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Conference Issue

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Rebuilt bridge in Mostar (Bosnia-Herzegovina), linking the Muslim and Croat parts of the city. Photograph by Cicely Herbert, July 2004.

Note on sof

To avoid confusion SoF (roman upper and lower case) is used to refer to the Sea of Faith Network and **sof** (lower case italics) to the magazine.

sof is the root of the Greek word for wisdom: *sofia*; wise: *sofe* (f), *sofos* (m). It is in the English word *philosophical*. **sof** magazine does not think wisdom is dispensed supernaturally from on high, but that it can only be sought by humans at home on Earth. **sof** is for diggers and seekers; it is radical, rooting for wisdom down to earth. As **sof** is for a world with room for many worlds, printed below are the Chinese characters meaning 'root of wisdom':

慧根

Conference Issue

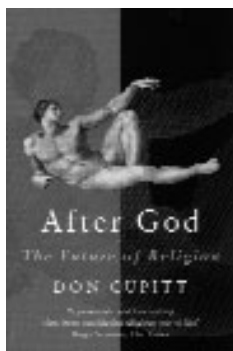
The theme of SoF's Annual Conference this year was 'Beyond Good and Evil: The Challenge of Reconciliation'.

At the Conference AGM the motion to change the magazine's name to *sofia* was defeated, but only just. It was a close thing. As there was not enough time for discussion, I'll propose the name *sofia* again next year; everyone I show the magazine to says it makes more sense. Meanwhile, *sof* or *sofia*, I love the magazine, which has no lack of talent to draw on. As Blake said, 'energy is eternal delight' and I'll continue to put my energy into making it as good as I can. At the Conference I met interesting, kind and sensible people and some possible new writers. And readers, please continue to send in ideas for articles and reviews, as well as letters.

At the Conference. I enjoyed listening to the three highly individual talks from our distinguished speakers,

Mary Midgley, Richard Holloway and Don Cupitt. I am still thinking about what they said. Like Don, one of my favourite poets is the early Wordsworth and, to quote from his *Tintern Abbey*, I know I was not the only one to come away from the talks 'with pleasing thoughts/ that in this moment there is life and food/ for future years.'

All three talks are printed in this packed Conference issue of the magazine, as well as items from Richard Holloway's Liturgy and Rob Wheeler's Closing Session, so that's enough of an editorial and over to them.



Don Cupitt was born in 1934 and educated at Charterhouse (where he was a Foundation Scholar), Trinity Hall, Cambridge (where he was an Exhibitioner), and Westcott House, Cambridge. He studied successively Natural Sciences, Theology, and the Philosophy of Religion. In 1959 he was ordained deacon in the Church of England (priest 1960), and served a three-year curacy in industrial Lancashire. In 1962 he returned to Cambridge as Vice-Principal of Westcott House, and then in late 1965 he was elected Fellow and Dean of Emmanuel College, where he has remained ever since. Don Cupitt is married to a potter, and they have three children. His most recent book, *The Way to Happiness* (Polegate Press, 2005), was reviewed in *sof* 72.



Mary Midgley, née Scrutton, born in 1919, was the daughter of the chaplain at King's College Cambridge and was educated at Downe House School (originally based in the former home of Charles Darwin) and Somerville College Oxford, where she was a scholar. Now retired from a professorship at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, she is known for her works on religion, science and ethics. She wrote her first book, *Beast and Man*, at the age of 56. Her other titles include *Wickedness, Science and Poetry, Heart and Mind* and her most recent book, *The Myths We Live By* (Routledge, 2004), was reviewed in *sof* 71.



Richard Holloway was born to poor working-class parents – his father was a dyemaker – in the West of Scotland. He joined a strict Anglican order when he was 14. His first parish as an Episcopalian priest was in the Gorbals. He met his wife, Jean, while doing postgraduate study in New York. He has two daughters – one a teacher, one in publishing – and a son who is a carpenter. He became Bishop of Edinburgh in 1986, and the Primus of the Scottish Episcopalian Church in 1992; he retired last year. Holloway has served on the Commission for Human Fertility and Embryology and the Broadcasting Commission, and is a regular BBC broadcaster. His most recent book *Looking in the Distance* (Canongate, Edinburgh 2004), was reviewed in *sof* 69.

The Ethics of Value-Creation



Don Cupitt argues that the true conquest of evil and nihilism is simply the practice of magnanimity.

In about the year 1960, as a young curate in a South Lancashire parish, I was privileged to witness what may have been one of the last great examples of a public death, 'a good death' in the grand manner.¹ The person in question was a redoubtable old matriarch of the parish, whose entire descent-group of children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren used to assemble for lunch at her house every Sunday. Now in her late eighties, she had taken to her bed and was known to be dying. Her last important act was to summon all her ancient enemies – and they were very numerous – to her bedside and forgive them all unconditionally. It was hardly an occasion on which her enemies could argue back at her. They had no alternative but to accept her generous forgiveness of their supposed sins and slink silently away, eternally one-down. Meanwhile the old lady went off to join the Church Triumphant, eternally one-up on all her foes. They could not retaliate now. She had given checkmate, and the blame game was over. She was the victor; hers was the crown of life. That was how a Christian should die – understanding the logic of the blame game so well as to make quite sure that you die in the odour of sanctity and feeling really good, while at the same time you have ensured that everyone else is left behind feeling really bad, forever indebted to you and morally inferior.

Traditional ideas of forgiveness and reconciliation always involve a power struggle.

Such is the logic of the traditional ideas of forgiveness and reconciliation. They always involve a power-struggle: somebody always comes out on top. You may say that religious people are people who are smart enough to know that in the long run it is the *moral* advantage that counts for most, and so are careful to be sure that they always have it. And if the old lady's enemies felt annoyed that she had outmanoeuvred them, then it could always be pointed out to them that they too could play the same trick when their own last days came. And is it not common knowledge that everywhere people *do* in fact battle for the moral high ground, in a way that ensures that the dead are always morally superior to the living, as women are morally superior to men and

as respectable and well-housed people are superior to those who are down and out?

The assumptions behind my example are now becoming clear. Why is it so important to die 'in a state of Grace'? Because the whole of our human life is spent in making preparations for a great court case after we die, at which our eternal destiny will be decided. We've got to ensure that our accounts are fully prepared, ready for audit, and that our reputations are spotless. We cannot afford to have any skeletons in our closets, because the soul at our Last Assize will be in the same sort of position as the defendant in a great libel case. We need to look and to be *really fragrant*.

But why this conception of human life, and how we should spend it? Because at the time when our religious traditions were taking shape the first legal systems were being graven on stones and codified in books. It was inevitable that thinking about morality should come to be saturated in legal metaphors. The Universe was modelled on the state, and God was its absolute Monarch. He promulgated both the laws of Nature, and also the Moral Law that governs the actions of all rational creatures. Irrational creatures obey the natural law by physical necessitation. Rational creatures are morally necessitated to obey the moral law, and are given consciences to tell them so. In addition, it was widely believed that there is at least a partial enforcement of the moral law by God even during this life, which functions to remind us of the Final Accounting that still lies ahead of us. Prudence pays; honesty is even in purely this-worldly terms already the best policy. Thus the Psalmist declares confidently:

I have been young, and now am old;
yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken
or his children begging bread.²

This claim, that human life is here and now already subject to a Moral Providence that will ultimately (and indeed, *literally*) have the Last Word, could still be made seriously in the eighteenth century by the celebrated Anglican apologist, Bishop Joseph Butler.³

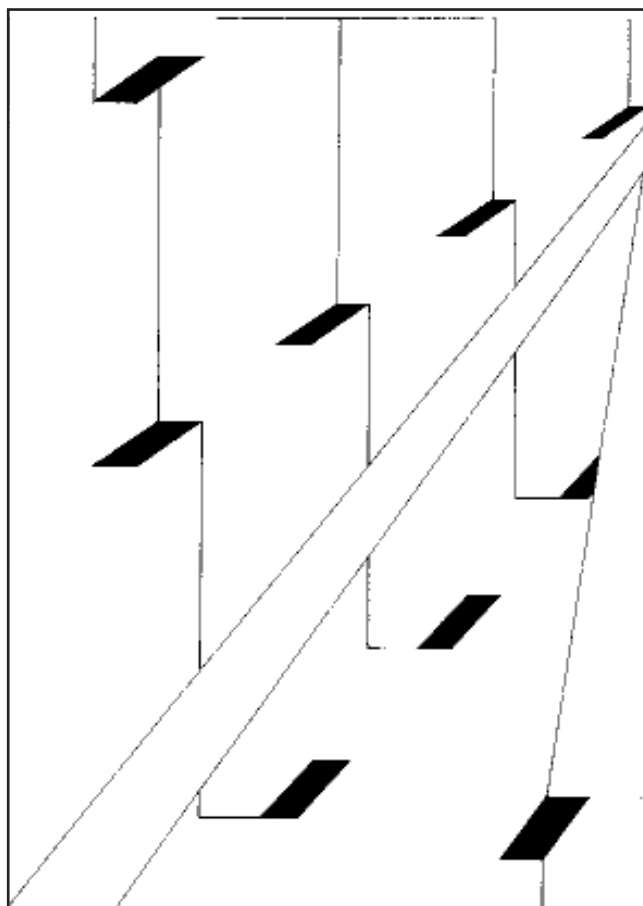
To take another and much less edifying example, consider the fierce struggle for power that has dominated the life of Anglicans and others in recent decades. The Conservative Evangelicals have been playing a part rather like that of Militant and other

near-Trotskyite 'entryists' in the Labour Party. They have been battling to get in and take over, and have done so by ceaselessly claiming sole legitimacy for themselves. As the hard Left claim to be the only real socialists, so the Evangelicals are in the habit of using language designed to get us all into the way of assuming that *they* are the only true Christians, and even the only true *Anglicans*. This is odd, because the Church of England is a rather medieval type of 'broad' folk-church, a 'school for sinners', episcopally governed and (since the Reformation) basically Lutheran. There could hardly be a Church less suitable for the Evangelicals, with their strange mixture of pop Calvinism and campfire revivalism. They notoriously have no respect at all for the authority of bishops, so why do they so much want to *be* bishops?

