



No. 74 November 2005



Down with God

sof is the magazine of the Sea of Faith Network (UK), a network of individuals and local groups that explores religion as a human creation. The magazine comes out in January, March, May, July, September and November.

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Oliver Essame, Gospel Hill Cottage, Chapel Lane, Whitfield, Brackley NN13 5TF
oliver@essame.clara.net

Subscription Rates for 2005: Individual membership: £30; concession membership £20; Magazine only: £15 per year.

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Dinah Livingstone, 10 St Martin's Close, London NW1 0HR
dinah@katabasis.co.uk

Copy deadline is **40 days** before the beginning of the month of publication. Contributions should preferably be emailed to the editor (in most formats) or posted as typewritten script.

LETTERS

Letters are particularly welcome and should be emailed or posted to:

Ken Smith, Bridleways, Haling Grove, South Croydon, CR2 6DQ
revkevin19@hotmail.co.uk

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Portholes Editor:

Ken Smith, Bridleways, Haling Grove, South Croydon, CR2 6DQ
revkevin19@hotmail.co.uk

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Rates are:

£120 full page

£65 half page

£37 quarter page

£25 1/8th of a page

sof is printed by Carrick Business Services, Cardiff.
(029 2074 1150)

WEBSITE

For more information, visit our website at: www.sofn.org.uk

ISSN 1460-5244 © SoF, 2005

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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

Down with God

This pre-Christmas issue of the magazine is called *Down with God* because the Christmas message is:

He came down to Earth from Heaven
who is God and Lord of all.
And his shelter was a stable
and his cradle was a stall.

Traditionally, Jesus, who is God, is born in a stable and dies on the cross, but remains God, Lord of all, omnipotent, eternal and *unchanged*.

The history of Christian theology has been a struggle to resolve this contradiction. We can read the Christian story as thrusting towards bringing God back down to Earth, because he never existed anywhere else, except as an idea, in the first place.

The first article in this issue looks at the work of the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo. Vattimo draws on Christian language of incarnation and salvation but says that this language must now take into account all the implications of the death of God. Vattimo conjugates this Christian language with the language of continental philosophy, Heidegger's 'history of being'. Vattimo reads this as a 'history of *weakening*,' 'weakening of the structures of being'. Of course, in ordinary conversation, rather than philosophical jargon, if I say 'I feel a weakening of being' it sounds rather like saying 'I think I'm coming down with the flu'.

Philip Knight's article on Vattimo, *The Kenosis of God* gives an introductory explanation of what Vattimo means by 'weakening of being'. One thing it clearly does mean is: 'If one believes in God, this God will be a non-realist God', the God of the book 'who does not exist as an objective reality'. So 'weakening of being' and 'a non-realist God' both mean that God 'does not exist as an objective reality', that is, in SoF language, God is a human creation. In my judgment and, I think, most members of the SoF Network, that is true. However, I don't think that the philosophical insight into God's non-existence afforded by the technical terms 'weakening of being' or 'non-realist' necessarily lead to any conclusions about the weakness or strength, the reality or non-reality of the Earth and its inhabitants.

However, Philip Knight shows Vattimo's *forte* as the *combining* of this technical philosophical language with the more familiar (to many of us) Christian language of incarnation and salvation. In particular, Vattimo uses the New Testament idea of '*kenosis* (God's own self-emptying and dissolution)'. In *Philippians 2: 6-11*, we have what was probably an early Christian hymn:

Though he was in the form of God
he did not count equality with God
as something to be grasped,
but emptied himself
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself,
became obedient to death, death on a cross.
Therefore God raised him high
and gave him the name
which is above all other names;
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord
(to the glory of God the Father).

In this hymn God *comes down* and becomes *wholly human*. He 'empties himself' into the wholly human. Then the wholly human, represented by Jesus, *rises* to take 'the name which is above all other names'. All that is God is assumed by the wholly human – the human form divine.

The last line of this early Christian hymn – 'to the glory of God the Father' – keeps it within the bounds of orthodoxy. God the Father remains 'on high' and supernatural. But the whole thrust of the poem is the triumph of the 'risen conquering son' (here representing humanity). In life and in many other stories and myths the son usually *takes over* from the father, may *depose* him. If we follow that pattern and regard the last line of the poem 'to the glory of God the Father' as merely formulaic, then Jesus the Son, *supersedes* the Father. In Blake's illustration to *Paradise Lost*, 'The Son Offers to Redeem Man', reproduced on the back cover of this issue, the Son is a beautiful rising young man, full of energy, and the Father is a crouching, faceless figure.

