as a Human Creation* proposes that much in the Bible accords with an understanding of the existence of God as the product of human imagination.

Religions were invented as ways of thinking about how to live wisely on Earth (or telling other people how to live). Catastrophes, like the recent tsunami (described by the Archbishop of Canterbury as 'a test of people's faith') make it impossible to believe that God, who promised in the Bible there would never be another flood, is both all-loving and omnipotent. But because we humans got here by accident, does not mean that we no longer need to think about how to live wisely. We need to think even harder because there is no one 'out there' or 'above' to tell us the answer.

We must look after the Earth, our common habitat. It was recently reported (*Guardian* 27.01.05) that lobby groups funded by the US oil industry are targeting Britain in a bid to play down the threat of climate change and derail action to cut greenhouse gas emissions. A month earlier, the George C. Marshall

Group, funded by Exxon Mobil, published a report claiming to 'undermine theories of climate change'. The US government, under pressure from the oil industry, still has not even ratified the minimum provisions of the Kyoto Protocol. Neither has Australia.

We must look after each other, and as Ogden stresses, expand our concern and capacity for reciprocity beyond our tribe to embrace our whole species. A crusading Christian US President, backed by powerful Christian fundamentalist sects, has been pursuing an illegal war, with the supine agreement of our own government. This war has killed more than 100,000 civilians, among others, destroyed priceless treasures in Babylon and elsewhere, an irreplaceable part of our common human heritage. Prisoners are abused and tortured both in Iraq and Guantánamo.

In his book *Life, Life* Cupitt contrasts 'world people' and 'life people'. 'World people,' he says disparagingly, 'see us as being set in a ready-made, ready-ordered physical world, which must be studied closely if we are to act effectively. For life people, by contrast, knowledge and the physical world are relatively unimportant. Consider how rarely Shakespeare's characters pay close attention to their physical environment.' (This is not true of Shakespeare's characters, see *Under the Greenwood Tree* on page 19.) 'Life people,' says Cupitt, 'scarcely notice their physical environment, because they are so absorbed by the varied ways in which people interact... Life people are non-realists. They are not interested in the idea of an intelligible, real, non-human "it" world.'

I love the Earth. Apart from the pleasure of going to the country or abroad, at home in London on a warm day I love to swim with my fellow creatures, the ducks and moorhens, in the Ladies' Pond on Hampstead Heath, see the turquoise dragonflies resting on the water-lily pads, catch a matching turquoise kingfisher streaking over the water, or watch a heron flap by in his pre-historic-looking way. (There was a petition about the Ponds recently to the Corporation of London, which attracted thousands of signatures, so clearly many people feel the same.) After a swim, the hot soup in the

garden at Kenwood is delicious and the walk home is through a meadow where we quite often see a green woodpecker, sometimes a pair, as well as rabbits, perhaps a fox. Over the brow of the hill, which has a fine view of London, on the descent towards the Men's Pond, a hawk may be hovering. I like to see how the trees are coming on and enjoy knowing most of their names.

I think we *must* care about our physical world, the Earth itself and the lives of those who live on it. Paul Overend made the same criticism of *Life, Life* in his review of the book in *sof* 64. Given the choice between non-realist life people and world people, I'd opt for being among the world people, who are concerned about the real world, but a better name for what we are and must be is Earth people.

In his piece *SoF International* in this issue, David Boulton reports on his speaker tour to SoF groups overseas and sister organisations. As he was a guest speaker, Boulton naturally writes in a mainly positive tone, even at times with a certain insider cosiness, which make his occasional restrained, laconic criticisms all the more devastating, particularly of the Westar Institute in the USA. The 'star-studded cast' of radical theologians, including Cupitt, met 'in the swanky Marriott Marquis Hotel on Times Square', New York. 'In all four days there was scarcely a reference to the real world outside... [where] Christian US America was knocking the hell into Iraq...' In the same city as the headquarters of the UN, whose Secretary General has condemned the war as illegal, this seems incredible. And it appears that 'Don't mention the war!' was not in order to avoid upsetting the punters, like Basil Fawcett, but simply because they were not concerned and preferred talking and talking in 'learned expositions about the meaning of the Second Axial Age' (which apparently means now).

Westar is 'best known for its Jesus Seminar' that investigates the historical Jesus. I could not help thinking of one of Jesus' jokes. 'You strain out a gnat and swallow a camel.' 'But,' he says, 'you have neglected the more important matters of justice, mercy and faithfulness' (Mt 23:23). Fortunately, there are radical theologians in the world, usually called liberation theologians, who like Jesus, are prepared to speak truth to power.

Boulton's other criticism (also voiced by Patti Whaley in her report of the Westar Conference in *sof* 65) was that 'there was little room for participation by the floor. The platform talked, we listened.' I remembered the scene in *The Marx Brothers at the Circus* where Monsieur Jardinot and his orchestra's bandstand is cut loose from its moorings and floats off out to sea while they continue to play on regardless.

Cupitt praises multinational companies for being rootless, so perhaps the Marriott Hotel, part of a large multinational chain, was not such an odd venue after all! Radical or rootless? Ronald Pearse criticises Cupitt's *Solar Ethics* in *sof* 60 for advocating rootlessness. He

warns of its hubristic dangers.

Boulton also reports on the very different atmosphere of the Snowstar Institute in Canada, with audience participation and two speakers, one a Muslim feminist theologian and the other from Amnesty International, both campaigners for human rights (the latter for the prisoners in Guantánamo Bay).

At SoF New Zealand Boulton shared a platform with the courageous radical Muslim woman Ghazala Anwar, the first Muslim he had met who sees Islam as a human creation. But on the whole, he says, both at home and abroad, SoF 'continues to sidestep' the attempt to relate radical theology to radical politics. We are rooted in Earth, which is our home and the home of our fellow creatures. The fact that we no longer accept a supernatural cosmology does not mean that we no longer need to seek to how live wisely, both individually and collectively. Inevitably, that also means thinking and acting politically. Now less than ever is it feasible to separate religion from politics.

SoF in Britain agrees that God is a human creation, a fiction. We should not behave like those stock comic figures, members of a society devoted to a fictional character (for example, the Sherlock Holmes Society), who become so obsessed with their fictional hero that they disregard anything else that is going on in the real world. A letter in *sof* 68 reminds us how relevant is SoF's agenda in opposing conflicts driven by a fundamentalist, 'realist understanding of a sacred story'. That is true and important. God is not real: it makes sense to adopt a non-realist position towards him and stop killing people in his name. But the Earth and its inhabitants, including ourselves, are real. It is unwise be non-realist about our physical reality, to discount it as unimportant. If we feel superior to what is going on in the real world and can't be bothered to concern ourselves, we may act very unwisely or fail to do what we should and become complicit by default.

Those giving birth or laying out their dead are realists, those who look after other people or animals are realists, as are those doing gardening, cooking, cleaning, knitting, mending at all effectively. Jesus had good advice about mending (Mk 2:21) and John tells us that Jesus' robe, for which the soldiers cast lots, was seamless (Jn 19:23). I wonder who made it? If it had been knitted, she would have used four needles, as I did for the sleeves of the jacket I recently knitted for my grandson. Bricklayers, carpenters, plumbers, plasterers, traffic cops at crossroads and lollipop ladies must be realists to cope with our physical reality. Yes, we are and must be Earth people.

What It Is to Be Human

Starting from the recent discovery of one metre tall *homo floresiensis* on the Indonesian island of Ebu, Margaret Ogden goes on to consider what it is to be human.

The recent discovery on an Indonesian island of Ebu, *Homo floresiensis*, reveals adaptation to a meagre food supply as a key feature of humans. Long after Neanderthal man had died out, there remained this group of marooned humans, of one metre stature and very limited brain size, subsisting on a low-calorie diet and seemingly with no large predators. With the bones from seven individuals there was evidence of stone-age tools, and fire-charred bones of small primitive elephants. The most complete skeleton was an 18,000 year old female, the others dating from just 13,000 years ago when they seem to have been wiped out by an earthquake. Twentieth-century humans living on nearby islands tell stories of amazing little hairy people they called 'ebu gogo', meaning 'grandmother who eats everything'! These Ebu and other early human species will have had gestures of recognition, limb signals relating to food sources and dangers, and early speech together with other basic attributes of mammals.



Ebu's skull (above) is much smaller than modern homo sapiens.

Is the capacity to drift into our own destruction one inevitable result of what it means to be a very *insapiens* human?

Let us now jump back to the Jurassic age of the Dinosaurs, when our early rat-sized placental and lactating mammalian ancestors were honing their survival strategies, alongside some larger badger-sized mammals preying on young dinosaurs. Among their attributes would have been curiosity, motivating searching for answers that would aid survival, a brain ability to map space and time sequences, with bravery in fighting for resources. Our forebears could have learned to hunt in packs like modern wolves, with marked territories for food and shelter, with shared child care, and competing for a pecking order that could provide the status for the most experienced to lead the troop, take the 'lion's' share of food, and raise most offspring. Within these social groups there would be signals and vocal sounds to express communication needs of hunger, fear, domination etc. Their brains would have forged pathways for these concepts, predating our later human labelling with words. Such pathways would form the basis in the brain for the Language Acquisition Device, L.A.D., postulated by Chomsky.

When Primate groups evolved, many lived in trees, developing prehensile thumbs and toes, tool use, and longer care of the newly born. Famous studies in the last century of Chimpanzees, Apes and Monkeys have revealed great advances in facial communication, tool use and cohesive group grooming. Individuals would need to know

the characters of others in their troop, and differentiate friend and foe. One prominent feature of being human is an evolved and almost instinctive allegiance to our own social group, and a reluctance to share good fortune with 'strangers'. Present day chimps also show many other 'human' characteristics, being able to learn sign language and teach this to their young. Jane Goodall reported from Gombe that some chimps showed signs of awe at waterfalls. It will be tragic if human wars in parts of Africa were to exterminate any of these remaining intelligent primate species. Hungry humans will be desperate for bush meat, and there are reports that the sexually friendly Bonobo monkeys may already be extinct.