In the British situation, the answer is of course that the Evangelicals greatly covet the historic social standing and wealth of the Church of England (or what's left of it), and they are willing to play any card that will give them an advantage in their struggles for power. Homosexuality is currently proving just the right issue for them. In other areas they will play other cards, for example, by exploiting popular anxieties about medical research.

Enough. In religion there is very often a struggle for power between different factions or sects, and we seem always to find the high ground occupied by those who have most successfully appropriated to themselves the language of legitimacy. They are the Orthodox, the traditionalists, the real thing: the ones who believe what has always been believed. In Judaism, modernisers have struggled to find a word that will give them some leverage against the Orthodox majority. Different groups have called themselves Liberal, Reformed, Progressive and even 'Conservative' – but to no avail. The Orthodox remain in the saddle. Similarly in Islam the Sunnis always come first, and the Shias and all the other smaller groups will always be second.

Both within the Churches and in the larger world outside them, what is rather optimistically called 'morality' plays a prominent part in battles for social prestige and authority. Within the Churches, especially in rural areas, the remaining faithful are all too often people whose religion and morality functions to make their armoured self-satisfaction still more impenetrable. Outside the Churches, everyone will have noticed that morality is nearly always preached downwards. Those who are relatively more old, rich and socially secure deliver moral lectures to those who are younger, poorer and less long-resident. The old, rich and powerful not only always assume their own moral superiority; they keep on and on reminding us of it. Moral talk rarely has much effect upon its audience, because its real purpose is to make the *speaker* feel even more self-satisfied. Both in religion and in ethics, people's biggest need is for a strong subjective assurance of moral justification or legitimacy. In religion I want to be really sure that I



Scala Coelestis by Christopher Truman

am one of God's Elect, and in morality I want to be quite sure that *my* morality is the only really *moral* morality; that I really am *better* than my neighbour.

Our discussion so far indicates what Nietzsche meant by using the phrase 'beyond good and evil'. He rightly thought that our moral discourse is full of false beliefs, illusions, awkward leftovers from the past, and dirty tricks. Morality is, very often, not something ultimate in our lives, but a fig leaf; a tool in our power-games, as the playwright Bernard Shaw used to say so clearly through his plays. That is why the whole subject of moral philosophy has become a morass, so difficult that it is one of the least-developed and most obscure territories in the whole of philosophy. By urging us to take up a standpoint 'beyond good and evil', Nietzsche is saying that we should look at the various competing human moralities as if from outside, and in a cool and critical spirit. We should question the morality of morality. What good does it do? Will these teachings really help us to conduct our common life more successfully? Does our morality really succeed in making our life seem to us more worthwhile?

Good questions; and they are the reason why over the past decades I have tried to work out a philosophy of my own that gives answers to them. I'll give a very brief sketch of a few of my ideas, and you may find them very odd: but you must remember that I find all the more orthodox moralities and justifications of morality to be unbearably obscure,

and often repulsive. I have felt that I must be as radical in ethics as I notoriously am in doctrine. Sorry!

First, I must briefly mention a second large background fact. Moral discourse in our tradition has not only been heavily influenced by legal metaphors; it has also been much influenced by Jewish and Christian apocalyptic myths, which have pictured the world and our life in terms of a cosmic struggle between the Principles of Good and Evil. The Christian was a soldier, and the Church on earth was 'Militant'. (It was 'Expectant' in Purgatory and, as we saw earlier, 'Triumphant' in Heaven.) The persistence of this mythology still to this day encourages moral realism and moral dualism, as when people focus upon an Evil Empire out there, an enemy to confront that gives purpose to their lives. 'We are the good people, who with God's help will struggle against this evil Power and will prevail'. But what we observers notice is that where this style of thinking is influential morality tends to be led by an urgent (and very expensive) quest to identify, hunt down and destroy 'evil'. Reactive, negative emotions become very prominent, and the typical moralist is the crusader, the witch hunter, the purity campaigner, and the embittered victim.

Value every aspect of the body, this life, each person and this world as highly as is self-consistently possible.

My own account does not contain anything of that kind, because I have been attempting to describe a purely-affirmative ethics of value that simply does without ideas of sin, evil, warfare, punishment, vindication and so on. I have felt that above all I must try to cut out of my ethics all the stuff that poisons the soul.⁴

Why? Because modern ethics is no longer a struggle to appear righteous in the eyes of one's neighbours, and no longer a cosmic battle against evil supernatural Powers. It is first and foremost a struggle for *value*, a struggle against nihilism, a struggle against the pervasive feeling that our life is worthless, meaningless, brief and insignificant. The first task of ethics today is to make life feel worth living. Our ethics then must be rooted in our own being as biological organisms who are perpetually appetitive, questing, with a strong appetite for experience and an urgent interest in life. In us emotion flows all the time, and reacts at once and very sensitively to everything we come across. We are not pure *thinkers* at all: on the contrary, our first response to each thing is a very delicately-attuned feeling-response, favourable or unfavourable. And when language enters; when we classify and interpret our experience by putting it into words – *then* our

primitive feeling-responses to experience are carried over into our language, and every description of things and events carries with it some evaluative overtones, tilting our sympathy one way or the other.

Now, our language includes a sort of inventory of our world. And because the ways we instinctively and immediately feel about everything come to be associated with and to flavour all our words, our language not only contains a comprehensive evaluation of our life as we presently experience it, but also, because it is our inherited language, our language tends to teach us our culture – a culture being an inherited traditional evaluation of life. The flavours annexed to words suggest to us how we should behave towards everything we come across.

Does this mean that our culture – that is, our inherited language – pre-programmes us to respond to, to evaluate, and to treat everything exactly as it prescribes? No, not at all, for because we are ourselves living and changing beings, we are always slightly modifying our received language, and therewith also adjusting our received valuations of things, as we go along. Thus our language is our culture, and is our overall evaluation of life. As we learn it, it shapes our feelings and helps us to build and to colour up our common world. But our feeling-life is not mechanical and automatic: we are living beings, always changing, and we never exactly repeat the previous generation's world-view, feelings and way of life. On the contrary, our culture, our language, our feeling-life, *and the world itself*, are all *transactional*; that is, they are being renegotiated and evolving every day. In life, everything changes a little all the time – and we are part of it all.

Thus our language gives us a choice. We may accept and go along with the received current evaluations of things, and so fit in with and accept the conventional wisdom. But it quite often happens that we disagree with the current evaluation of something that is coded into the way it is currently spoken of. We feel that it has been unjustly given a bad name. It is underestimated. In which case, we can argue for a change in the vocabulary that is used to describe that thing. During the 1960s, as people first realised all these points, there were successful campaigns to alter somewhat the vocabulary in which we all of us habitually spoke of – and therefore acted towards – women, homosexual men, black people and many other groups who had long been linguistically stigmatised. And mention of the 1960s reminds me that it was indeed during that period that we all of us gradually learnt to think about morality in the new way that I am describing – i.e. as human, as transactional, as embedded in language, and as changeable by consent, through public debate and linguistic change.

Ever since the days of Galileo and Descartes it has been thought that orthodox scientific method is by far the best and most powerful way to knowledge that human beings have ever devised – and that it

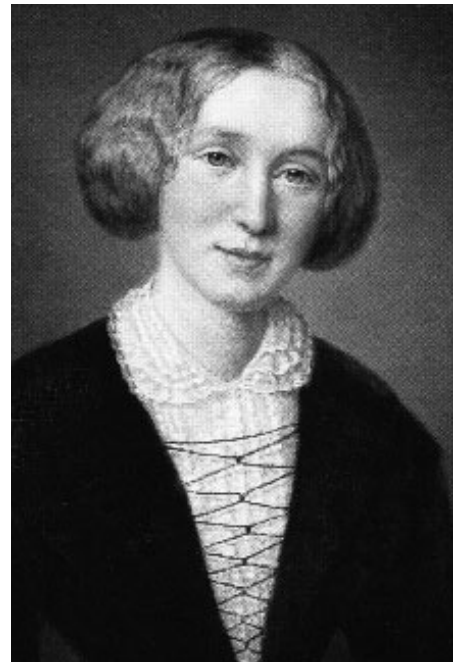
pictures the Universe as a value-free zone, a huge, dead machine with no immanent purposiveness at all. From Pascal onwards people complained of feeling threatened by nihilism, until eventually Nietzsche announced its arrival. We now know that 'the moral interpretation of the world' was an illusion. There is no hidden force for good secretly at work out there. We are alone. Nobody cares; and when we become extinct – which we now fear may actually happen within a couple of centuries or less – the Universe won't even notice our absence.

The new ethical theory that I have been describing proposes an answer to all this. The fear that our whole life is ultimately meaningless and worthless is partly based, as we have seen, on the belief that science is by far the best way to knowledge we've got, coupled with the fact that the scientific world-picture does not find any purposiveness or values in the world. But there is also the fact that the Augustinian Christianity, which was dominant amongst both Catholics and Protestants until the late seventeenth century, took such a very gloomy view of human nature and of this world. In retrospect, it was horrible. It located almost all goodness, beauty and happiness in the eternal world, and portrayed our ordinary human life as utterly wretched. When people began to lose faith in the eternal world, they had nothing left but what the *Book of Common Prayer* (1662) describes as 'the miseries of this sinful world' – i.e., nihilism; for we can now see that nihilism is an artificial bogey, something that was constructed by Augustinian Christianity in order to frighten us into holding on to realistic theism and supernatural faith.

... always keep a-hold of nurse
For fear of finding something worse.