So we can read the Christian story as humanity coming into its own, growing up and no longer needing a supernatural father. After all, we usually regard it as 'unnatural' for ordinary adult humans to remain dependent on their father. Paul also has the theme of Jesus as the prototype. It is a vision of possibility.

Humanity has not yet fully come into its own. The story is not yet finished. In this sense the Christian story is *programmatically*, and 'salvation' can be seen as humanity fulfilling itself – becoming 'mature, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:13) – and bringing justice and peace on Earth, bringing heaven down to Earth, as in the book of *Revelation*.

Following Peter Knight's article on the philosopher Vattimo, we have Peter Lumsden's Eucharist, inspired by a theology of *kenosis*. At its conclusion he says:

So through this meal, we see that God resides only in humanity.

We declare the heavens empty, the Lord reigns only in the human heart.

God has become human, so that the human can become divine.

In this surrender of supernatural power, this *kenosis*, we see what we must do.

In *Asking Why* Michael Senior challenges Richard Holloway for complaining that without God the universe lacks meaning. As he says: 'You cannot blame a non-existent being for being absent.' In the next article John MacDonald Smith reassesses the 'anthropic' argument for the existence of God. Peter Mavromatis thinks of God as a ventriloquist's dummy, and following the recent reports that President Bush thinks God told him to invade Afghanistan and Iraq, *sof* is fortunate to have an original cartoon by Josh, drawn specially for this issue, on page 16.

This year I went on holiday to Sicily. We stayed near the beautiful little town of Cefalù, that stands on the island's north coast at one end of a wide bay. Over the town looms a gigantic rock – really, a small mountain – which in the past was used as a fortress against the many invaders. Much to our surprise we discovered that this rock was a poet called Dafnis. He was the son of the god Mercury and a nymph, and he introduced the world to the joys of pastoral poetry. He would roam about writing poems praising the beauties of nature before his eyes. He married Echnaide and swore eternal love to her. But unfortunately, he got drunk and was seduced by a capricious queen. His mother-in-law was so incensed at his unfaithfulness that she blinded him, so that he wandered far and wide through the country, now unable to see its beauties or write about them.. At last, his father Mercury took pity on him and turned him into an enormous rock, so that he became part of the nature he had loved so much.

The mountains, rivers and whole landscape of Sicily are full of gods, heroes and poets. Mount Etna, which is still very active, was Vulcan's forge. These stories, some very old, *humanise* the landscape, which acquires layer upon layer of meaning, a history in human consciousness that continues century after century.

Even though the Christian God is dead (in fact, never existed), he also continues to inhabit the physical and mental landscape of Europe and further afield, in buildings, stories, popular traditions, memories of

battles long ago. This enriches the imaginative texture of people's lives, making them not more divine but more fully human. Don Cupitt has suggested that we might think of our God as a dead person whom we remember affectionately or otherwise. In *Paradise Lost* Milton mentions Greek and Roman gods as well as telling the story of the Judaeo-Christian God, Satan and Adam and Eve. How does he differentiate the reality status of these gods? Presumably, he thought that the Christian God was real and the Greek and Roman gods were myths. But on the other hand, Milton is telling a story, which adds considerably to the biblical story, and so in that sense the Judaeo-Christian God is his creation, fictional too.

Stories and myths enrich our mental and physical landscape and so do dead people. Dead people from the distant past tend to become fuzzy and mythical if we do not know much about them. Like Sicily, London is full of myths, for example, Battlebridge Road near King's Cross is called after the last battle between Queen Boadicea (now usually spelt Boudicca) and the Romans. Since it is rather doubtful whether that took place there, it has become mythical. But it is easier to find out more about people who lived closer to our time. For example, whenever I walk up Millfield Lane on Hampstead Heath, I always stop and remember at the spot where Keats and Coleridge met and had their famous conversation. I was fascinated to read Richard Holmes'¹ well-researched account into what actually happened. Likewise when I stand in Bunhill Fields and nod to Blake in his tomb, I'm glad to see that the tombstone also mentions his wife Catherine Sophia and to remember that, by all accounts, they were very happily married. Certainly, it matters whether these people really lived on Earth or not. I'd like to know more...