During recurrent Ice Ages, requiring exploitation of extremely diverse habitats, humans needed to adapt in many ways simultaneously, trebling their brain size to cope with the overload of sensory information and the need to make relevant effective responses. Recent research by Professor Bruce Lahn at the University of Chicago (reported in *The Guardian* 29th December 2004) shows that the DNA of 214 genes involved in brain development had gone through an intense amount of evolution in a short time – a process that far outstripped the speed of evolution of genes affecting other body parts. The professor suggested that the development of human society may have stimulated brain growth because improved cognitive abilities became a key advantage. Only those parents who could think and plan survival strategies would be able to breed effectively and pass on their genes for larger brains to their offspring. Professor Lahn has written: 'Even devoid of social context, as humans become more intelligent, it might create a situation where being a little smarter matters a lot.'

Our own *Homo* genus moved out from the trees to the plains, with upright stature freeing the arms for improved tool use. Our human skills as marathon runners probably developed at this time. Loss of most body hair would help

in cooling, but meant that infants had to be carried. Hands could wield more elaborate tools, and express more signals. The changes in diet and reduced jaw musculature left room for the enlarged brains that could enhance survival chances in successive generations. Our brain size would also have enabled deliberate choices that would harm others (we humans indeed have a capacity for evil actions). It seems that larger brains are needed for deceit! The explosion in brain size enabled conversion of grunts into more meaningful words. Would these early species have been busy with survival tasks with no time for wonder at their world? Yet perhaps they had developed some inner spirituality that could help them endure hardship and survive.

For many thousands of years different human species continued to develop, with our Neanderthal 'cousins' surviving until 30,000 years ago. So what are the most crucial additional special features of hunter-gatherer *Homo sapiens* compared with earlier humans? Principally the vastly larger and more complex brains enabled a quantum leap in brain inter-connectivity. Under each square mm of our convoluted human cortex there are 148,000 individual nerve cells – neurons. These branch out in networks to all other regions of the brain, some of which have become specialised for interpreting different senses, some for motor skills, some are concerned with language etc. Modern brain imaging techniques help scientists relate specific brain areas not only to specific motor and sensory stimuli, but also to reported 'feelings' and 'images' from articulate experimentees. Our complex brains helped tribes of early humans to flourish and attain mastery over many other animal species, and then spread out over much of the globe. They could co-ordinate projects, submit to hierarchies in groups, and teach specialist skills to the young.

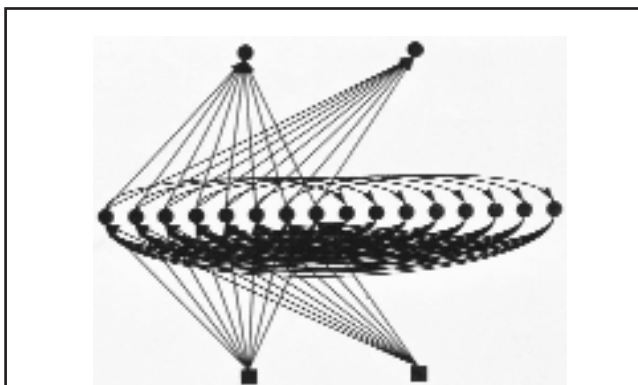
Matt Ridley¹ writes that one key way our brain differs from animals' is its capacity to exploit reciprocity, to trade favours and reap the benefits of social living. Steven Pinker² suggests that humans have intuitive knowledge of basic scientific mechanisms including psychology. Three year-olds can be excellent manipulators! David Boulton³ draws our attention to another human capacity – imagination, which prompts us to put ourselves in the place of others. This was demonstrated in the great sympathy and generosity following the Tsunami that struck on December 26th 2004.

When hunter-gathers began to live in farming settlements, with more reliable food sources, further specialised roles would increase, including herbal healers, builders, and spiritual leaders. Some leaders could tell stories to answer questions about the purpose of life and allay fears of death. They could gain power by predicting seasons, e.g. via stone circles, and could accept gifts to propitiate harmful spirits. Those tribes who had spiritual story-myths seem to have had the edge for survival, and any brain pathways that facilitated spiritual beliefs would have been inherited. I suggest that just as our brains have evolved a R.A.D., a religious acquisition device, to aid survival. Different isolated human groups would have developed allegiance to different religious stories which could answer curiosity about origins, could give exemplars for moral conduct, and could also reduce fears of death via stories of heaven or reincarnation. Such stories can act as bribes for better conduct within the group.

Our natural evolved selfishness to protect kith and kin needs a vast expansion into care for all peoples of the world.

Reflective techniques and neighbourly activities are part of most religions today, and should also be utilised by those who have discarded any evolved realist beliefs in external deities. Techniques of inner reflection can be learned via Yoga or other methods of meditation. Disciples of the 13th century Persian poet Rumi participated in a dancing 'centring of consciousness', which aimed to join the body and soul together in a journey to a deeper psychic awareness. Moments of great wonder at Nature, Art, or Music, can achieve similar inner calm and joy. Our over-busy thinking minds can be refreshed, aiding survival skills and leading to greater empathy with fellow humans. David Sloan Wilson has written: 'So religion acts as a biologically and culturally evolved adaptation that enables humans to function more effectively as a group rather than a mere collection of individuals.' He advises us to 'reflect and let your inner instincts contribute to your decisions.' But will it ever be possible to enlarge the boundaries of our group empathies to become a more united world population?

Recent Consciousness Studies research have begun to give insights into that rather mysterious attribute- our sense of self. The fascinating book *Radiant Cool*⁴ includes a detailed account of some current research using brain scans. Our complex brain structures lay down memories of events, linking the present with previous stored memories, and postulating forward scenarios for possible action.



Dan Lloyd writes about the diagram above that responses 'are copied to a "mirror layer" of context units, which are available with new inputs at the next time step to allow the network to use its own past to detect and anticipate patterns developing over time.' Multidimensional scaling links maps at any one instant with those of the past, and can predict forward alternatives for the future. From these complex brain structures we gain our sense of self.

During the many years of human evolution, our increase in brain size has stimulated us to spread out over our globe and to develop different technologies to fine-tune our lives, enabling a few to achieve a more comfortable life style. Keith Ward⁵ does not accept that Evolution has had this capacity to fine-tune living things to their environments, and considers that God as a first cause, with a capacity to influence events, has to be an essential postulate for our understanding of life on this planet, but ironically it is via Natural Selection itself that different

religions have arisen to increase our chances of survival. However, theists can still maintain that a designer God would have planned our evolved spirituality!

Our inherited biases for particular concern for our own families, our own neighbourhoods, our own tribes or nations, our own life-spans, seem to blind us to the plight of other peoples and also to certain global consequences of our activities. The spectacular 2004 Tsunami disaster did cut through our complacency, and inspired generosity. Can future governments, or the Arts, inspire us to make sacrifices for the sake of future generations before it is too late?

The peoples of the world are limbs of one body,
sharing the essence.
When a single limb is oppressed, all the others
suffer agony.⁶

Those of us who no longer accept supernatural causation or interference in events should take due heed of the potential for contributions from our inner spirituality in guiding our choices of action, and the valuable contributions of organised religions in co-ordinating neighbourhood and national activities. It would be wise not to neglect this evolved capacity and to practise pausing reflectively before taking important decisions. Nor should we ignore the grave dangers posed by rival fundamentalist sects that can undermine local and national co-operative endeavours to work for the good of humanity as a whole. Neither any single religion, nor any agnostic or atheist group acting alone can hope to so influence global decisions made over the next fifty years as to ensure a longer term of survival for humans on this planet. Is the capacity to drift into our own destruction one inevitable result of what it means to be a very *insapiens* human?

Our natural evolved selfishness to protect kith and kin needs a vast expansion into care for all peoples of the world, including a determination to reduce certain emissions of air pollutants, and to approve regular government contributions from wealthy nations to support peoples scratching out subsistence livings. We need to be aware not only of our positive adaptive evolved attributes but also of the load of selfish luggage we carry selected during our struggles for survival in a past world that had ample resources for our small ancestral populations. Occasional generous charitable responses to disasters will not be enough to save our descendants from an increasingly uninhabitable world before human extinction cuts in, and natural selection enables, perhaps termites?, to conquer the globe. Will it ever be possible for us to channel our evolved selfish tribal attributes into a shared determination to do what it takes to conserve this planet for future generations?

1. Matt Ridley, *The Origins of Virtue*, (Viking UK, 1996)
2. Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct* (Penguin, London 1994).
3. David Boulton, *The Trouble with God* (John Hunt, Winchester 2002).
4. Dan Lloyd, *Radiant Cool – A Novel Theory of Consciousness* (MIT Press, USA, 2004).
5. Keith Ward, *God, Chance and Necessity* (One World Publications, Oxford 1996).⁶
6. Sheikh Sa'adi of Shiraz quoted by Saira Shah in Saira Shah, *The Storyteller's Daughter* (Penguin, London 2003).

Margaret Ogden is a member of SoF Steering Committee. She had a superb student experience in the Zoology Department of University College, London, where she was taught by JBS Haldane, Peter Medawar, John Maynard Smith and others. This was followed by a teaching career in London.

Puzzling

Here is ME
and there is YOU
but you are also ME.

Both of us began as ME
and certainly will end as ME.

No one in the world is as important as ME,
Africa, America, China, Russia,
hungry, well-fed,
white, pink, blue or black
all ME.

When ME is not looking
YOU are not.
When YOU are not looking
ME is not.

So here is ME
spinning on a globe
aware of the air
and alive like the sheep
in the field
who are probably also ME.

Anne Beresford

Anne Beresford's most recent collection is *Hearing Things* (Katabasis, 2002).

1. José de Broucker, *Dom Hélder Câmara. The Conversions of a Bishop*, London: Collins, 1979, pp. 172, 185.
2. Mary Hall, *The Impossible Dream. The Spirituality of Dom Hélder Câmara* New York, Orbis, 1980., pp 75-76.

We're All Animals Now!

The Advent of Post-Biblical Thinking

Dominic Kirkham traces the fascinating story of the discovery of the age of the Universe and the time span of evolution. We are 'bacterial froth', 'star-dust'.