So during the early modern period – roughly, the period of our Tudor monarchs – we inherited from the Middle Ages a life-world that looked rather shabby and dismal. Since then there has been a long, hard struggle to upgrade the life-world, and learn how to enjoy life. We have struggled to redeem the world and this life by slowly revaluing and upgrading (for example) time, matter, the body, nature, the senses, the emotions, women and human love. And it is against this background that I formulate my version of the moral task. For the sake of the general happiness, we should teach people to value every aspect of the body, this life, each person and this world as highly as is self-consistently possible. We should try to be generous, and should do as little denouncing, condemning, disparaging and judging as we can. We should look at what the study of natural history, for example, has done to differentiate, diversify and enrich the perceived natural world, and should do likewise. The life-world is maximally enriched and beautified for all if each individual does her bit to love and care for her own corner of it. Individually and collectively, we are all of us happier when we value life and the life-world highly, so it is rational to pursue as life-affirming an ethical policy as possible.

In our world a very great number of people consider themselves to be members of badly-treated minorities. Such people seem to devote much of their time to brooding over ancient wrongs, and nourishing grudges, grievances and dreams of bloody revenge. To do this poisons the soul, and to such people I say: 'Leave your ethnic group, your victimised minority! Leave them! The true conquest of evil and nihilism is simply the practice of magnanimity. Try to be as consistently affirmative as possible, and try to avoid any complaining. Do not get into disputes, or seek compensation. Instead, just try to cherish and enrich your corner of the world, and so contribute something to the whole human scene. Create value! Value is saving Grace!'



George Eliot

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say: 'Leave your ethnic group, your victimised minority! Leave them! The true conquest of evil and nihilism is simply the practice of magnanimity. Try to be as consistently affirmative as possible, and try to avoid any complaining. Do not get into disputes, or seek compensation. Instead, just try to cherish and enrich your corner of the world, and so contribute something to the whole human scene. Create value! Value is saving Grace!'

We are not given any ready-made unity of all values, or of all the virtues. The best we can do is to raise our own spirits by doing what we can do to inject enough meaning and value into life to make the world beautiful and life worth living. It follows that – like George Eliot, I think⁵ – I have to admit that we can't aim quite as high as the saints in the past. But I can claim that something very good and worthwhile remains within reach.

1. I confess to having used this anecdote before, in Leo Howe and Alan Wain, ed., *Predicting the Future*, Cambridge University Press 1993, p. 169. But it is still true, and very apposite here.

2. Psalm 37:25.

3. Joseph Butler, *The Analogy of Religion Natural and Revealed to the Constitution and Course of Nature*, 1736.

4. In what follows I draw upon ideas first put forward in *The New Christian Ethics*, London: SCM Press 1987. Notice that I make ethics thoroughly subjective and emotive. We, and we only, put the values into life by the ways in which we feel about things.

5. In her preface to *Middlemarch*, 1872.

This is an abbreviated version of Don Cupitt's talk. Unfortunately, there was not enough space to print it in full. Uncut version is online at www.sofn.org.uk

What, if Anything, is Moral Relativism?



‘Surely it’s always wrong to make moral judgments.’ Mary Midgley explores this contradiction in a fresh look at relativism and subjectivism.

When Pope Benedict XVI was making his inaugural speech he said that one of the more fearful dangers of the present day is the march of relativism. I thought, let’s have a look at that. Are all forms of it a bad idea, perhaps not? Perhaps we could cheer Pope Benedict up a bit by picking out the parts that he should like and the parts that he should not.

So, what is relativism? Now, we start with a simple thing which I think is properly called relativism – is the most obvious form of it – and I have given a splendid old example, which many of you are probably familiar with. It’s Herodotus’ story:

When Darius was king of Persia, he summoned the Greeks who happened to be present at his court, and asked them what they would take to eat the dead bodies of their fathers. They replied that they would not do it for any money in the world. Later, in the presence of the Greeks, and through an interpreter... he asked some Indians, of the tribe called Callatiae, who do in fact eat their parents’ dead bodies, what they would take to burn them. They uttered a cry of horror and forbade him to mention such a dreadful thing. One can see by this what custom can do.¹

Now, it’s rather unlikely, I guess, that Darius actually did this, but it shows the Greeks were already thinking about it. Traders, as the Greeks were, were always running into things that startled them and by Herodotus’ time they had got as far as this very satisfactory thought, that you should respect the customs of others even when they differ from your own. This was a valuable insight. If that is what somebody means by relativism, then they should know that it is not only harmless but good.

But all these valuable insights only suit a particular range of cases. If they are extended into universal principles they go badly wrong and anyway, they can’t be combined because the different insights we will be looking at contradict each other. This trouble has been confounded by the methods of Nietzsche, who didn’t believe in trying to reconcile contrary views but preferred to state both of them strongly in extreme forms and leave his readers to work out what was to be done about it.

The sort of muddle that arises was delightfully instanced to me when a student in a class said with obvious fervour and conviction: ‘But, surely, it’s

always wrong to make moral judgments.’ You see, some moral judgments are more equal than others!

So, then, there is this thing which one might call relativism proper: ‘In Rome do as the Romans do’, ‘Live and let live’ and so on. This is good advice when you are dealing with other people’s problems. It’s especially suitable advice for an imperial power like Darius who has to deal with a lot of different cultures.

He doesn’t necessarily take them very seriously anyway, but he has to avoid conflicts. Or, indeed, he might take them seriously, and this is more interesting; he might say to himself: ‘How come these people are acting so differently, is it that these are different ways of expressing a single purpose?’ That is, showing respect to the dead. And then he might go on to work out how those different things were felt to be respectful and, of course, he had better go on to say: ‘Well, why do we Persians put our dead on high towers and let the vultures eat them?’ That is another way of showing respect.

But what does the ruler do when he comes across a tribe who are selling their grandparents at a suitable age for somebody else to eat? Might that be different? Imperial powers have indeed run into this sort of trouble repeatedly, about ritual murders, suttee, child abuse, slavery – all kinds of things – where they find suddenly, to their distress, they have got to make a moral judgment. And it shows that we haven’t *not* made a moral judgment the first time, when we said it doesn’t matter what they do with their dead. We *have* made the moral judgment: ‘This is not wrong’. It doesn’t become my business because it’s not bad enough.



King Darius of Persia

So, the relativist solution only works for a certain range of cases. And the limitation of cultural relativism can be put in this way: societies are not monolithic blocks. It isn't true, as some anthropologists have suggested, that you get a whole group of people who are all perfectly happy to go one way and another group who all perfectly happy to go the other. There is dissent within any society. I think it is clear now that when anthropology got going, it deliberately dealt in very small rather isolated 'tribes' and, coming in from the outside, the anthropologist was not likely to spot all the dissent that was happening. If, for instance, all the informants are male then you don't question whether the women are happy about it.

The relativist solution only works for a certain range of cases.

So, for that sort of reason, people begin to move on from this ancient form of relativism to something more like subjectivism, which really is very different. It is now not just that the culture makes up its own morality but that the individual does so. Each individual creates his own morality – notably *his*, not hers: the theorists of this kind of thing from Rousseau through Nietzsche on have tended to overlook the gender issue until quite lately. There is an awful lot of what you might call misogyny in those theorists. It's an expression of the Enlightenment's notion of the totally independent male householder. As Hobbes put it, 'A family is a little monarchy, whether that family consists of a man and his children, or of a man and his children and his servants.'

I am not being irrelevant here. The simplification became possible because they had that model in mind. It was one man, one vote, household suffrage; it was political in origin but it was developed into a general view of individuality. Here is Nietzsche:

*'My judgment is my judgment, to which hardly anyone else has a right', is what the philosopher of the future will say. One must get rid of the bad taste of wishing to agree with many others. 'Good' is no longer good in the mouth of my neighbour. And how could there be a 'common good'?*²

That protest isn't just Nietzsche being a bit extreme. It's a protest that belongs to Enlightenment thought in general; the individualism, the attempt to split people off from the mass, which in many ways has been a very good thing; we are profiting from it. But when you make it so extreme you do have to ask a number of difficult questions. Nietzsche sometimes comes out as a pure subjectivist, just saying that each individual is split off from the rest. But often he

claims much more than that, exalting the individual as a prophet for the whole community:

*None yet knoweth what is good or evil – unless it be that he is a creator! But a creator is he that createth man's goal and giveth earth its meaning and its future; he it is that first maketh good and evil to be.*³

How can a subjectivist theorist take this prophetic tone?. If he's speaking just for himself he wouldn't shout like that. He wouldn't devote his time to *telling everyone else*, to writing. Nietzsche lived alone just writing and writing, desperately hoping it would get out one day to the other people who were supposed to take it in.

Now there's nothing wrong with that wish for other people to do what's right for them and be better, but you cannot combine it with the thought that each person is a split off, separate item. These are clashing images and Nietzsche is always bringing clashing images together, out of which you're supposed to get something that has the advantages of both. Whether it works, I'm not sure.

*In the end comes the sovereign individual, that resembles only himself, that has got loose from the morality of custom, the autonomous, super-moral individual (for autonomous and moral are mutually exclusive terms).*⁴

There it is starting to look as though we really are trying to get rid of a notion of morality as something public altogether.

Sartre, I think, is in the same box. Sartre, answering the objection 'your values are not serious since you choose them for yourself', says:

*To that I can only say that I am very sorry that it should be so, but if I have excluded God the Father, there must be somebody to invent values.*⁵

That seems to me an absolutely extraordinary remark. You don't need to invent the wheel, it's there already and has been for a long time. You can improve the wheel, use it in different situations, but the values which are stressed by people like Nietzsche and Sartre are ancient values: freedom, courage, honesty. They are suggesting that you conceive them differently. They are shifting the balance between these different values which are there, and a very small shift in that balance is extremely noticeable. 'Invent' seems to me a particularly odd metaphor, because when you invent a new cogwheel or whatnot you already know what the end is, the aim. You invent a new means to it, but if you're inventing what the aim is I don't think that makes a lot of sense. Philippa Foot put the case: what if you were to suggest that something is a value which nobody has thought of yet, like clapping your hands once an hour or peeling your orange in a spiral? It doesn't kind of bite, does it?

When a thing is recognised as a value it's because of an immense context of human experience within which people have found this helpful or useful or admirable and when you want to change it, you draw attention to that context. I am suggesting that when you've been trying to be consistently subjectivist for a time you find you're involved in something larger and you haven't solved the problem of disagreement. There are still a lot of people who disagree and nobody's able to do much about it. So the other solution: immoralism, in the sense that nothing can be right or wrong at all, does get mooted at this point. And Nietzsche sometimes talked as though that was what he meant. But an awful lot of the time he didn't:

Fundamentally, my term immoralist involves two negations. First, I negate a type of man that has so far been considered supreme, the good, the benevolent, the beneficent. And then I negate a type of morality that has become prevalent and predominant as morality itself – the morality of decadence, or more concretely, Christian morality ...morality as vampirism. ⁶

Here he is plainly attacking a particular kind of morality, not the practice of thinking morally in general. Now I think it is fair to point out that Nietzsche was operating in the mid 19th century in a Germany that had become extremely stagnant after Metternich, which was contentedly, complacently Lutheran and that he was not only the son of a parson but the grandson of two other parsons and was brought up in a household of women. His father having died, his mother and two aunts and a sister were all piously Lutheran. It was not that he was oppressed with violence and a fear of hell but that it was a suffocating atmosphere of sentimentality, which said the Good Lord will see to everything and we don't really need to think. So this is how he explains what's wrong with Christianity:

There is master morality and slave morality... When it is the rulers who determine the concept 'good', it is the exalted, proud states of the soul which are considered distinguishing and determine the order of rank... Good and bad mean the same thing as 'noble' and 'despicable'... [by contrast] The slave is suspicious of the virtues of the powerful... [for him] those qualities which make easier the existence of the suffering will be brought into prominence... Slave morality is essentially a matter of utility. ⁷

As I'm sure you all know, 'Beyond Good and Evil' for Nietzsche did not mean we've got rid of morality, it meant you must choose the right morality – the noble one. He had this romantic idea of the heroic past, in which people were tough and brutal and

never hesitated to do what they felt like doing. We have lost this nobility of spirit by becoming Christian and decadent. It really is interesting how much he regards the need to resist Christian morality as itself a moral imperative:

There is no help for it; we must mercilessly call to account and bring to trial the feelings of surrender, of self-sacrifice for one's fellow-men, all the morality of self-alienation...There is too much charm and sugar in those feelings of 'for others, not myself'. ⁸

Now we move on to contemporary expressions of the immoralist project. In 1983 a survey reported in *The Observer* declared that:

British still believe in sin, hell and the devil

Most Britons still believe in the concept of sin and nearly a third believe in hell and the devil, according to the biggest survey of public opinion ever carried out in the West ... Belief in sin is highest in Northern Ireland (91 per cent) and lowest in Denmark (29 per cent) ... Even 15 per cent of atheists believe in sin and 4 per cent in the devil. Most Europeans admit that they sometimes regret having done something wrong. The Italians and Danes suffer most from such regrets, the French and Belgians least. The rich regret more than the poor ... The rich are less likely to believe in sin than the poor. ⁹

I think this is extraordinary and I'd like to quote what I wrote about it in my book *Wickedness*:

What were these people supposed to be believing? 'Belief in sin' is not a factual belief, as beliefs in God, hell or the devil certainly are, whatever else they involve. 'Sin' seems not to be defined in a restrictive way as an offence against God, or the minority of atheists couldn't have signed up for it. Belief in it can scarcely be identified with the sense of regret for having done wrong, since there might surely be people who thought that others sinned, though they did not think they did so themselves. Besides, the rich apparently do one but not the other... But this makes it no easier to see what the belief is actually meant to be, unless it is the simple and obvious one that some actions are wrong. Is the reporter's idea that up-to-date people – including most Danes and even more atheists – have now withdrawn their objections to all courses of action, including boiling our friends alive just for the hell of it? This is not very plausible... At a popular level, all that is meant is often that sexual activity has been shown not to be sinful. That does not diminish the number of sins, because, where a sexual activity is considered justified, interference with it begins to be blamed. Recognised sins against liberty therefore multiply in exact proportion as recognised sins against chastity grow scarcer. ¹⁰



Friedrich Nietzsche

Here's another more subtle and interesting example: Barbara Wootton, eminent sociologist, protesting against Lord Devlin. There are probably a few people here as old as me who can remember Lord Devlin; he was a distinguished judge who had written a clear, popular book saying that law and morality were not quite distinct; that it was the business of law to reflect in some degree the moral judgments of the people under it. And here is Barbara Wootton saying, 'That's wrong':

Can we then in the modern world identify a class of inherently wicked actions [as Lord Devlin suggests]? ... This attempt to revive the lawyer's distinction between... things which are bad in themselves and things which are merely prohibited ... cannot, I think, succeed ...

She seems to be saying there are only things that are merely prohibited.

*The statement that a real crime is one about which a good citizen would feel guilty is surely circular. For how is the good citizen to be defined in this context unless as one who feels guilt about committing the crimes that Lord Devlin would classify as 'real'?*¹¹

The thought that child abuse, rape, ritual murder are forbidden because they are wrong is not at all a fishy thought.

Now it's all a matter of the examples that you have in mind. What was in mind at the time was homosexuality, abortion, capital punishment and she suspected, quite possibly rightly, that Lord Devlin had strong moral views on these things and wanted them made into law, but if you ask about child abuse, rape, ritual murder, murder – all these things where the law does not seem so questionable – the thought that these are forbidden because they are wrong is not at all a fishy thought.

My last example comes from a detective story by PD James. It's a good detective story but I was struck in reading it by noticing that this particular social move comes up in it repeatedly.

[Alice has just admitted that she has done a murder. She explains]: 'I'm not arguing that she deserved to die. It doesn't matter whether she was happy, or childless, or even much use to anybody but herself. What I'm saying is that I wanted her dead.' [Meg]: *'That sounds to me so evil that it's beyond my understanding. Alice, what you did was a dreadful sin.'* Alice laughed ... *[and replied]: 'Meg you continue to astonish me. You use words which are no longer in the general vocabulary, not even in the Church's,*

*so I'm told. The implications of that simple little word are beyond my comprehension.'*¹²

You see the move. Somebody makes what's clearly a moral judgment – an accusation. Instead of dealing with it you shrug haughtily and reply: 'Oh, do you still talk like that?' I guess that actually nobody today is likely to respond exactly as Meg does in this passage. They are more likely to say: 'God, that's mean!' or: 'You can't treat people like that!', which specifies more what's wrong with it. The word 'sin' is a little bit out of date; it's not used in quite that way today and neither is 'evil'. Thus the thought that this is an affected way of talking is not so surprising. But talking affectedly is not the same thing as talking nonsense.

I think PD James is impressed with that style of talk. It's not just that she's showing her characters as doing it, but that she thinks that there is something profound and enlightened about the assumption that nobody makes moral judgments any longer. I'll end by coming back to that remark my student made: 'It's always wrong to make moral judgments.' Something funny there!

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1. Herodotus, *Histories* Book III, Chapter 58.
 2. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good And Evil*, 2nd Article, Section 43.
 3. Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Part 3, 'Of Old And New Tables'.
 4. Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, Chapter 2 (opening).
 5. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, Methuen 1948, p. 54.
 6. Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, (Vintage Books), pp. 328 and 334.
 7. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good And Evil*, Section 260.
 8. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good And Evil*, Section 33.
 9. *The Observer*, Sunday 28th February 1983.
 10. Mary Midgley, *Wickedness – A Philosophical Essay* (Routledge 1984).
 11. Baroness Wootton, *Crime and the Criminal Law* (Stevens 1981) pp. 42, 63.
 12. P.D. James, *Devices and Desires* (Faber & Faber 1989) p. 388.
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Further Reading

- Simon Blackburn, *Being Good. A Short Introduction to Ethics* (Oxford UP, 2001).
- R.J. Hollingdale, *Nietzsche* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973)
- Mary Midgley, *Wickedness; A Philosophical Essay* (Routledge 1984); *Heart And Mind: The Varieties of Moral Experience* (Harvester Press 1981); *Can't We Make Moral Judgments?* (Bristol Press 1991).
- Adam Morton, *On Evil* (Routledge, 2004).

This is an edited version of a recording of Mary Midgley's talk. Recording and transcription by Oliver Essame.

May The Force Be With You Not



In his talk on Force, Richard Holloway focused on the insights of Simone Weil and studies of the two Nazis, Stangl and Speer.

'With regard to human affairs, not to laugh, not to cry, not to become indignant, but to understand.' – SPINOZA

When I was about nine or ten I had a part-time job as message boy for the local Co-Op grocer's shop at the top of our street. It was a big store with a workforce of eight, both women and men, though I can't remember the exact proportion of each. One morning when the shop was quiet an incident occurred which has stayed in my memory. There was a big store room at the back of the shop, with a long table in the middle, used for measuring and bagging, slicing and sorting. On the morning in question there was a conspiratorial buzz among the male members of the staff, who were all drifting towards the store room. I joined them, wondering what was up. It was obvious that, whatever was afoot, the ring leader was the oldest man in the staff, a self-important person who seemed to think himself a cut above the rest of us.

'Force is that X that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a thing.'

When we had all gathered he hushed us to silence, and a few seconds later one of the women workers came into the room, presumably to pick up something for a customer. As soon as she entered, the door was closed, then locked, and the men surrounded her. The atmosphere, as I remember it, was jokey rather than menacing, and the woman giggled nervously as though she knew what was coming. Mr Self-important gave the signal and the men grabbed the woman and lifted her onto her back on the table. Though she struggled a bit, it still seemed to be more of a lark than a lynching, and she didn't call out for help. I didn't exactly know what was going on, but I played a significant part in what happened, because, though she was being held down on her back on the table, her legs were still hanging over the side. Entering the fun, I took hold of her ankles and lifted her legs onto the table, provoking the congratulations of Mr Self-important for my

assistance. He then shoved his hand under her skirt and groped her.