Perhaps you missed the celebrations on 23rd October for the 6000th birthday of the universe. It seems to have been a rather muted affair, even among the resurgent evangelical groups in the USA who hold to a literal reading of the Bible: the official plaques and brochures of Yellowstone Park, for example, now invite us to admire the wondrous evidence of creation as recorded in the Bible. True, the Bible does not actually mention a specific date, but it has long been held that the text holds the clues; as is the case in such matters revelation is by way of code, which is there for the enlightened to discover.

Across the centuries great minds have grappled with decoding the sacred texts: the Venerable Bede, for example, computed a date of 3952BC. But it was not until 1655 that the great Hebrew scholar and Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge University, John Lightfoot, gave the definitive and widely accepted date for the moment of creation. It was now clear that on 23 October 4004BC at nine o'clock in the morning that, 'Heaven and earth, centre and circumference, were created all together, in the same instant, and clouds full of water.'

A generation later it occurred to another Cambridge cleric, Thomas Burnet, whilst crossing the Alps that the chaotic features of the mountains had not been created *ab origine* by God but were the after effects of the Deluge: mountains were, in effect, gigantic souvenirs of humanity's sinfulness. If this were so it implied the earth was subject to periodic change. Burnet set out his view that the earth had a history (guided of course by the Creator) in his book *The Sacred Theory of the Earth* (1684). It was a 'theory' which immediately provoked outrage as it seemed to suggest a defect in the original design.

The discovery of time and change shook the foundations of the nineteenth-century world view.

The controversy seemed to anticipate a later 'theory' of change in the nineteenth century. Though Burnet's career was ruined by his questioning of scripture and counter-doctrinal ideas, a new dimension had been introduced into the discussion about Creation – change, and for change to work it needed time. The idea was taken up by a precocious French natural historian, Count Georges Buffon (1707-88), who, whilst realising the need for time in creation, was clever enough to evade a direct challenge to the established catholic

orthodoxy, risking ruin and imprisonment, by proposing that the 'days' of Creation might be a metaphor for longer periods of time.

In public Buffon was suggesting perhaps tens of thousands of years. In private he was thinking something altogether more blasphemous: in notes discovered posthumously

he scribbled a figure of several billion years. The growing interest in fossils seemed to provide an alternative to the biblical record of events. But all this was speculation – theory: no one had any definite dates of anything from ancient times other than what the Bible recorded. Enter the Egyptologist, Jean-Francois Champolion (1790-1832). His deciphering of the ancient hieroglyphs and subsequent trip to Egypt in 1822 to study the ancient monuments revealed a world which could be dated independently of the Bible: the record of the pharaohs stretched beyond 3,000BC. This assertion provoked the wrath of both Church and State. In the face of the resurgent traditionalism of the Bourbons – curiously similar to the neo-conservatism of today – Champolion narrowly avoided imprisonment.

But there was worse to come. Fossil hunters, such as Gideon Mantell (1790-1852) in Sussex, were discovering whole worlds inhabited by creatures whose natures beggared belief. This former creation in which horrific carnage was part of daily life seemed inexplicable in terms of traditional biblical theodicy: why would God create such hideous monsters? The response swung between denial to the view that these were Satan's creatures, 'armed with the virility of Evil... a teeming Spawn fitted for the lowest abyss of Chaos!' Such 'Dinosaurs' (demon lizards) challenged not only the order of creation but the very nature of the creator who had designed it. The eminent Oxford geologist, Reverend William Buckland, eventually had to accept that the carnivorous carnage was 'inconsistent with a Creation founded in Benevolence', but recognition of the inconsistency drove him insane.

It is difficult for us to understand how drastically the discovery of time and change shook the foundations of



The Venerable Bede computed 3952 BC

the nineteenth-century world view, creating a climate of doubt and disbelief in previously established Christian orthodoxy. Natural Theology provided early scientists with a metaphysical justification for their research and as Charles Gillespie pointed out in *Genesis and Geology*, 'everyone agreed natural history must devote itself to exhibiting evidence of divine design and material Providence.' But places like Galapagos gave evidence of neither, for the 'God of Galapagos' was not a loving God who cared about his productions but one which was careless, wasteful, indifferent, almost diabolical: 'certainly not the sort of God to whom anyone would be inclined to pray.'

The idea that geological time was endless (Deep Time), with 'no vestige of a beginning – no prospect of an end', is one we owe to Edinburgh proto-scientist James Hutton (1726-1797). It is one most people still find difficult to accept. As biological beings with a beginning and an end we tend to assume this to be true of the universe. With the discovery of Deep Space in the twentieth century, thanks to the work of Edwin Hubble (identifying an expanding universe) and later revelations from the Hubble space telescope, there is every reason to reject this assumption. What the universe does reveal is that not only does it have a vast and violent history but that it is much more mysterious and unintelligible than we ever had reason to believe.

As intelligent beings we constantly seek the signs of intelligibility imprinted in the universe. Either by

The recent tsunami has reminded us of the difficulties of reconciling the idea of creation with natural catastrophes.

divination or experimentation we are driven to discern what this intelligent design is. So perhaps one of the most paradoxical results of our growing knowledge is, as the Astronomer Royal, Martin Rees, pointed out in *Our Final Century*, that our minds have now reached the threshold of recognising their own incapacity: 'The micro-structure of empty space could be far too complex for unaided human brains to grasp.' It would seem that in Black Holes all intelligibility ceases and through them we are perhaps even led to alternative universes.

Of course, it is possible to postulate a Higher Intelligence which overrides all such limitations. The reason to reject such a *deus ex machina* is from the evidence of the universe we do know, in particular the reality of catastrophe. The recent tsunami has reminded

us of the difficulties of reconciling the idea of creation with natural catastrophes: the Archbishop of Canterbury spoke of the event as being 'a test of people's faith'. Unless one wants to suggest that, like the Flood, it is a punishment for sin, catastrophic changes imply a defect in design, which, as the critics of Burnett pointed out, undermines the conventional understanding of scripture. The rebirth of catastrophism in the 1970's came with the realisation that after 180 million years the 'demonic' dinosaurs were nearly (but not quite) exterminated by a random meteorite strike. Other such random events seemed to abound, such as the 'oxygen holocaust' in which the original hydrogen-loving cells were destroyed over the period of a billion years by the oxygen they released. The mindless destruction of mindless creatures is itself a mindless act.



Spiral galaxy

The discovery of Deep Time and Deep Space challenged pivotal assumptions of biblical thinking – that there is a beginning; a stable order; an intelligible design and benevolent purpose. It seemed that the biblical paradigm was not just defective, but fundamentally flawed. Still further challenges have come with the advent of what we may call Deep Life – the discovery of the genetic basis of life. Though we generally assume we know what life is no one has ever been able to give it a credible definition. To the astro-physicist Fred Hoyle, 'our' sort of carbon based life is a feature of the time and place in the universe we now inhabit, and where key elements have had the time to form from the ashes of long dead stars – we are star dust!

The best shot at penetrating the mystery of 'What is Life?' came from a professor of theoretical physics in 1944. In a book of that name Erwin Schrodinger, who had previously discovered the mathematical basis of quantum mechanics, postulated a molecular basis for genes in which the number of atoms and energy levels would create mutations analogous to those which existed in quantum physics. This suggestion opened up a new field of research – molecular biology – which would lead to the discovery of DNA and the genetic basis of life. The evolution of the cell has been the decisive step in comparison with which everything else pales into insignificance. In the tree of life all the great 'domains' are microbial, with the multi-cellular organisms (like humans) occupying a very small and insignificant space in the grand spectacle of things: Schrodinger concluded with the thought that the personal self was inseparable from the 'universal self'. Needless to say, with views like this his Dublin publisher withdrew at the last minute fearing ecclesiastical retribution.

Traditionally, as Richard Dawkins writes in *The Ancestors' Tale*, the story of life has been told from the point of view of the 'big animals – us.' But when viewed from the perspective of bacteria, a piece of yeast or an amoeba is scarcely distinguishable from a human.

We are but a slight variation on a theme which has been unfolding for a mere 500 million years and though (to us) the variation seems vast it is insignificant in comparison to bacterial versatility: as Dawkins says, 'we are bacterial froth.' After the Cambrian explosion of

The Bible itself has often been the basis of bigotry and used as justification for the extermination and enslavement of peoples.

animal life everything gets rather repetitive, we seem little more than altered fish. So much for the idea of fixed species!

All this challenges our sense of identity, which has its roots in the biblical belief of Adamite exceptionalism – a myth clearly exploded by the recent discovery of *homo floresiensis* ('Hobbit man'). The clear distinction between fixed species, animal and human – like other 'clear distinctions' in the Bible between clean and unclean, male and female, good and evil – find little or no basis in reality as we now know it. Rather than helping us to understand who we are they obscure our origins and the fact that the animals not only brought us to where we are but made us what we are: as evolutionary biologist, Simon Conway Morris, says, 'We didn't, you know, get here on our own merits.' Our self-understanding is inextricably linked to our animal past: we're all animals now.

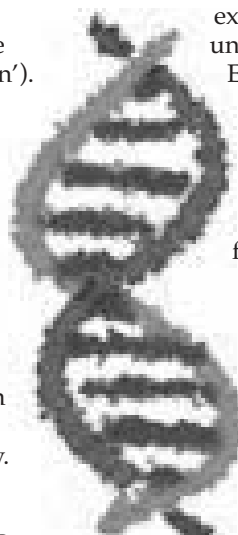
This is the basis of evolutionary psychology, which enables contemporary philosophers like Peter Singer not only to denounce the prejudice of 'specism' but to promote the novel concept of animal rights. For thinkers like Singer evolution explains the deepest characteristics of human behaviour, giving a different context to the discussion of morality. Morally right action is about giving as many of us as possible what we want and need. Such 'preference utilitarianism', as it is called, contrasts to the apodictic morality of the Bible, which is blamed for a catastrophic disregard for animal life and the environment, even of human rights.

The erosion of the credibility of biblical thinking and the assumptions on which it is based has also been accompanied by a re-evaluation of the integrity of the Bible itself. Biblical archaeology has not only increasingly come to question the accuracy of what it records but the status of the work as a whole. From being seen as a prism through which to view the world and a standard of judgement it is now regarded as an artefact that was very much the product of its own limited world.