And it was all over. They let her up, she collected whatever it was she had come for, and the men all went back to work. Nothing was ever said about the incident, and no reference was ever made to it. Feeling unclean and complicit, I stopped working there soon afterwards. Sometimes I would bump into Mr Self-important in the town, out with his family, and I used to wonder what went on in his mind about the incident. I also wondered what got into *me*, why I did what I did, where it came from, what it was that took over in the store room in that long-gone grocer's shop in Mitchell Street, Alexandria.

Those were the kind of questions that Blake Morrison also asked himself in his book *As If*, which explored the murder of little Jamie Bulger and its aftermath. Appalled by the witch hunt of Jamie's killers, themselves children, he tried to imagine himself into their shoes. And he remembered a teenage party he attended where most of the middle-class boys present queued up to shag – the appropriate word here – an unprotesting girl who was so drunk she could hardly stand up. Where did that come from? What got into them?

In both of these examples a force of some sort has taken over a group of men, with irreversible consequences for them all. What is it? What is the nature of the force that impelled those incidents? In attempting to answer that question I shall make use of a remarkable essay by Simone Weil on *The Iliad or Poem of Force*. In her essay, through the tragic sensibility of Homer, Weil describes humans in the grip of an energy or force that plays with them the way a cat toys with a helpless mouse it has caught, before killing it more from boredom than need. Here's her definition of force: 'To define force – it is that X that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a thing. Exercised to the limit, it turns man into a thing in the most literal sense: it makes a corpse out of him. Somebody was here, and the next minute there is nobody here at all; this is a spectacle the *Iliad* never wearies of showing us.'¹

This is the theme of the *Iliad*, a poem she describes as a miracle. She writes: 'Its bitterness is the only justifiable bitterness, for it springs from the subjection of the human spirit to force, that is, in the last analysis, to matter. This subjection is the common lot, although each spirit will bear it differently, in proportion to its own virtue. No one in the *Iliad* is spared by it, as no one on earth is. No one who succumbs to it is by virtue of this fact regarded with contempt. Whoever, within his own soul and in human relations, escapes the dominion of force is loved but loved sorrowfully, because of the threat of destruction that constantly hangs over him.'²

Here's Simone Weil again: 'This property of force achieves its maximum effectiveness during the clash of arms, in battle, when the tide of the day has turned, and everything is rushing toward a decision. It is not the planning man, the man of strategy, the man acting on the resolution taken, who wins or loses a battle; battles are fought and decided by men deprived of these faculties, men who have undergone a transformation, who have dropped either to the level of inert matter, which is pure passivity, or to the level of blind force, which is pure momentum... The art of war is simply the art of producing such transformations, and its equipment, its processes, even the casualties it inflicts on the enemy, are only means directed towards this end... Yet these transformations are always a mystery; the gods are their authors, the gods who kindle men's imagination. But however caused, this petrificative quality of force, twofold always, is essential to its nature... Its power of converting a man into a thing is a double one, and in its application double-edged. To the same degree, though in different fashions, those who use it and those who endure it are turned to stone.'³ In the current diagnostics of force, especially in its abusive sexual forms, we usually focus our attention on the passive victim who is turned by it into a thing; but Simone Weil wants us to recognise that everyone is petrified by force, everyone is turned to stone by it, especially those who become its active agents.

She goes on: 'He who does not recognise to what extent shifting fortune and necessity hold in subjection every human spirit, cannot regard as fellow-creatures nor love as he loves himself those whom chance separated from him by an abyss. Only he who has measured the dominion of force, and knows how not

to respect it, is capable of love and justice.'⁴ Later in this lecture, when I turn to Gitta Sereny's analysis of the character of the men who followed Hitler, I shall return to the kind of sympathy towards our fellow-creatures that can help us, sometimes, withstand the inexorability of force; but I want to turn immediately to another group, always few in number, who, alone among humans, never show any respect to force.

In a letter she wrote to her parents a couple of weeks before her death in 1943, Simone Weil discussed the fools in Shakespeare. She said: 'When I saw *Lear* here, I asked myself how it was possible that the unbearably tragic character of these fools had not been obvious long ago to everyone, including myself. The tragedy is not the sentimental one it is sometimes thought to be; it is this. There is a class of people in this world who have fallen into the lowest degree of humiliation, far below beggary, and who are deprived not only of all social consideration but also, in everybody's opinion, of the specific human dignity,

reason itself – and these are the only people who, in fact, are able to tell the truth. All the others lie. In *Lear* it is striking. Even Kent and Cordelia attenuate, mitigate, soften, and veil the truth; and unless they are forced to choose between telling it and telling a downright lie, they manoeuvre to evade it. What makes the tragedy extreme is the fact that because the fools possess no academic titles or episcopal dignities and because no

one is aware that their sayings deserve the slightest attention – everybody being convinced *a priori* of the contrary, since they are fools – their expression of the truth is not even listened to. Everybody, including Shakespeare's readers and audiences for four centuries, is unaware that what they say is true. And not satirically or humorously true, but simply the truth. Pure unadulterated truth – luminous, profound, and essential.'⁵

She does not explicitly apply this insight – that only fools speak the truth and everyone else lies – to the problem of force, but when we bring the insight into play in that context it is illuminating. Most people are bent out of shape by force in its various manifestations. Look at photographs in the papers of people meeting the royals; observe junior cabinet ministers in the presence of the Prime Minister; watch the faithful in the presence of the Pope: their skeletons melt, they become smilingly soft and goofy-looking, they lose moral definition. The force of the





Simone Weil

awed, the fact that you are having to put energy into being unimpressed shows that you too have been bent out of shape by force. Only the innocent, only the fool, is unaffected and acts with unselfconscious truthfulness in such situations.

Speaking specifically about Jesus, Simone Weil said, in her essay on the *Iliad*, that even the man who does not wear the armour of the lie cannot experience force without being touched by it to the very soul. While grace can prevent this touch from corrupting him, it cannot spare him the wound. There is no escape for any of us from force, but Jesus belonged to that tiny group of humans who refuse ever to be impressed by it. Though she does not spell it out, the implication is that this kind of foolishness or innocence is an original endowment of being, part of the mysterious grace of the genetic lottery, not something humans can acquire by their own effort. However, there is something we can acquire that may help us to modify the effects of force on our own being; and here I want to turn to the writings of Gitta Sereny, before coming back to Simone Weil in conclusion.

As well as a celebrated study of the child murderer May Bell, Sereny wrote two remarkable books on the impact of Hitler on individual members of his circle. The first of the Nazi books was about Franz Stangl, who had been Kommandant of Treblinka, one of the four extermination camps in German-occupied Poland. Stangl was sentenced to life imprisonment for co-responsibility in the murder of 900,000 people in Treblinka. Her other remarkable book was a study of Albert Speer, the architect of Nazi Germany and Hitler's right-hand man. In the preface to *Into that Darkness*, the book about Stangl, she wrote: 'Over the months of the Nuremberg trials...I felt more and more that we needed to find someone capable of explaining to us how presumably normal human beings had been brought to do what he had done...If it could be achieved, an evaluation of such a person's background, his childhood, and eventually his adult motivation and reactions, as he saw them, rather than as we wished or prejudged them to be, might teach us to understand better to

visiting presence turns them into things. It is very difficult to resist this effect. Even if you are one of those puritans who are self-righteously resistant to being over-

what extent evil in human beings is created by their genes, and to what extent by their society and environment.'⁶

In her studies of Stangl and Speer she discovers in both cases a denial of love in childhood. Unlike Speer, Stangl was an unremarkable man. Diana Athill worked with Sereny on the book about Stangl, and this is what she said about him in her memoirs: 'I still think – and often – of how that unremarkable man became a monster as the result of a chain of choices between right and wrong – some of the early ones quite trivial – and the way in which no one he respected intervened in favour of the right, while a number of people he respected (senior officers, a priest, a doctor – his idea of respectability was conventional) behaved as though wrong were right. Chief among them, of course, the Führer. Stangl did not have a strong centre – had probably been deprived of it by a dreary childhood – so he became a creature of the regime. Other people without much centre didn't – or not to the same extent – so some quality inherent in him (perhaps lack of imagination combined with ambition) must have been evident to those who picked him for his appalling jobs. But it was surely environment rather than genes which made him what he became.'⁷

Yes, environment certainly, but the more significant factor, I think, lies in that tell-tale phrase 'lack of imagination.' Sereny was allowed to visit Stangl in prison for many hours over six weeks, at the end of which his imagination finally kicked in, he touched the core of his guilt and admitted that he ought not still to be alive. When she next came to the prison to see him she was told he was dead – from heart failure not suicide, though the story persists that he killed himself, having finally understood the depth of his guilt.

When we turn to Speer the picture is more complex. Though he was the only senior Nazi at Nuremberg to plead guilty, and went on to write about what it was like inside the horrors of the Third Reich, her portrait of him is devastating. Speer himself killed no one and felt no enmity, hatred or even dislike for the millions in Eastern Europe, Christians and Jews, who were systematically slaughtered. Sereny says he felt nothing, because there was a dimension in him that was missing, a capacity to feel which his childhood had blotted out, allowing him to experience not love, but only romanticised substitutes for it. (Incidentally, she says there was a strong erotic bond between Speer and Hitler – never sexualised, of course, but hypnotically present all the same). Pity, compassion, sympathy, empathy weren't part of Speer's emotional vocabulary. He could feel deeply, but only indirectly – through music or landscape or art. She points out that

his feelings could also be aroused through what she calls visual hyperbole. He was the begetter of the great Nazi set pieces, such as the Cathedral of Light, with its flags and thousands of men at attention, motionless like pillars, as well as the rows of blond children, eyes shining, arms stiffly raised. This became beauty to him and – another substitute for love – allowed him to *feel*.