Yet the problem for the modern world is that the realm of empirically based, rational knowledge which

has replaced it seems even more unsatisfactory to the human spirit. In an influential work on the philosophical implications of the new understanding of life, aptly entitled *Chance and Necessity* (1971), the French biologist and Nobel laureate Jacques Monod synthesised the insights of biology since Schrodinger which showed that life was essentially a physical and mathematical phenomenon. Evolution can only take place because though nucleic acids reproduce themselves exactly, accidental mistakes produce mutations. In this scenario the universe was an accident and life a mistake. No wonder Monod noted that many distinguished minds could not accept, or even understand, the processes by which natural selection had produced the 'music of the biosphere.' It is simpler to believe old myths just as it is to say that each day the sun rises and sets on our world. Even though we know or suspect it to be false we choose to ignore the evidence: any myth is better than none. Such a mentality is at the heart of the new fundamentalisms which now possess so many.

It is worth remembering that the Bible itself has often been the basis of bigotry and used as justification for the extermination and enslavement of peoples; it underlay the insufferable self-righteousness of Europeans in the nineteenth century and of Americans in the present century. British colonists of Tasmania, for example, regarded aborigines as 'agricultural vermin' to be exterminated and the last Tasman aborigine, 'King Billy', was shot in 1876 and his scrotum made into a tobacco pouch for a Christian gentleman (shades of Dr.Mengele!).



DNA double helix

Through the discovery of the true nature of Deep Time, Deep Space and Deep Life, Western culture has gradually moved on beyond the paradigms of biblical thought. When we look back over evolution's history we see a drama that is savage, cruel, merciless and indifferent. But by acting positively to others through love and creativity we introduce value into our world. Like happiness, meaning is not something 'out there' we can decode or strive for, it is the consequence of our own attitude to others. Now for the first time intelligence (our intelligence) can assess the consequences of our actions and take ameliorative action: we can pity, care and be merciful (if we so choose).

In a myriad of daily choices we construct our world on the basis of the natural world we inherit. Long after we have destroyed the great animal species, and we ourselves have been destroyed, the basic structure of life will remain unchanged. The world will go on, perhaps to produce other intelligent species who will look back on our colossal arrogance and stupidity, much as we look back on the dinosaurs. Perhaps they too will think we were demons. Either way, it is up to us how we wish to be remembered.

Dominic Kirkham is an interested follower of SoF and writes regularly for *Renewal* (Catholics for a Changing Church).

The Biblical God as a Human Creation

David Lee proposes that much in the Bible accords with an understanding of the existence of God as the product of human imagination.

Those who hold that God has no metaphysical objectivity will nevertheless agree that he exists as a potent idea in human imagination, and as an active figure in the stories we tell and the language we speak. One look at the world of today should convince us that there is no escape from the challenge of religious faith, whether we accept the reality of the divine or not. There are those who take the position that the traditional churches have outlived their usefulness and cannot be thought of as relevant in the contemporary scene. There are also those who find it possible to maintain their active support and membership of the traditional church while holding to the concept of the divine as a human creation.

A major component of the life and work of the church has been its use of the Bible as the principle source book for the Christian religion, and the main element in liturgical worship and devotional practice. The Bible is pre-eminently a book of religious realism, and the presence of God on every page appears as central and irreducible. The theme of this paper is to look more closely at the Bible and to propose that much in it accords with an understanding of the existence of God as the product of human imagination.

Images of God

There is no single idea of God in the Bible.

The Book of Joshua tells us that the Israelites were a group of warring tribes in Palestine and that they believed that God was on their side:

The Lord said to Joshua, 'Do not be afraid or discouraged; take the whole army with you and go and attack Ai. I am delivering the king of Ai into your hands, along with his people, the city and his territory.' (Joshua 8:1)

The Book of Deuteronomy was written long after the Book of Joshua and in it we find that the Israelites believed that God was calling them to more than survival:

When the Lord your God brings you into the land which you are about to enter to occupy it, when he drives out many nations before you – Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizites, Hivites, and Jebusites, seven nations more powerful than you –

and when the Lord your God delivers them into your power for you to defeat, you must exterminate them. (Deut. 7:1,2)

So the Israelites believed that God had given them the right to destroy the nations around them and to take their land. Such a claim seems impossible to justify in today's world until we realise that this is one of the reasons given by some for the present policies of the State of Israel.



Joshua burning Ai

As time passed and Israel began to feel secure in its borders we find a more exalted image of God emerging. So in the Book of the Prophet Micah:

In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house will be established higher than all other mountains, towering above other hills. Peoples will stream towards it; many nations will go, saying, 'Let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of Jacob's God, that he may teach us his ways and we may walk in his paths.' For instruction issues from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He will be judge between many peoples and arbiter among great and distant nations. They will hammer their swords into mattocks and their spears into pruning-knives. Nation will not take up sword against nation; they will never again be trained for war. (Micah 4:1-3)

There is no single idea of God in the Bible.

By the time we come to the time of the New Testament Israel has suffered exile, the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, the conquest of the Greeks and found itself under the occupation of the Romans. This resulted in a new image of God. So in the First Letter of John:

God is love; he who dwells in love is dwelling in God, and God in him. This is how love has reached its perfection among us, so that we may have confidence on the day of judgement; and this we have because we are in the world as he is. In love there is no room for fear; indeed perfect love banishes fear. (1 Jn 4:16,17)

So God is thought of as one who is primarily involved with human emotions, a very personal God, to do with inner tranquillity and good will. From the point of view of those who believe in the objective reality of God – God as an actual person ‘out there’ looking down upon us with infinite power and love, the differences between these images of God in the Bible are explained by saying that human beings only gradually learnt to understand the true nature of God and that it took a very long time. The non-supernaturalist approach is that in each generation the human race invents its own idea of God to suit the challenges and opportunities of the time.

The Book of Dreams

The Bible is a book of dreams. Over and over again it records God speaking to his people through their dreams. In the book of Genesis the dream of Joseph reflects the idea that the Israelites have the God-given right to possess the lands they occupy:

In a dream Jacob saw a ladder, which rested on the ground with its top reaching to heaven, and angels of God were going up and down on it. The Lord was standing beside him saying, ‘I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. This land on which you are lying I shall give to you and your descendants.’ (Gen. 28:12,13)

In the Book of Judges the dream of Gideon reflects the picture of God as the champion of the Israelites in their warring adventures:

When Gideon heard the account of the dream and its interpretation, he bowed down in worship. Then going back to the Israelite camp he said, ‘Let us go! The Lord has delivered the camp of the Midianites into our hands.’ (Judges 7:15)

The Book of Job is quite explicit in saying that God speaks to people in their dreams, and even that nightmares have the purpose of warning them of difficulties to come.

Indeed, once God has spoken he does not speak a second time to confirm it. In dreams, in visions of the night, when deepest slumber falls on mortals, while they lie asleep in bed God imparts his message, and as a warning strikes them with terror. (Job 33:14-16).

The Book of Daniel shows that even the dreams of non-believers can bring messages from God: Daniel answered: ‘No wise man, exorcist, magician, or diviner can tell your majesty the secret about which you ask. But there is in heaven a God who reveals secrets, and he has made known to King Nebucadnezzar what is to be at the end of this age. This is the dream and these are the visions that came into your head.’ (Dan. 2:27,28)

The vision of the prophet Joel shows that even when the divine spirit falls on the human race there will still be a place for dreams:

After this I shall pour out my spirit on all mankind; your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams and your young men see visions.” (Joel 2:28)



Jacob's ladder

Dreams appear in the New Testament in the most Jewish of the Gospels. Matthew says that Joseph had a message from God in a dream:

After Herod's death an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said to him, ‘Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who threatened the child's life are dead.’ (Matt.2:19,20)

The wife of Pontius Pilate is regarded as a saint in the Orthodox Church, largely because she is reported as having a dream about Jesus, again from St Matthew's Gospel.

While Pilate was sitting in court a message came to him from his wife: ‘Have nothing to do with that innocent man; I was much troubled on his account in my dreams last night.’ (Matt. 27:19)

While the traditionalist believer might say that God can use dreams to convey his messages to people, and that the Bible shows this to be the case, the non-supernaturalist will argue that even the most elementary student of psychology knows that dreams are an expression of the subconscious mind ceaselessly at work sorting out the experiences of the day and relating them to archetypal images and ideas shared by the community. The idea that God speaks to people in dreams is a good example of this, and supports the view that God is a product of the human mind.

Wisdom

Whereas the place of dreams as a medium for messages from God is uniformly expressed throughout the Bible the relevance of wisdom is something which develops and matures. It begins as an expression of practical advice on virtuous living:

My son, attend to my wisdom and listen with care to my counsel, so that you may preserve discretion and your lips safeguard knowledge. (Prov. 5:1)

It includes the cunning insight of King Solomon as shown in his judgement in the case of the two women both claiming a new born baby:

When Israel heard the judgement which the king had given, they all stood in awe of him; for they saw that he possessed wisdom from God for administering judgement. (1Kings 3:28),

All these examples however, are subject to the fear of the Lord, which is the beginning of wisdom.

The first step in wisdom is the fear of the Lord, and knowledge of the Most Holy One is understanding; for through me your days will be increased and years added to your life. (Prov. 9:10,11)

The wisdom of God is shown in creation and providence, and it soon becomes hypostasised – the personification of the Divine.

For wisdom is more moving than any motion: she passeth and goeth through all things by reason of her pureness. For she is the breath of the power of God, and a pure influence flowing from the glory of the Almighty: therefore can no defiled thing fall into her. (Wisd.7:24,25)

In the New Testament Divine Wisdom is incarnate in Christ and it is also connected with the Holy Spirit whose gift it is.

However we dress it up wisdom is only conceivable as a human attribute something ‘down here’ rather than ‘up there’.

Jews demand signs, Greeks look for wisdom, but we proclaim Christ nailed to the cross; and though this is an offence to Jews and folly to Gentiles, yet to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike, he is the power of God and the wisdom of God. (1 Cor. 1:22-24)

Here is a good example of the process by which a human attribute becomes associated in thought with the figure of the divine. So if wisdom is thought of as a property of God then humans are urged to acquire this gift and to develop it in relation to how it works in the divine economy. This is, of course, admirable, but it does not require that we believe that it can exist outside human thought and experience. However we dress it up wisdom is only conceivable as a human attribute something ‘down here’ rather than ‘up there’.

Jesus Christ

The idea that God’s existence is simply a part of human consciousness and culture calls in question much of

what Christians have held about the nature of Jesus Christ as God and Man. Popular religious culture tends to emphasize the divinity of Jesus. In the Catholic Creeds and the Definition of Chalcedon we see that Christ’s divinity and humanity are to be understood as quite distinct and yet joined together. So if we read the Gospels and filter out all references to the divinity of Jesus, that is, voices from heaven, angelic visitations, miracles, the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection and Ascension, we are not left with nothing. In fact we are left with a recognizable human person. We then approach the person of Jesus, as did the original disciples; we make contact with the son of Mary, the carpenter of Nazareth.

The Gospels reveal that his contemporaries understood Jesus as a Teacher before anything else. ‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no man can do these things unless God is with him.’ (Jn 3:1,2) Over and over again he is addressed as teacher, altogether 43 times in the four Gospels. Two things flow from this observation: First, we know that a teacher is one who does more than impart information; a teacher enables the pupil to grow and mature. When all that has been imparted by the teacher has been forgotten, the confidence, the intellectual strength, remains. Put simply the teacher’s legacy is something like: ‘Think for yourself, have the courage to face facts and decide and take responsibility for your life.’ For the present generation to see Jesus in this role is to require of them a sense of maturity and self-determination not much encouraged by those who hold that religion is a matter of unquestioning faith and obedience.

Secondly, the content of the teaching of Jesus was mainly in the form of the stories we call parables. With few exceptions, for example, the parable of Dives and Lazarus, the parables may be understood in a quite worldly way. To be sure many of them begin or conclude with the formula ‘The kingdom of God is like this’, but the stories are of typical worldly situations and challenges. See, for example, *The Good Samaritan* (Lk. 10:29-37), *The Unjust Steward* (Lk. 16:1-8), and *The Prodigal Son* (Lk. 15:11-32). They enshrine moral principles and they urge the hearer to live in a certain way, they develop the command: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’.

The disciples’ initial contact with Jesus was at this level. Belief in his messiahship and divinity came much later and was written in the Gospels many years after the events they describe. By that time Christian thinkers had become preoccupied by the struggle to make the Gospel message intelligible to the surrounding Greek culture, with all that meant in terms of the classical cosmology which was to dominate the Church for the next 1500 years. I believe that one of the ways in which we can rescue the Church from the strait-jacket of naïve realism is to renew the emphasis on the humanity of Jesus. A restoration of the teaching of Jesus will focus our minds on the idea of Christianity as a way of life before it is a set of dogmatic propositions.

David Lee is a member of the Cardiff SoF Group and was the Archdeacon of Llandaff until his retirement in 1997.

SoF International

David Boulton reports on his speaker tour to SoF groups overseas and sister organisations.

When a handful of enthusiasts got together after the BBC's *Sea of Faith* series in 1984 to organise a conference 'to explore and promote religious faith as a human creation', they cannot have imagined that the waves they were creating would roll across the oceans and fling a few pebbles up the strands of distant lands to create a world-wide network. Not quite the Fifth International (though church traditionalists were quick to denounce it as a fifth column), but a network of networks linking radical religious humanists and their allies in Britain, New Zealand, Australia, Canada and the United States, with outliers dotted across the globe. And when I first stumbled across the UK network in the early 1990s and was given the responsibility *pro tem* of producing this magazine, I never imagined that I would one day be crossing these oceans to visit each of the networks in turn. But that's what I found myself doing in 2004, and the experience was hugely enriching.

It all began with an invitation from Sea of Faith in Australia (SoFiA) to speak at their inaugural conference in Perth, in September. Then it transpired that the New Zealand network would be holding its annual conference only a week later, a few thousand miles away in Cambridge, just south of Auckland, and they asked me to pop over. Meanwhile, earlier in the year, I had attended the Westar Institute's mega-conference in New York, and accepted an invitation to speak at SnowStar's conference at Niagara Falls, Canada. A unique opportunity, then, to compare and contrast the different manifestations of the Sea of Faith phenomenon in all its diversity.

First, then, the Westar conference in March. Westar is not, of course, a part of Sea of Faith but an academic institute based in Santa Rosa, California, best known for its Jesus Seminar in which some of the world's leading New Testament scholars and historians have been working together to find a scholarly consensus on the historical Jesus. Over the last five years or so, however, Westar has been calling on a different expertise, that of the radical theologian, Don Cupitt (whose books are now published exclusively by Westar's own Polebridge Press) has become a star in Westar's crown, as has New Zealand Sea of Faith's Lloyd Geering. Our own David Hart is a Westar Fellow, and others who have backed SoF's promotion of religion understood as a cultural creation – Karen Armstrong and Richard Holloway among them – have likewise followed the Westar trail. The result is that the SoF networks and Westar have become closely linked as allies in the campaign for religious literacy and an up-to-date understanding of religious culture and mythology.

The connection works both ways. Westar's founder-director Robert Funk has been a SoF guest speaker in Britain, and Associates of the Institute such as Hershey Julien, John Klopacz and Tom Hall have attended UK annual conferences. Hershey is SoF's representative in the USA and has been busy recruiting new members. One day soon membership will reach the critical mass required to enable US members to make their declaration of independence and start their own network.

Westar usually holds two conferences a year in Santa Rosa, but Robert Funk switched the Spring 2004 meeting to New York and the swanky Marriott Marquis Hotel on Times Square, so for four days *The Future of the Judeo-Christian Tradition* was right up there with the big Broadway attractions. The star-studded cast, in addition to Cupitt, Armstrong, Holloway and Geering, included Marcus Borg, Elaine Pagels, John Shelby Spong and Karen King. Rarely have so many of the biggest names in radical theology been gathered together in one place. My supporting role was to deliver the citation for Westar's John T Robinson Award, which went to one Don Cupitt.

USA: In all four days there was scarcely a reference to the real world outside.

The problem was that there was little room for participation by the floor. The platform talked, we listened. What we heard was richly rewarding, but opportunities for questions and open discussion were limited. In style alone, this was very different from the participatory format of SoF conferences. Another difference was the relentlessly theoretical emphasis of the stream of lectures. In all four days there was scarcely a reference to the real world outside and the preoccupations of the man and woman on the Broadway sidewalk. Christian US America was knocking the hell into Iraq, Mel Gibson's tacky film turning the passion of Christ into a sado-religious spectacle was the talk of the town, but none of that found its way into the learned expositions on the meaning of the Second Axial Age.

So back to Britain, only to pack a fresh suitcase and fly off to Niagara for the SnowStar Institute's conference on *Paradise Lost, Now What?* SnowStar was

founded only four years ago, its name indicating its early ambition to do for Canada what Westar was doing for the United States. But when it comes to conferences, SnowStar's style is much closer to SoF's than to Westar's: informal, participatory, bottom-up rather than top-down. As I read their Constitution I found myself wondering why it all seemed so familiar, till I realised that I had written a lot of it! Del Stewart and David Galston, Snowstar's founders and inspirational double-act, had simply copied much of SoF UK's constitution into their own.

Where more than 300 had packed into the Marriott Marquis, SnowStar's 120 made for a more intimate and friendly event. Still new and finding its feet, their previous conferences had started at 40, then doubled, then grown by half as much again. Main attraction this year was John Dominic Crossan, who reminded us that the first-century Romans had had their own 'saviour', 'son of God' and 'king of kings' – all titles of the Emperor Augustus. But perhaps the most original and rewarding speaker was Riffat Hassan, Muslim, feminist theologian and campaigner for human rights, who challenged our perspectives on Islamic fundamentalism, and did so with humour and an enviable lightness of touch.

Mark Warren of Amnesty International and campaigner for the rights of the 600 prisoners at the USA's Guantánamo Bay concentration camp ensured that real-world concerns were at the heart of our religious preoccupations, and I provided a light dessert with a tour of the Republic of Heaven. Galston and Stewart laid on some innocent merriment by humiliating their guest speakers in a trivial pursuits quiz, where we all won the dunces' prizes we deserved. SnowStar takes religious literacy seriously but is good at factoring in some comic relief. And when the backdrop is Niagara Falls turning into the world's biggest icicle in a snowstorm, it makes for a memorable experience.

Canada: Riffat Hassan, Muslim feminist theologian and Mark Warren of Amnesty International

Next stop Sheffield, where we all wished we were at Leicester. The speakers were Keith Ward, Nigel Leaves and Don Cupitt, with a debate between Robert Forman and Peter Selby on the relative merits of free-ranging spirituality and institutional religion. Only in one or two workshops was there any attempt to relate radical theology to radical politics, which SoF continues to sidestep (but may not be able to avoid much longer if our new editor has her determined way).

And so to Australia and New Zealand. Sea of Faith in Australia (SoFiA) has existed in autonomous



David and Anthea Boulton visiting Hobbiton NZ

groups for several years, stretched across the country's vast distances. Perth, in the deep south-west and one of the most isolated major cities in the world, seemed a strange choice for their first national conference, especially as most SoF groups are concentrated a couple of thousand miles away along the east coast; but Nigel Leaves' Wollaston Theological College proved a fine venue, and Australians seemed happy to follow their song-lines across the continent. One determined SoFer from Brisbane drove all the way. It took him ten days there and ten days back. It's as if we held our annual conference not in Sheffield or Leicester but Moscow.

The theme was *Where to now with Religion?*, addressed by Don Cupitt (en route to Beijing to lecture the Chinese on non-realism!), Rachael Kohn, an ABC broadcaster, and myself. I had the good fortune prior to the conference to address SoF groups in Brisbane, the Gold Coast and Canberra (a joint meeting with Quakers and the Centre for Progressive Christianity), which gave me an exhilarating taste of the openness of mind with which Australian SoFers explore religious commitment in a secular age. Theosophists and charismatics shared their insights with dyed-in-the-wool atheists.