But the conclusion of his story is that he did finally learn to feel with real authenticity, and to enter, for the first time, the experience of others. He acknowledged his part in Hitler's madness, and with that honesty came a horrifying realisation of what had been done. With that came an overwhelming guilt and a wish for death, yet a fear of execution. In a final, generous paragraph Sereny summed him up: 'This, I feel, had become the real Speer. This was a very serious man who knew more about that bane of our century, Hitler, than anyone else. This was an erudite and solitary man who, recognising his deficiencies in human relations, had read five thousand books in prison to try to understand the

A communion that opens us to the humanity of the other... Above all, we can refuse to hate.

universe and human beings, an effort he succeeded in with his mind but failed in with his heart. Empathy is finally a gift, and cannot be learned, so, essentially, returning into the world after twenty years (in prison), he remained alone. Unforgiven by so many for having served Hitler, he elected to spend the rest of his life in confrontation with this past, unforgiving of himself for having so nearly loved a monster.⁸

Let me pause before those daunting words: 'Empathy is finally a gift and cannot be learned,' and compare them to words we heard earlier from Simone Weil: 'He who does not recognise to what extent shifting fortune and necessity hold in subjection every human spirit, cannot regard as fellow-creatures nor love as he loves himself those whom chance separated from him by an abyss. Only he who has measured the dominion of force, and knows how not to respect it, is capable of love and justice.' What can save us from despair or political immobilism is the recognition that we can, after all, measure the dominion of force, especially in its impact on our own lives, and learn not to respect it. We can, by an act of constant radical self-interrogation, measure the way in which force has both acted upon us and acted upon others through us.

More profoundly, in an act of sympathetic communion, we can recognise that shifting fortune and necessity hold us all in subjection, and with that understanding can come a passionate identification with others and a refusal, ever, to turn them, either by word or deed, into things. This sympathy, this ability to feel ourselves into the lives of others, is the root of a passionate morality that would rather die than become the instrument of force. And part of that revolt against force is a refusal to hate the enemy, because hatred is yet another manifestation of the petrificative power of force.

Though it may kill us, we can resist force. If we withstand the momentum of force that drives us to vengeance, punishment, redress, suffering; and move, instead, to an ethic of transformation, astonishing things can happen to both the victims and offenders force has turned to stone. In spite of the cruel chorus that derides the movement towards restorative and transformative justice, we have to show them that it is a costly not a cheap alternative to the vicious circularity of punishment. It calls for a radical understanding of the force that impels us against each other, and the way we make ourselves complicit in its devastating momentum.

When practised with sufficient commitment, the ethic of transformative justice can melt the petrificative impact of force into a communion that opens us to the humanity of the other: no longer a thing; now a creature suffering the same blows of fate as the rest of us. We can refuse to let force divide us against each other. Above all, we can refuse to hate. And we don't even need an organisation to do it through. All we need to do is make a start.

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1. Simone Weil, 'The Iliad or The Poem of Force' from *Simone Weil: An Anthology*. (Grove Press, New York 1986) p.163.
 2. Simone Weil, *op.cit.*, p.191.
 3. Simone Weil, pp.184, 185.
 4. Simone Weil, p.192.
 5. Simone Weil, *op.cit.* pp.1-2.
 6. Quoted in Diana Athill, *Stet*, (Granta, London 2001) pp.70-71.
 7. Athill p.75.
 8. Gitta Sereny, *Albert Speer*, (MacMillan, 1995) p.719.
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This is an abbreviated version of Richard Holloway's talk. Unfortunately there was not enough space to print it in full. Uncut version is online at qqq.sofn.org.uk

The Mostar Bridge Rebuilt

Our film and theatre critic Cicely Herbert turns to architecture and describes her visit to an important rebuilt bridge.

A year ago, in July, I visited Mostar during the week in which its old bridge, the 'Stari Most', was reopened. The bridge, always an important link, had been reconstructed after it was completely destroyed by opposing factions in Bosnia-Herzegovina during the recent civil war. 'Stari Most' had long been seen as a symbol of the town's past multi-faith heritage and the United Nations was instrumental in its rebuilding. There are few more potent metaphors for unity and reconciliation than the building of a bridge. A bridge can connect and bring people together from either side of a divide, be that a river, a ravine or a border. Very often, historically, the first consideration in its construction will have been the need for a trading link, but once that has been established so is the possibility of communication, of interaction, knowledge and understanding.

Replacing the original suspension bridge which had been guarded by the Mostari, from which the town probably got its name, 'Stari Most' was designed by Mimar Hajrudin, a disciple of the great Ottoman architect Mimar Sinan, who built some of the finest mosques in Istanbul. The graceful yet sturdy bridge was completed in 1566, built from 456 blocks of white stone, many of which were recovered from the River Neretva after 'Stari Most' was destroyed by repeated bombardment in the recent conflict. Work on the rebuilding began in 1997, using these stones and many of the same methods as were employed by the original architect. The bridge is 30 metres long and its arch measures 20 metres. The keystone was put in place in August 2003, and during the reopening ceremony, a year later, young men and boys, following an old tradition, jumped from the bridge into the waters far below: a rite of passage requiring an act of considerable daring.

I was privileged to have been invited to the heart of Bosnia-Herzegovina for a family celebration after the marriage of two young people who are now making a life for themselves in London. The bridegroom's father is Chinese/Malaysian and his mother is German; he met his Croatian bride in a recreational gym in London. The bride's grandfather, a wise man in his late nineties, whose family had suffered greatly during the recent war, welcomed us to his beautiful valley, which smelled

(overwhelmingly, to this traveller from 'the big smoke') of wild thyme and pure unpolluted air. Long ago he had dreamed that a Chinese man would come to that valley and in recognition of his arrival he gave the young couple a piece of land on which to build.

The wedding ceremony had already taken place in Dubrovnik and two days before that event the party of guests, which included friends from all over the world – from Malaysia, the Caribbean, Africa, from many European countries including Britain, Ireland, Greece, Germany, Holland, France, and Switzerland, Serbs and Croats and a Brazilian woman, had all spent a day together on a boat visiting three islands and diving into waters as warm, as blue and as welcoming as any Londoner could dream of.



A few days later, and a long five hour drive away, in Mostar, a small group of us walked across the newly reopened bridge from the west side of the town to the east with its mosques and minarets, stopping to drink coffee and watch boys and young men leaping from the

newly restored bridge into the river below. Absorbed by what we saw, we failed to notice the disappearance of the youngest member of our party, the bridegroom's six year old nephew. Over half an hour passed before we discovered his absence and panic gripped each one of us as we ran frantically from end to end of the bridge, staring mutely into the churning waters below and then calling out his name as we ran through the narrow bazaar-filled streets of the town. Providence spared us and we found the boy, frightened and tearful, but safe in the care of a group of old Muslim men who roundly upbraided us for our neglect as they handed him back to us. Never before can the swirling green waters of a river have seemed so sweet, nor the curved arch of a bridge provided such a blessing as it did to us that morning in Mostar.

Recommended reading: *The Bridge over the Drina* by Ivo Andric (winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature). This great novel tells the story of one bridge in the Bosnian town of Visegrad, built in the sixteenth century and spanning generations, nationalities and creeds. Available in paperback, published by Harvill at £8.99.

Please send your letters to:
Oliver Essame, sof Letters' Editor, Gospel Hill Cottage, Chapel Lane, Whitfield, Brackley NN13 5TF. Email: oliver@essame.clara.net

Sof 72 was interesting in that the editor had chosen one main theme, rather than the usual pick-and-mix of earlier editions. However, her introductory article and her rendition of the ancient creed on the last page seemed to me to be irrelevant for the 21st Century.

For centuries of Christianity the problem for the Christians was how could the divine Jesus be also only a man and then how could the man Jesus be also God? Neither of these can be genuine concerns now, as the distinction between the notion of 'God' and 'Man' no longer exists, surely? In this century our need is to recognise that we are indeed all separate humans, each different from another, and yet we share a common humanity. And more than that, we have a sense of life shared with all living creatures, and more than that, we have a sense of unity with ourselves and the immense universe, and more than that, we sense that even this is part of a greater whole.

There is nothing 'other' or distinct about the greater whole. We are part of the greater whole *and it would not*

exist without us. This is like the sea – without this one drop of water and the next and the next, there would be no sea. The sea is more than, and yet also only, every drop. If there is any modern reason to use the word 'God' it has to be as this inclusive notion of the whole being greater than the sum of the parts, and yet not existing without the parts.

Every person can recognize their importance in the formation of the whole and recognise the equality and value of every other person too. Our treatment of other humans and other life forms will be enriched when we can take on board the notion that every single living being is a necessary manifestation of the whole.

In the end, this is very similar to the old Christian belief that we should try to see Christ in the other person – but it has got rid of the awful, divisive notions of a god 'out there', overseeing the lot. There is one whole and we are in it and it wouldn't exist without us and all else. This century must learn to accept the reality and live well in it.

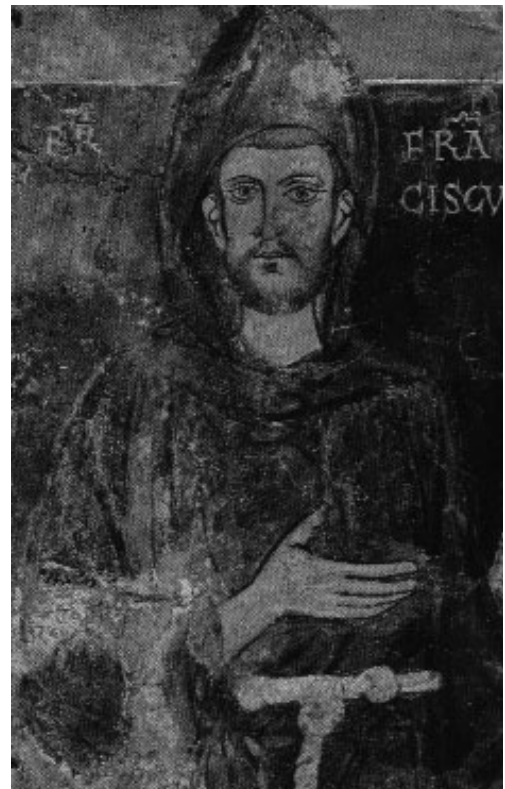
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Limbo

There is a 'limbo' between life and death,
 Where heart-beats fail and minds drift into sleep;
 Where bodies scarcely stir or draw their breath,
 And anguished eyes have passed the time to weep.
 In this cold country, blood is quick to chill,
 And neither friends nor kin can comfort give.
 We fall a prey to real and fancied ill,
 Afraid to die, yet lack the will to live.
 At dawn of each unprofitable day,
 Past joys, remembered, double present pain.
 The heart sweeps dreams of happiness away,
 And drifting souls o'erwhelm themselves again.
 This is our state if we, from love exiled,
 Abandon hope of being reconciled.