Finally, Cambridge, New Zealand, for the biggest of all the SoF conferences, some 240 strong. Noel Cheer, a guest at our own UK conference, was in charge, welcoming us with a Maori greeting which must have echoed across Middle Earth. Here too our theme was the future of religion and I found myself sharing the platform with Lloyd Geering, doyen of radical philosophers of religion, and a wonderfully courageous radical Muslim woman, Ghazala Anwar – the first Muslim I have met who sees Islam as a human creation, and who tells me she would like to start a Muslim SoF network. I hope it will be possible to invite her to one of our UK conferences soon to pursue this exciting idea.

I confess Anthea and I did steal away for a few hours to visit nearby Hobbiton, where we duly had ourselves photographed on the steps outside the round front door of Bag End. There's very little of the film set left to see, but the landscape was perfect for



Ghazala Anwar

the Shire, and we paid our homage to a non-real Gandalf the White, who died and rose again to vanquish the land of Mordor, where the shadows lie...

So what did I learn about the different networks? Mainly that they are not very different. New Zealand, from the start, chose not to adopt the UK's

'mission statement', opting for a broader commitment 'to facilitate the exploration of religious thought and expression from a non-dogmatic and human-oriented standpoint'; and SoFiA has followed much the same open line. But in practice any differences with the UK network seem negligible. SoF UK is open to all who 'sympathise with' the view that religion is a human creation, but in practice accepts members who want to explore it without committing to it. New Zealand and Australia don't commit to it, but their literature – excellent newsletters, run respectively by Noel Cheer and Greg Spearitt – is no less 'religious humanist' than that of the UK. Australia seems more open to 'new age' spiritualities than most of us are, New Zealand sees the UK network as skewed towards Anglicans and 'godless vicars'. Both share the UK's suspicion of linking radical theology with radical politics, terrified that to do so would provoke disharmony and splits.

But what the three networks, together with Westar and SnowStar, are doing together is refusing to leave religion to those who root it in another world, beyond the bright blue sky. We don't have all the answers, but

New Zealand: Noel Cheer welcomed us with a Maori greeting which must have echoed across Middle Earth.

we are not afraid to ask the questions. How long, then, before we organise the first SoF International conference? The Fifth International could, after all, be an idea whose time has come! And there's at least one line in the old *Internationale* which we could make our own: 'No saviour from on high delivers!'

David Boulton is a former editor of *sof* magazine. His latest book is *The Trouble with God: Religious Humanism and the Republic of Heaven* (O Books, Alresford, 2002).

I Don't Know

I don't know if God is or if God is not,
I don't know who you are,
I don't know who I am.

And yet,

I believe,

I love,

I live.

I don't know that anyone knows -

And yet,

I live and I love,

I work and I play,

I care and I give,

I find words and so find meaning,

And I find life.

I still don't know and will not know,

and yet I do.

James Findlay

James Findlay is a retired Minister of Religion, now more at home in the Unitarian Church.

BEYOND THE VEIL OF STONE

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Thinking about Fundamentalism

The phrase ‘fundamentalism is evil’, spoken from the platform of the 2004 SoF Conference in Sheffield, led Robin Smart to ponder a bit more about what we mean by fundamentalism.

In schooldays of more than fifty years ago, if I recall correctly, my learning paid little heed to the word fundamentalism other than it was used to describe those Christian Protestant churches in the United States of America which had to some extent during the 18th and 19th centuries broken away from the established churches in the ‘old European world’. These break-away churches, it seemed, were not only giving their branches of Christianity their own names and rigidly adhering to what one could describe as selected basic principles of the Christian Bible. Despite the universally accepted fact that the Bible contained some historical inaccuracies and some clear signs of contradiction, some of them were even proclaiming that the Bible was sacrosanct and unquestionable in every single word.

Some of the branches had been formed with a specific aim towards certain sections of the population, be it race or social position. Some came fairly close to asserting that Jesus was an American and some have magically received further editions of Holy Writ equal in importance to the Bible. Being humans of course some have fallen by the wayside, with all the evidence suggesting the branch of religion was merely an avenue to all or any of the delights of sex, money and power by the leaders.

Some came fairly close to asserting that Jesus was an American.

The 20th century also saw the increasing use of the word fundamentalism in respect of non-Christian churches. Rarely were media references to these groups a report of admiration. I do not think it would be unfair to the not very well informed man on the Clapham omnibus to say that he would describe a fundamentalist as one who ties dynamite round his chest and then enters the camp of his enemy before lighting the blue touch paper and not retiring. As regards Christian fundamentalists, I venture to suggest he would not be too positive in his comments but might stretch as far as to describe them as ‘a bunch of nutters’.

So, to get back to the question, what is a fundamentalist? The only embracing definition I have found is the definition decided at a conference of conservative Protestants in Niagara in 1895. They named their five points as:

1. The verbal inerrancy of Scripture
2. The Divinity of Christ
3. A substitutionary theory of the Atonement
4. The physical resurrection
5. The bodily return of Christ

Clearly this definition would not be universally applicable today. It refers only to members of the Christian religion and in no way embraces all those branches of Christianity that nowadays have earned themselves the title of fundamentalists or the almost indefinable area loosely referred to as Evangelical – countless independent churches which are self-appointed and autonomous. As to fundamentalism in religions other than Christianity, all the main religions of the world have, like Christianity, countless branches, with some branches despising another branch with the same intensity that one branch of Christianity will despise certain other branches. So where do we go from here? The answer seems to be a bit of lateral thinking and to formulate a definition which does not name any religion at all but rather looks at the human actions involved, to assess what by any reasonable judgement would be considered unacceptable in society.

So let us forget anything about things like believing in the inerrancy of any particular scripture or a belief that by singing a lullaby to a carrot on Tuesday nights you would upon death enter paradise, and put forward the proposition that fundamentalism is:

1. Any religious association that will jointly or singularly take any action to the prejudice of any member of that association who explores, associates with or joins any other religious association.
2. Any religious association that will jointly or singularly use either physical, economic, or mental coercion upon any person or persons to join their association.
3. Any religious association that will jointly or singularly carry out any acts to the physical, economic or mental prejudice of any other association or member of such an association for whatever reason, except in the course of lawful defence to a previous unlawful attack.

I cannot pretend that this definition is the best one could ever formulate. However it is a start and I firmly believe it is the correct approach to making a definition. Yes, number 3 leaves plenty of scope for argument and possibly, to a lesser degree, both 1 and 2. However there are a lot more (probably all of them) intelligent people than I in the Sea of Faith and presumably the editor is hoping for a sackful of letters taking the definition further.

A phrase spoken from the platform at the 2004 Sheffield conference was ‘fundamentalism is evil’. I cannot be certain that I was the first person vigorously to nod agreement for when I had finished my nod a glance around the hall appeared to endorse my agreement. I think I also heard more than a few ‘hear hears’. Of one thing is certain, from which we cannot back down: we cannot believe that ‘fundamentalism is evil’ until each and every one of us that says it, knows what we are talking about.

Robin Smart is a member of SoF Steering Committee.

Alison McRobb reviews

Honest to God: Forty Years On

edited by Colin Slee

SCM press. 2004. 288 pp. £16.99. ISBN 0334029392

Honestly – how many people out there are likely to be excited by this title? As many as managed to sustain interest four decades ago in *The Honest to God Debate*? Perhaps, but one suspects that a current Alpha Course advert on the back of a bus might have more going for it. It was a worthy motive – to assess Christian theology's lasting debt to John Robinson – that inspired the 'retrospective' conference as a clergy training day in March 2003 in Southwark Cathedral, where, by all accounts, the delivery of worthy papers from worthy labourers in the vineyard was genuinely appreciated by the three-line-whipped audience. The conference papers here in their published form will prove invaluable to PhD students researching the era of that notorious Bishop of Woolwich and his brush with Lady Chatterley (Lady Who?), but what do they hold for the wider church-watching public?

The younger generation of clergy in Southwark on the conference day would certainly have picked up from their elders the sense of excitement and purpose which powered the circles of priests, workers and worker-priests revolving around the revered Mervyn Stockwood. How Robinson made a role for himself as priest, academic, writer and Bishop in that milieu is variously explained by the speakers. Arguably nothing like that energy has been generated in the C of E since, certainly not in the stagnant Decade of Evangelism. In his Foreword, Richard Cheetham, Bishop of Kingston, refers to that 'vision and inspiration' reflected in the conference papers, but also to the 'palpable sense of disappointment' that the 'heady hopes' of the 1960s 'had not been realised as many would have wished'.

All the speakers do well on retrospective analysis. Because it's all so long ago (isn't it?) they needed to set the

60s scene; but the recurring 'how I felt when I first read *Honest to God*' recalls 'how I felt when I first read *Lady Chatterley's Lover*'. In other words, it's a bit adolescent. Then it becomes a bit cosy and collegiate. How did people feel, outside the hallowed circles of Southwark and Cambridge? Well, the once-born were wide-eyed and liberated, and the sophisticated wondered what all the fuss was about. The tortured presumably felt even more tortured, and the disgusted, like our friend's mother, wrote letters to the Bishop personally, saying how disgusted they were. Plus ça change . . .

On one prediction the commentators agree: that his conclusions, far from being too radical, 'erred in not being radical enough'. Of the contributors Martyn Percy is lucid and readable as always and the late Christopher Ryan's 'The Language of Theism' is thoughtful. Mindful of the conference's aim, Don Cupitt calls for 'reform and renewal'. He finds the root of today's problems with God-talk in the ambiguities which Robinson revealed but 'hid behind' because no solution presented itself at that time.

And now? 'Our task is to move forward in the adventure', says Colin Slee in his Introduction. Readers of this book may not see the 'mighty tortoise' moving adventurously or at all, but Slee himself provides some dynamite: he gets to say his piece on Jeffrey John – and it's well said.

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I read the quote from Mary Wollstonecraft on the back page of *sof*. 69 and was reminded of a series of theology lectures at Wells which, due to the kindness of others, I was able to attend last year. The general theme of the lectures was to establish a connection between faith and the imagination. An art historian, a musician and a poet, as well as a bishop and a novelist were among the contributors. The point they all made, in one way or another, was that faith could be, and should be, illuminated by the imagination and that such illumination could be expressed through music, literature (including poetry) and the arts in general.

I felt instinctively that this was right, but I was a little puzzled that none of the speakers I heard took the next, to me, most obvious step that religious faith itself is a product of the human imagination. The wide selection of religious beliefs which have existed from the earliest times, and those which exist today are, in my view, the result of

human reflection on experience. How else could such a variety be manifest? There is no thought but human thought and we cannot step beyond the boundaries of what can be conceived. Wittgenstein, a philosopher of the 20th century, once said that 'the limits of my language are the limits of my world'. The imagination, however wild and vivid, is confined to what is humanly conceivable and language is the framework of thought. Religion therefore, is a product of experience and our language limits what we say about it.

Another thing which puzzled me was that the subjects selected to show how faith could be illuminated by the broader field of human experience, were all connected with, and confined to, the arts. For more than a hundred years many people have perceived there to be a conflict between science and religion, yet it would seem to me that, if anything provided a common ground between the two it would be their mutual reliance upon the imagination. It took, after all, a powerful imagination on the part of Galileo to assert that the Earth moved, and for Einstein to conceive of Relativity.

Nearer home we might ask what feats of the imagination will have to be taken by the Church as a whole if it is to survive much into the present century.

John Coombes
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Mayday Notes

Under the Greenwood Tree

'Consider how rarely Shakespeare's characters pay close attention to their physical environment,' says Don Cupitt in *Life, Life*. True to his non-realist principles, he does not mention any particular play. But what he says about Shakespeare's characters in general is not true. There is only room here to give a few examples. First, King Lear in the storm (III.2):

Blow winds, and crack your cheeks; rage, blow
you cataracts, and hurricanoes spout,
till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks,
you sulphurous and thought-executing fires,
vaunt couriers of oak-cleaving thunderbolts
sing me my white head.

Lear goes on to say the storm is not as unkind as his daughters have been. He is reluctant to be led indoors because: 'this tempest will not give me leave to ponder on things would hurt me more.' The storm is the central image and the dark heart of the play.

Macbeth meets the witches on a blasted heath. 'So fair and foul a day I have not seen,' he says. When they have incited his ambition with their alluring prophecies – 'blasted' his life – he asks them (I.3):

Say from whence
you owe this strange intelligence or why
upon this blasted heath you stop our way
with such prophetic greeting?

When Macbeth arrives *home* he has a coded conversation with his wife. He tells her, 'My dearest love, Duncan comes here tonight.' She asks: 'And when goes hence?' Macbeth answers: 'Tomorrow as he purposes.' They agree that he shall never leave the castle. King Duncan arrives and praises the castle's environment (I.6):

This castle hath a pleasant seat; the air
nimble and sweetly recommends itself.

Macbeth in his own castle is well aware that killing his king is an even more heinous crime when he is his host (I.7):

He's here in double trust:
First, as I am his kinsman and his subject –
strong both against the deed; then as his host,
who should against his murderer shut the door,
not bear the knife myself.

In *Romeo and Juliet* the characters' awareness of the grim mausoleum, in which Juliet lies still in all her beauty, adds greatly to the climax of the play. Romeo breaking into the tomb says (V.3):

Thou detestable maw, thou womb of death,
gorged with the dearest morsel of the earth,
thus I enforce thy rotten jaws to open.

In *The Winter's Tale* Perdita describes what grows in every season in her cottage garden – among the spring flowers she would like to give her love Florizel: 'daffodils/ that come before the swallow dares and take/ the winds of March with beauty'. She and the disguised King Polixines discuss grafting, which she disapproves of and he, ironically in the circumstances, recommends. When he

reveals himself and orders his son, her Florizel, not to see her any more because she is a mere shepherdess, then stalks off, she reflects (IV.4):

I was not much afear'd: for once or twice
I was about to speak, and tell him plainly
the self-same Sun, that shines upon his Court,
hides not his visage from our cottage, but
looks on alike.

The Forest itself is one of the main themes of *As You Like It*. In contrast to the violent hatreds of the Court in Act I, Act II opens with the banished Duke enthusing at length about life in the Forest (II.1), which Amiens praises in his song (II.5):

Under the greenwood tree,
who loves to lie with me,
and turn his merry note
unto the sweet bird's throat,
come hither, come hither, come hither.
Here shall he see
no enemy
but winter and rough weather.

The characters continually talk about the Forest, often contrasting it with the Court. The shepherd Corin argues with Touchstone (III.2):

Those that are good manners at the court are as ridiculous in the country as the behaviour of the country is most mockable at the court. You told me you salute not at the court but you kiss your hands: that courtesy would be uncleanly if courtiers were shepherds.

'Instance,' demands Touchstone. Corin replies:

Why, we are still handling our ewes and their fells, you know, are greasy.

Shakespeare's characters, says Cupitt, talk non-stop. Of course they do, they are, after all in a *play*. They talk for all sorts of reasons, one being to report what has happened and advance the action of the play. They talk about their physical environment, giving it 'a local habitation and a name' so that the audience can 'see' it. As Shakespeare's plays do not obey the requirement of the 'classical unities' that all the action should happen in one place, the characters will mention or describe a change of scene for the audience – this is not film or television. Queen Gertrude's account of Ophelia's drowning 'with fantastic garlands' (*Hamlet* IV.7) both reports the event and describes the 'weeping brook'. Hamlet, of course, talks non-stop and fails to act, but that's his *problem*.

Drawing of May tree in blossom is by Anne Mieke Lumsden.



Behzti (Dishonour)

Cicely Herbert discusses the Sikh playwright Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's play *Behzti*, whose production at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre was cancelled following violent protests.



It was my intention to review the Birmingham Repertory Theatre's production of *Behzti* but the run of the play was cancelled following violent protest by angered members of the Sikh community. At the time of writing discussions are in progress to find an alternative venue.

Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti is a Sikh playwright whose first stage play *Behsharam* (*Shameless*) broke box office records when it was staged in 2001. Her TV work includes the writing of several episodes of *East Enders*. She has a rich talent for comedy and a powerful sense of what will work in a theatre. She also has something important to say about the abuse that so often occurs when people in a position of trust (most often men) have authority over vulnerable members of society. Evidence of widespread betrayal of that trust within religious establishments has been brought to light with the recent disclosure of institutionalised abuse of young people in the Catholic Church. Human beings, alas, are not always able to live up to great ideals and it is in its exposure of the way those ideals can sometimes become corrupted that the staging of *Behzti* has caused an uproar in the Sikh community.

Like many people in Britain I have shamefully little knowledge of the Sikh religion and if no other good comes from the current debate, at least, by trying to understand the distress caused to Sikhs by this play we will have learned something. Sikhism is a comparatively new and progressive religion founded by the mystic Guru Nanak, born in 1469, who believed that God is found within oneself. Sikhs reject the adherence to rituals such as fasting and idolatry and believe in the finest of human qualities – compassion, honesty, generosity and patience. A good family life is the bedrock of Sikh belief. There are Gurus but no priests in Sikhism and people of all religious faiths are welcomed to the Gurdwara, the holy temple, where there is always a communal kitchen providing food for any visitor of whatever belief, thus underlining the Sikh principles of service and equality.

The important question of whether a stage setting that represents the Holy Temple can be described as holy if it does not contain the spirit of the holy book *Guru Granth Sahib*, was raised in the letters page of the *Guardian* (18/1/05). The script of the play is prefaced by Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's foreword which avers: 'Truth is everything in Sikhism, the truth of action, the truth of an individual, God's truth.' One can therefore assume that the controversial plot – that of a dissolute Elder in charge of the restoration of the temple, who sexually abuses women and who had a relationship with a married man driven by shame to commit suicide after their affair was uncovered – must be a version of the truth as she finds it. *Behzti* is a brave play, one which was always likely to cause cries of outrage within a devout community, and as such it deserves to be seen. The suggestion that the setting of the main action should be changed from the Gurdwara to a community centre is to miss the point entirely and was rightly rejected by the author and the production team. It should also be pointed out that the most controversial aspects of the play, (off-stage scenes of rape and murder), do not take place in the setting of the sacred area of the temple but in the administrative rooms – an office and the kitchen.

The theatre is a powerful medium and this is an important moment in its history for anyone who cares about it. (The furore caused by the televising of the National Theatre's production of *Jerry Springer – the Opera* provides another example of the strength of feeling such matters still arouse.)

Censorship is rarely, if ever, acceptable in our society and a young woman's life is now under threat. The Commission for Racial Equality has issued a statement:

We support the right to protest about a work of art or a play that may offend. In this case we fully understand the hurt that may have been caused to some Sikhs by the production. However, it is unacceptable to demand that the author or playwright should edit their work or that the play should be banned. This playwright – a Sikh herself – has a story to tell. She should be heard, and anyone who chooses to see the play should be free to form their own judgements... The CRE will be holding a *summit* in the new year for all stakeholders. All faith groups including Sikhs, Christians and Muslims etc., will be invited, along with theatre-goers, artists, playwrights, and authors to give them an opportunity to discuss these issues and how they should deal with religious differences.

Behzti is published by Oberon Modern Plays (www.oberonbooks.com)

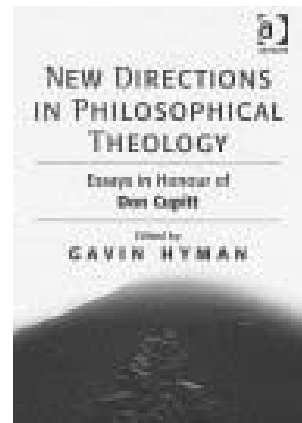
Don Deserves Better!

Nigel Leaves reviews

New Directions in Philosophical Theology: Essays in Honour of Don Cupitt

edited by Gavin Hyman

Ashgate. 2004. 224 pages. £47.50. ISBN 0754650618



reviews

Don Cupitt was once described as 'a retired Cambridge don, with many unmistakable characteristics of a retired Cambridge don, rooted in English philosophy and that pleasant way of life.' My second book on the writings of Cupitt, *Surfing on the Sea of Faith* (forthcoming from Polebridge Press), attempts in part to dispel that portrayal. Unfortunately, this collection of essays edited by Gavin Hyman in honour of Don Cupitt reinforces that misleading description in four ways.