Tom E. Owen

Tom E. Owen is a long-term member of SoF. 'Limbo' is taken from his poetry collection *In-between Time* (Wynfolde Press, St Helens, 2000).



'Where there is hatred, let me sow love.'
Prayer of St Francis, famously misquoted by Margaret Thatcher on the threshold of 10 Downing Street in 1979.

Stephen Mitchell reviews

Bringing God Back to Earth: Confessions of a Christian Publisher

by John Hunt.

○ Books. Winchester. 2004. 320 pages. £9.99. ISBN 1903816815

Bringing God Back to Earth is a breath-taking project. In case we miss the scale of the task, the author reminds us two-thirds the way through the book:

We've covered why we believe, whether it's credible, the differences between good and bad religion, the good teaching of Jesus, the way that got turned into bad religion by the politicians and bureaucrats. This last third of the book takes an overview of where we are, and the way forward. (page 240)

But don't be put off by the scope of the book. The writer has such an easy-going style that we dance our way through aeons of time. And, of course, any book about God and religion is going to cover life, death and everything in between.

Bringing God Back to Earth is a courageous book. John Hunt will be well known to Sea of Faith readers as the publisher of a wide range of liberal and radical religious books. That wasn't always the case. These *Confessions of a Christian Publisher* are the fruits of his personal journey from publishing books he's 'too embarrassed to mention' to those by authors of a wide spectrum of beliefs.

Bringing God Back to Earth continues the themes of John Hunt's earlier book, prompted by a question from one of his children: 'Daddy, Do you believe in God?' I only hope the child addressed in the first book has grown up. Parts of this book are the stuff of nightmares. Descriptions of aspects of the Christian impact on the world in 'The Damage We Do', and possible future scenarios in 'The Choices We Face' will startle believers and non-believers alike. One example: after describing in some detail the Spanish invasion of Central America under Cortés, he writes

So holocaust is not too strong a word to describe aspects of the Christian impact on the world. A comparable genocide today to the sixteenth-century one in Central and South America would involve figures of around 600 million – nuclear war proportions. (page 233)

And the future? John Hunt makes a passionate plea to be rid of arguments about religion that simply don't matter. There's no point to some of the debates between believers and unbelievers.

To sum it up, life is just what it is, and being a Christian is just a particular way of living it rather



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than looking for a different one. We're in the kingdom of God if only we could see it. It's not the next world that's important, but this one. Not the future, but now. Not the kind of beliefs we have about God, but the kind of people they help us to be.

So far, so Sea of Faith. But John Hunt wants to take us further and it's one reason we should read this book. How in practice are we to replace bad religion with good religion? How will it manifest itself in our communities? In *Bringing God Back to Earth* there is a very definite place for churches of some form in the future – to provide a heart for the community; to enable us to wrestle with, and celebrate communally, birth, commitment, marriage and death, which are now turned into soulless administrative functions; as beacons of light, practising repentance, forgiveness, openness, love, tolerance, poverty and forces for change. As for the ministers of these enlightened churches, they should be just what they describe themselves as being, ministers of religion, that is ministers of all kinds of religion rather than preachers of a local version of a particular brand.

This book races breathlessly to its final vision. It makes compulsive reading. It's what I liked about the book. There are no footnotes or endnotes and no index. We feel we are in the author's company, carried along by his fervour. But like all great spiritual books, the fervour is undermined by a radical acceptance of life. After all:

Religion is nothing special. It's not something you do on Sundays or in quiet times. It's not something you can separate from loving and living. It's not different from washing the dishes, or dreaming at night... It's our response to life that determines what it means for us, rather than some uncertain idea of life itself. (page 31)

It left me wanting more; more about the practice of religion that shapes such a response to life. Maybe one of his kids will pop him another question!

O BOOKS FOR SOF READERS

I publish books which reflect my interests, and as a member for some years of the SoF they might also reflect yours. All are available worldwide, and can be ordered from good bookshops or direct from our website, www.o-books.net. Alternatively call Orca Books on 01202 665432.

John Hunt

The Anglican Quilt *Robert van de Weyer*

Tracing the roots of the current crisis in the Anglican communion back to its foundations over four centuries ago, the author shows why ancient divisions have grown wider in recent decades, and offers a detailed plan for resolving it.

"It should be read by everybody who cares about the future of the Anglican Church." **Rev Nicholas Stacey**, former deputy director of Oxfam. "There is much in it to admire...I have no ready alternative to offer." **John Habgood**, former Archbishop of York

1 903816 89 0 £9.99 \$14.95 240 pages pb

Bringing God Back to Earth *John Hunt*

(revised edition of *Daddy, Do You Believe in God?*) "Answers all the questions you ever wanted to ask about God and some you never even thought of."

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Andrew Linzey and Richard Kirker

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A re-issue of the popular *New Framework for Christian Belief*, this offers an alternative vision to the creeds of the Church.

"This is the most significant book for Christian thinking so far this millennium. It outlines a new framework for grasping a contemporary alternative to traditional expressions of belief." **Rev Dr Meic Phillips**, Presbyterian "A courageous and imaginative attempt to clear away the debris so that the Water of Life may bubble up to cleanse and renew our lives and our society." **Rev Marcus Braybrooke**, President, World Congress of Faiths

1 905047 17 7 £9.99 \$19.95 128 pages pb

Hilary Campbell reviews

Casting Off: Finding Faith for Change

by Ruth Scott

SPCK. London. 2005. £7.99. ISBN 028105696X

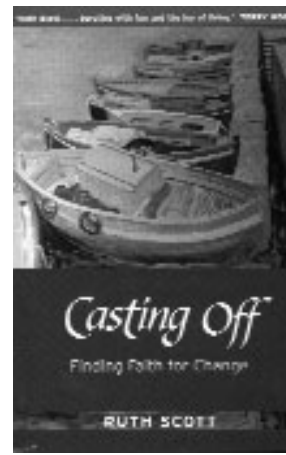
This book has a ringing endorsement from Terry Wogan. But don't let that put you off! Ruth Scott is an Anglican priest, writer and broadcaster (occasionally for Radio 2's Pause for Thought on Wogan's morning show). She has been involved in interfaith dialogue for some years, and lectures at Leo Baeck College, a training college for rabbis in Finchley. She runs workshops in the UK and abroad, using her training in mime and physical theatre, and acts as a facilitator for various Christian communities. In her spare time she eats fire.

This book explores the picture of faith as a raft that can be used to navigate the turbulent waters of uncertainty and change that seem to characterise the nature of life today. It is a picture deliberately chosen to contrast with the traditional picture of faith as fortress, rock, standing unmoved, unaltered by 'the changes and chances of this fleeting world'. 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head' (Matthew 8:20) are words that have become central to the author's faith. (pxii). This is a picture of living transitionally and of exploring a spirituality of homelessness.

This is a book which tells a personal story, and that explores tools for a travelling faith that may be useful for others. There is emphasis on facing uncertainty, of 'living the questions' (a quote from Rainer Maria Rilke). What maps and charts might be useful for this journey? The author explores the Bible as a map to liberate, seeing it as story to connect with, individually and collectively. She encourages an imaginative engagement with scripture, a wrestling and arguing with the texts. Travelling into unknown places requires the learning of different languages, of listening to the experiences, the stories of other people, and of helping them to express themselves in language that communicates their hope and belief. The line between sacred and secular language becomes indistinct or even invisible. For the priest this might be particularly focused in times of accompanying people through times of loss and grief.

For many families traditional doctrines about life after death make little sense. They are more concerned with expressing hope in humanity now, not on the basis of some perceived reward or punishment in the future, 'but because to live out love is the creative and life-giving way to live. Their hope lay in the belief that out of this terrible tragedy the human spirit could make something meaningful... all these things seemed to me to be gospel values, whatever the language we used to express them.' (p40)

Other chapters explore travelling light, valuing



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companions along the way, letting go of baggage, travelling hopefully and with humour. They explore the sense of finding faith in the fear of the unfamiliar, of the encounter with the other (in the author's case this has often been with the encounter with those of other faiths). She describes her journey as a woman seeking to 'sing the Lord's song in the strange land that is the Anglican Church' (p67). And there is exploration of the God-word, of why the author continues to make space for God. A question she asks of herself: 'Can I call myself a Christian when my faith focuses increasingly on humanity rather than divinity?' (p103). Her response is that her sense of God has become a shorthand for human qualities valued by all religions, and she sees her travelling as always wanting to follow 'such "godliness" or, as Jesus embodies it, such deep humanity.' (p106). She remains someone deeply committed to her faith, a wandering pilgrim, seeking to carry a sense of home with her as she sails her raft.

I found this a very accessible book, of a thoughtful following of faith. It is an honest personal story and an encouraging one for those who may continue to despair of the institution of church (which they still believe may be redeemable!), and the lack of such honest sharing within that institution. For some Sea of Faith people, this book will not be radical enough. It could provide a starting place for those who are beginning to wonder how to travel faithfully and transitionally. I enjoyed the personal story telling and I found much to resonate with my own faith journeying, with a celebration of the depth of humanity, a faith that lives the questions, and a seeking of religious language that is liberating.