First, all the essays are written by British academics who were (or still are) at Cambridge University, most of them former students of Don Cupitt. Second, all the contributors (except for Linda Woodhead) actually oppose the direction that Don Cupitt has taken; indeed most of the writers clearly espouse theological realism. Third, this is an academic tome written in such dense prose (again Linda Woodhead is the exception) that it will be beyond the grasp of the general reader. Fourth, the price tag of £47.50 will condemn it to the restricted venue of University libraries.

This is quite contrary to the agenda set by Don Cupitt in his numerous books, articles and two TV series. Not only has his aim always been to cross the alleged gap between the Academy and the general public, but lately he has come to despair of the ability of theological professionals to understand the theology inherent in ordinary language. His purpose has been to explore non-realist readings of Christian doctrine and find new ways of religious being. He has burst out of the Academy to join those who are struggling to find religious purpose and meaning in an increasingly conservative Church. He has joined forces with religious radicals in the USA, Canada, New Zealand, Australia and elsewhere. He does not lecture from an ivory tower, but calls from a hill-top for all to hear. The Sea of Faith Networks across the globe are testament to his worldwide appeal.

This *Festschrift* for Don Cupitt would have been more appealing if it had included contributions from those who are on the radical edge of both the Academy and the Church, and for whom his message is ground-breaking – Lloyd Geering, John Shelby Spong, Robert Funk, David A. Hart, and Scott Cowdell. Such appreciative testimony would not only have balanced the record but would also have dispelled the myth that Cupitt's primary audience is both British and Academia.

The fundamental problem with these essays (apart from their obscurity) is that nearly all their authors use Cupitt as a foil for their own affirmations of the existence of something/someone more 'out there' than Cupitt is prepared to admit. They all are thankful that Cupitt has outlined the difficulty of believing in God, but they refuse to accept that this might result in non-realism. Time and time again in these essays one reads such phrases as 'this does not require non-realism' or 'Don and I differ theologically' or 'I do not follow him much of the way.' The book should be subtitled, *Believing in God and not quite agreeing with Don Cupitt*. One senses a concerted reticence to admit (or at least to acknowledge) that Don might actually be right. The contributors have either espoused the theological outlook of the 'early Cupitt' of *Christ and the Hiddenness of God* (1971) and are thus locked into negative theology and the apophatic way, or are peddlers of 'radical orthodoxy.' One also has a sense that some are prudent holders of important academic and Church positions and so they are afraid to 'come out.'

I really wanted to find something positive to say about these essays. Don Cupitt deserves to be honoured. In the end one is grateful for an excellent introduction which gives a good summary of the essays, a fine bibliography and a refreshingly comprehensible essay by Linda Woodhead on 'theology and the trouble it's in!' For the rest buy yourself a good theological dictionary, enrol in a Master's Course in philosophical theology, and you might at last benefit from the expenditure of your hard-earned cash.

Perhaps we in Sea of Faith will find this lamentably pedantic and one-sided anthology a compelling reason to honour Don by producing a more honest and user-friendly *Festschrift*. Surely someone ought to.

Nigel Leaves lives in Perth, Western Australia. Recent publications are *Odyssey on the Sea of Faith* (Polebridge Press, USA, 2004), with *Surfing on the Sea of Faith* forthcoming from Polebridge Press.

Anne Ashworth reviews

Downward Mobility

by Aileen La Tourette

Headland Publications. 2004. 91pp. £7.50. ISBN 1902096843

One of the poems in Aileen La Tourette's collection is entitled *Love*, and in a sense most of the book is about love: love between lovers, love between generations in the family, a love that can also be sharp as a knife, cold as snow. Another title is *Irony*, and there is plenty of that too. Both poems are evocations of her mother – ironing, in the case of *Irony*. Aileen La Tourette senior, to whom many of these poems refer, emerges for the reader as a complex and evidently unforgettable personality. She was a French American Catholic, and it is from that Catholicism that Aileen the younger later emerged, to become a long-time Sea of Faith-er. An image of that abandoned faith is a Lady Well: 'the stone lid's cracked, sunken, the old well invisible.'

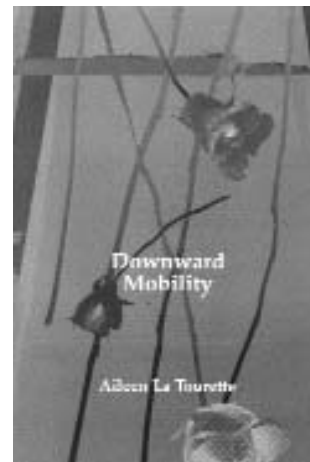
There is no theologising here: this is a book of poetry. Yet SoF readers – especially those suffering from but enriched by a Catholic upbringing – will pick up the still-visible religious references. These can be shocking, as in *Parthenogenesis* where the Virgin is compared to parthenogenetic turkeys, or *You*, where a first sex act reminds the poet of her first communion, where the wafer stuck to her palate:

Communion was a loneliness you learned.
Sex seemed the same, a solitude that burned...
knowing you had to transubstantiate
the sticky mess back into something huge,
or let the devil win and lose your faith...
Religion played a bigger part than you
could ever guess...

Perhaps a typical lapsed-Catholic comment is 'we can't face the sacred without the tacky' from which it follows, as the poet observes elsewhere, 'love's not for the squeamish.' (Indeed a few of these pieces are not for the squeamish either.) Catholic imagery recurs: a small son's Robin cape is worn 'solemnly as a priest/ donning a red chasuble for the beginning, Christmas'. In truth La Tourette uses simile and metaphor with prodigality, as though tossing abundant seed corn. Spot no less than five images in four short lines from a poem about rain:

Rain scratches like needles on vinyl,
lowers curtains glistening like beads,
takes up my quests like a rosary,
an abacus of loss too fast for me.

Those lines are from the eponymous *Downward Mobility*. The message of falling rain is of 'a million blunt arrows pointing to our downward mobility'. In a note on the cover, the poet explains the phrase as 'a kind of emotional suppleness'. It is this emotional suppleness which adds strength and texture to the



reviews

elegiac poems for her deceased parents, the tender ones for young sons. ('Mothers pulse in us', she suggests, in ways which make for both upward and downward mobility.) It is the very backbone of the final, powerful piece, *The Twins*. Here there are two speakers, a man about to jump from a Twin Tower on September 11th, and his wife speaking from elsewhere, ending poignantly 'we were downwardly mobile, all the time.'

The Twins is one of three substantial sequences of linked sonnets, crafted with great skill. Clearly this is a poet who enjoys strict forms. The unusual *ghazal*, a form used in Arabic love poetry, is here a vehicle for elegies for her mother. And don't be misled: when La Tourette employs free verse she is no less a skilful wordsmith. Her sound effects are worth pausing over: internal rhyme, assonance and consonance, words to savour on the tongue:

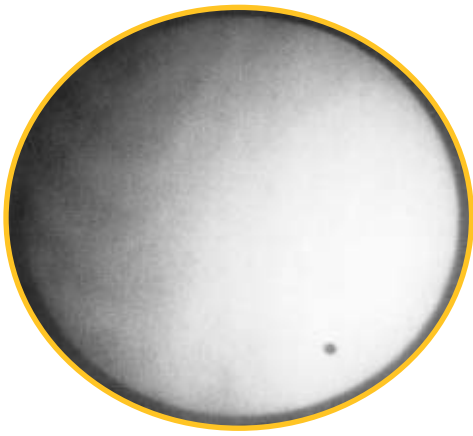
He played a green weed
like a whistle, picked
milkweed to feel it trickle,
shamrocks to gamble.

More difficult for the reader are Aileen's characteristic long sentences, which writhe their way like snakes down a board, forcing the reader to leap lines, spaces, stanzas. I counted one sentence which stretches to thirty-one lines (*Staking Claims*). A reviewer can only advise: take a deep breath, keep head above water, it's worth the effort.

Is this a distinctively American voice? Not really, but there are of course American references. Aileen was brought up in New Jersey, and in a poem addressed to T.S. Eliot 'salutes a native of St Louis'. Like Eliot, she has been many years in England, but is aware of memories:

as if I'd packed the Bronx in what
my grandmother called a valise,
hailed it across the ocean.

I'm glad she came.



Transit of Venus 2004

Duccio's Annunciation

And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be. – LUKE 1:29

I step back, submissive to the times,
hold a veil over my heart
ready to wait two thousand years

before return to Assumption.
Gabriel enters my womb
through his staff and the lilies

that were once mine.
His hand bestows benediction
onto me who am Benediction.

I am the Triple Goddess.
Am Baalat and Mariamne
whose altars Yahveh smashed.

Now I become the Gate of Heaven,
the Interceder,
three Marys at the foot of the cross.

Humility, Virginitly, Obedience
conceal I am the Giver of Life,
the Great Love that is creation.

Adele Davide

This poem is taken from Adele Davide's most recent collection *The Moon's Song* (Katabasis, 2001).

Goddesses

They belong to their faces
as only those
who've become the landscape of their skins,
belong.

They belong to their breasts,
reach casually into their bra's,
feed peevish businessmen, a dying child,
a distempered dog, headmistresses,
the odd dictator.

They are a basin of brown eggs or milk,
never the demand.

Often asked for forgiveness
or other impossible things,
they look at penitents
and petitioners steadily,
as a gift.

No return is asked
or expected.

They belong to their bellies,
relish a digestif of sly chuckles,
and fat peals of laughter,
dirty as soapsuds when a job is done.
Appetite, old friend, is known
biblically,
met in the pleasure of pleasing.

They belong to their wombs
only as those who are sure
the seed case is not the seed
and the root hair not the soil
belong.

Ordinary as a Tesco tillroll,
they belong to their deaths
as utterly as fading comes
and one collapsing star feeds another.

Fortunately,
there are very many more of them
than you think.

Kate Foley

Kate Foley lives in Amsterdam. Her latest poetry collection is *Laughter from the Hive* (Shoestring Press, Beeston, Notts., 2004).

‘This night of Love
So filled with longing
It contracts my heart
Makes a glass thirsty
For the ruby of your
Wine...’

*13th century Persian
poet Rumi.
Margaret Ogden
writes about Rumi and
dancing in What It Is to
Be Human on page 5.*



IS THE USA PLANNING TO ATTACK IRAN NEXT?