Hilary Campbell is an Anglican priest, newly appointed Team Vicar in the parish of Kidlington with Hampton Poyle, in north Oxfordshire. She is a member of SoF Steering Committee.

Denis Gildea reviews

Happiness: Lessons from a New Science

by Richard Layard

Allen Lane. London. 2005. 310 pages. Hbk. £17.99. ISBN 0713997699

In some ways this book is stating the obvious. The Americans put 'the pursuit of happiness' at the top of their agenda in 1776, and Jeremy Bentham proposed the principle of the Greatest Happiness nearly 200 years ago. And many of us reflect wryly that we are not much happier after 50 years of unprecedentedly rapid increase in our standard of living. But we are stuck because we think happiness is purely subjective and a rather woolly concept.

Richard Layard is an economist (a professor at LSE), not a philosopher, and he approaches this problem scientifically. The unfolding of his logic challenges the assumptions underlying the current received wisdom. His book is very readable, and is brightened up by cartoons and quotations; but it is also a scholarly work, with simple statements justified in footnote references to scientific studies not only in economics but also in sociology, psychology, neuroscience and social policy.

The first part of the book shows that happiness is measurable, and this is the basis of all the subsequent logic which leads to ever more exciting conclusions. Our unquestioning pursuit of economic growth and individual consumption is put to shame by showing that when we see the joy of children getting new toys rapidly fading, especially when other children are getting them too, this applies equally to grown-ups. He quotes scientific studies showing what sort of thing causes happiness and misery. He shows that reducing our selfishness and competitiveness, and increasing our compassion, will make us better off – happier. He recommends that we should monitor levels of happiness and misery; rethink our attitude to taxes; go for greater equality; spend more time with our families and work shorter hours; forbid advertising to children; give high priority to mental health; recognise the value of meditation; and rethink moral education in schools.

So what has all this got to do with the Sea of Faith? Traditional religion has had two valuable functions: to convey wisdom about morality – how we live together – and about spirituality – self-awareness, and the search for inner peace. But as God has faded from our everyday vocabulary, and has become an embarrassing concept, to my surprise morality has become almost as faded and embarrassing. I do not think that even a hundred



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years ago there were many people whose only motivation for doing the right thing was to avoid punishment by the almighty law enforcement officer. Bishop Holloway has shown that Godless Morality is perfectly possible. It was a revelation that when Robin Cook suggested in 1997 that we should have an ethical foreign policy, this was treated with derision. Our own national interest is the only criterion.

So how do we shift from maximising profit to doing good? Why should we do what is right? Because it makes us happier. 'I don't have that faith.' 'Then look at the evidence.' Perhaps Richard Layard's principle of the Greatest Happiness provides us with a widely acceptable motivation to discern how to achieve it, both by our policies and individual actions and through spirituality. The argument will be more persuasive for resting on scientific evidence rather than faith.

I hope this remarkable book will be widely read by Sea of Faith members, and perhaps we might invite Richard Layard to a future conference to help us decide what to do about it.

I am tempted to sum up with a nutshell philosophy which I heard in a play a dozen years ago:

Love one another.
And you will be happy.
It is as simple,
And as difficult,
As that.
There is no other way.
Amen.

Denis Gildea is a retired civil servant and a long-standing member of SoF Network.

Damnatio Memoriae

by Sebastian Barker

Enitharmon Press. London. 2004. 128pages. £8.95. ISBN 19005640902

Sebastian Barker has an exquisite ear for traditional forms. He may not always avoid the Georgian pitfalls of predictable, even outmoded, dictions; but a modern traditional poem, such as 'Curriculum Vitae' which opens this volume runs beautifully, whether on full or half-rhyme, viz:

On the whole
Science procrastinates the soul,

Whose true anatomy is hurt
Into the beautiful by art.

The following poem, too, 'The Ballad of Hackney Brook' shows the same unerring ear at work; and both poems end strikingly, e.g., 'Curriculum Vitae': 'the affair / Of my mid-age, who brings me peace, / Her love, where paranoias cease.'; and the second poem: 'For next to love I know no love / Like the love of Hackney Brook'.

Unfortunately, the following poem 'Katie' is a bit of a verbal marshmallow – somewhat sentimental and weak:

O Katie, my Katie,
There was none like you
Seated on your barstool
To drink the whole night through.

Weak, too, in its choice of similes: 'Your head as hard as granite / Your smile as soft as rain.' I think there is a problem with this poem and the next three dedicated to members of his family because he is too close to his subjects. But when you reach 'In the Heart of Hackney' – a poem for Aidan Andrew Dun – any personal element is absent (despite the dedication) and Barker has the poem absolutely right. But enough of discussing Barker's undeniable lyric gift – few poets 'sing' today as he does – though I would like to go on talking of successful poems like 'Linger Awhile', 'Silent Meditation', 'The Virgin Muse' or 'A Song for Sarah', but that would be to almost completely misrepresent this remarkable volume. For the heart of it is a series of discrete and most unusual meditative poem sequences – especially that which gives the volume its title – but, additionally, 'Columbarium', 'The Scribe in the Scriptorium', 'The Teraphim of Trash', 'The Agony of Faith' and 'Against the Deadening of the Mind' which all, in fact, live under the general rubric of 'Damnatio Memoriae' or 'erased from memory'.

Sebastian Barker has made his poetry from his quarrel with *both* God and himself. Some ten years ago, from having gone down the road of philosophy he produced *The Dream of Intelligence*: a considerable poem whose focal point is the life of Nietzsche. That quasi-epic poem, in one sense, was both his long dark night of the soul and its way out at the same time. No saint, Barker was a suffering Humanist of a sort for many years. But a Humanist with a strong religious impulse. Eventually he became a Roman Catholic, though it



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appears to have 'solved' little to judge from subsequent poems. However, it gave him the most marvellous subjects, namely, the vast doctrinal work of the *Summa Theologiae* and its mediated dialogue with God. Half this book, then, *Damnatio Memoriae*, described as 'A Poem in Six Movements Scored for Many Voices', is an amazing fabricated *tour-de-force*. There is an extensive 'Exegesis' to each of the movements: a litany of scriptural and other quotations that the poet has hammered 'On the anvil of the tongue' into lively shape. Unfortunately there is insufficient space in this review for me to plunge deeply into this profound act of scholarship and poetry. All I can do is affirm its great fascination. For readers of *sof* this book of great yet personal thoughts offers a vital expression of one man's struggle to make sense of things mortal and immortal. I feel such a readership will inevitably welcome it as much as I do.

A Poison Tree

I was angry with my friend:
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

And I watered it in fears,
Night and morning with my tears:
And I sunned it with smiles,
And with soft deceitful wiles.

And it grew both day and night,
Till it bore an apple bright.
And my foe beheld it shine,
And he knew that it was mine.

And into my garden stole,
When the night had veiled the pole;
In the morning glad I see,
My foe outstretched beneath the tree.

William Blake

Closing Session

Here are some extracts from Rob Wheeler's multi-media closing session, based on the work of poet-painter-engraver William Blake, visionary prophet, political radical and heretic:



I sing according to the inspiration of the Poetic Genius, who is the eternal all-protecting Divine Humanity to whom be Glory and Power and Dominion evermore.

The Poetic Genius

The ancient Poets animated all sensible objects with Gods or Geniuses, calling them by the names and adorning them with the properties of woods, rivers, mountains, lakes, cities, nations, and whatever their enlarged and numerous senses could perceive.

And particularly they studied the genius of each city and country, placing it under its mental deity; till a system was formed, which some took advantage of, and enslaved the vulgar by attempting to realise or abstract the mental deities from their objects: thus began Priesthood; choosing forms of worship from poetic tales. And at length they pronounced that the Gods had ordered such things.

Thus men forgot that all deities reside within the human breast.

The Marriage of Heaven and Hell

*God appears and God is light
to those poor souls who dwell in night
but does a human form display
to those who dwell in realms of day.*

The roaring of lions, the howling of wolves, the raging of the stormy sea, and the destructive sword are portions of eternity too great for the eye of man.

Energy is Eternal Delight

The worship of God is: Honouring his gifts in other people each according to his genius and loving the greatest men and women best. Those who envy or calumniate great men and women hate God, for there is no other God.

All Bibles or sacred codes have been the causes of the following Errors:

That Man has two real existing principles, i.e. a Body and a Soul.

That Energy called Evil is alone from the Body and that Reason called Good is alone from the Soul.

That God will torment Man in Eternity for following his Energies.

But the following Contraries to these are True:

Man has no Body distinct from his Soul; for that called Body is a portion of Soul discerned by the five Senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age.

Energy is the only life and is from the Body, and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy.

Energy is Eternal Delight.

Everything that Lives is Holy

*Let us rejoice for empire is no more
and now the Lion and Wolf shall cease.*

Go therefore, cast out devils in Christ's name. Heal thou the sick of spiritual disease. Pity the evil, for thou art not sent to smite with terror and with punishments those that are sick; like the Pharisees crucifying and encompassing sea and land for proselytes to tyranny and wrath. But to the publicans and harlots go! Teach them true happiness, but let no curse go forth out of thy mouth to blight their peace. For hell is opened to heaven; thine eyes beheld the dungeons burst and the prisoners set free.

For everything that lives is holy!



FUTILITY

Move him into the sun –
Gently its touch awoke him once,
At home, whispering of fields unsown.
Always it woke him, even in France,
Until this morning and this snow.
If anything might rouse him now
The kind old sun will know.

Think how it wakes the seeds –
Woke, once, the clays of a cold star.
Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides,
Full-nerved – still warm – too hard to stir?
Was it for this the clay grew tall?
O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
To break earth's sleep at all?



In his *Liturgy for a Meditation on Force*, Richard Holloway included Wilfred Owen's *Futility*, one of the great English poems on the wastefulness of the killing that we do. On November 4 1918, just seven days before the Armistice, Wilfred Owen was caught in a machine gun attack and killed. He was twenty-five when he died.