The historian's job is an important one. It does matter whether people existed or not and what they were like and what they did. Yes, our gods, Greek, Roman Judaeo-Christian-Muslim are fictions, myths that are part of our heritage. Yes, we remember them rather like dead people. But the human beings who worshipped and fought over them, who struggled to make sense of their own lives, who inhabited the same spaces that we do now, were real and it is both interesting and respectful to care about the reality of their lives. But the dead are dead. Above all, let us believe in life before death, respect the living and enjoy being with each other and fellow creatures here and now.

1. Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Darker Reflections* (Flamingo, London 1999).

The *Kenosis* of God

Philip Knight introduces the work of Gianni Vattimo, who brings to the centuries-long philosophical conversation about 'being' the Pauline idea of *kenosis*: the 'emptying' of God.

The US moral philosopher, Jeffrey Stout, notes that, 'academic theology seems to have lost its ability to command attention as a distinctive contributor to public discourse in our culture.'¹ This situation creates what Stout calls the 'theologian's dilemma': the more theologians adhere to meaningful patterns of public discourse, the less distinctive is the theological contribution they make to public life, and thus the less able they are to voice the traditional concerns of the religious communities they are meant to serve. But the more they are seen to be voicing these concerns the less public relevance is accredited to their utterances. Church leaders and academic theologians who contribute to public debate will have a public audience only if the utterances they make could just as well have been uttered by humanists who need never have encountered theological sources of meaning. Consequently, philosophy tends to call for the privatisation of religious belief. In my workshop presentation at this year's SoF Conference, of which this article is a reduced version, I quoted Richard Rorty, Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls in support of this call. My aim, however, is to present an alternative call from the Italian philosopher, Gianni Vattimo, which offers theology a way to recover its public voice.

According to Rorty, theology's privatisation is necessitated by our acceptance of a Darwinian story of human origins. Darwinism has made philosophical pluralism seem irresistible by undermining our confidence in the philosophical heritage of orthodox Christian theology. This heritage posits an ingredient special to humans which connects us to a realm of reality beyond the surrounds of our immediate material environment. The existence of such a realm made the notion of a non-human authority, such as a divine voice in scripture, seem plausible. Without it such a notion ceases to convince and theology loses its public plausibility. For Rorty, 'The main reason why religion needs to be privatised is that, in political discussion with those outside the relevant religious community, it is a conversation-stopper.'² Ending a political conversation is about the worst thing anyone can do in an open liberal society based on 'argumentative reason' and nothing ends such conversation more comprehensively than a word or two from God. Interpretations of the Bible, like interpretations of poetry, will be a meaningful but private affair.

Gianni Vattimo, however, can be interpreted as offering an alternative to privatisation. He draws on the language of incarnation and salvation but skilfully evades its tendency to be authoritarian and metaphysical by insisting that Christian theology will not be heard in the public square until people of religion have thought through, and included in their utterances, *all* the implications of Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God.

Vattimo's philosophy begins with the truth of hermeneutics (interpretation) in both senses of the genitive. He explores the type of truth which belongs to hermeneutics and the truth that hermeneutics brings to philosophy once we accept Nietzsche's claim that 'there are no facts, only interpretations; and this is an interpretation.' For Vattimo, hermeneutical truth – the truth of interpretation – responds to the history that Heidegger called 'the history of being' and which Vattimo reads as a history of *weakening*. This means that any reconstruction of a tradition's future cannot evade the influence of its past and, for Vattimo, this means that we need to accept that:

All the principal traits of western civilisation ... are structured by their relation to Judeo-Christian Scripture, the text upon which this civilisation is based. While, our civilisation no longer explicitly professes itself Christian ... it is nevertheless profoundly shaped by that heritage at its source.³

For Vattimo, recovering theology's public voice is a matter of recollecting that Christian texts and associated experiences belong within a historical trajectory which constitutes our own secular, pluralistic culture where public debate is transacted. Indeed, Vattimo believes that secularism and philosophical pluralism can be neither fully understood nor argued for persuasively without a recognition of their provenance in biblical revelation and that consequently hermeneutics, secularism and a nihilism which undermines the strong structures of 'being' don't merely identify the vocation which 'being' has for us today but are also the maturation of the Christian message. Vattimo notes:

The Judeo-Christian message ... speaks of an occurrence of being, which has a history, and this history is the history of creation (God creates a being other than himself, a being who is free even to deny God) and salvation (God becomes man in abasement and humiliation, and dissolves his own transcendence – the event that St. Paul calls *kenosis*).⁴



The Turin Shroud

On this view, Christian history – biblical history, the story of creation, incarnation and salvation – is ‘the history of being’ as seen now in secularisation and the weakening of the strong structures of ‘being’ expressed in the hermeneutic rendering of truth over metaphysics, the growth of democracy over monarchy, and pluralism over absolutism. Vattimo twists the Christian story of creation, incarnation and salvation in the direction provided by the biblical idea of *kenosis* (God’s own self-emptying and dissolution) and away from metaphysical authority. In the process he gives voice to an inheritance which should not, and cannot, be excluded from public debate since it is just this biblical inheritance which makes public debate possible in an age where metaphysics is everywhere in decline. The following three points will explain Vattimo’s thinking.

‘Though he was in the form of God ... he emptied (*ekenosen*) himself, taking the form of a servant’ (Philippians 2:5-7).

First, Vattimo acknowledges that philosophical pluralism marks the end of a period of thought dominated by metaphysics during which time ‘being’ was understood as the objective foundation of reality and truth. However, Vattimo argues that metaphysics cannot be *directly* rejected. If we are to overcome ‘being’ understood in terms of metaphysical foundations we must, Vattimo urges, think of ‘being’ in terms of its historicity as a process of weakening and withdrawal symbolised in the biblical idea that God is friend rather than master, self-emptyingly creative and incarnate throughout the world, and continually dissolving today in the processes of secularisation. For Vattimo, secularisation is the destiny of Christianity understood as the *kenosis* of God. He notes:

... modern hermeneutic philosophy is born in Europe not only because here there is a religion of the book that focuses attention on the phenomenon of interpretation, but also because this religion has at its base the idea of the incarnation of God, which it conceives as *kenosis*, as abasement and, in our translation, as weakening.⁵

Secondly, Vattimo sees no need to refute Rorty’s claim that the ‘history of being’ unfolds within a contingent human canon of Western productivity but he does refute Rorty’s insouciance about the need to understand philosophical pluralism in the light of this canon’s heritage. Only in this light, Vattimo argues, can philosophical pluralism hope to be read as an effective critique of metaphysics in the forms of humanism, technology and the will to power that it takes today. As Vattimo sees it, the problem of postmodernity is how to express the truth of the end of metaphysics without speaking of this truth in metaphysical terms. To treat the shift from metaphysics to hermeneutics, as Rorty does, as of little philosophical interest, not only misses its vital connection with the past – the biblical and Christian past – but also leaves hermeneutics and pluralism unable to negate the self-

reflexive tendency of metaphysics to turn against those who reject it. Vattimo believes that without a connection to a history – ‘the history of the weakening of being’ originating in the biblical drama of divine *kenosis* through creation and incarnation – we will never fully succeed in questioning the mastery of metaphysics in the form of humanism. Vattimo writes:

My friend Richard Rorty has expressed his sympathy for my reading of *kenosis* ... though without finding it any reason to feel any closer to Christianity. Now ... I do maintain that ... even his non-foundationalism is possible – presentable as a reasonable thesis – only because we are living in a civilisation shaped by the biblical, and specifically Christian message. If this were not the case, Rorty would, paradoxically, be obliged to supply demonstrative proof for his non-foundationalism as an ‘objective’ thesis, that is, to argue that in reality there are no foundations – forgetting the additional clause in Nietzsche’s sentence: ‘there are no facts, only interpretations and this is an interpretation, [Rorty] does acknowledge a spontaneous preference for a world-view that rejects foundationalism and is thus more desirable because less authoritarian and more open to human freedom. But what can we do when we find this spontaneous preference for a humane and democratic society lacking?’⁶

For Vattimo, what we do is offer a reading of ‘the history of being’ as a history of the Christian message of salvation from the strong structures of ‘being’ through *kenosis* which manifests itself today in the historical appearances of secularisation, pluralism, democracy and the nihilistic (interpretative) view of truth. It is this that allows us to think beyond foundationalism and the metaphysics of modernity encountered in humanism and techno-science.

Thirdly, it is for the sake of a secularised public life of pluralism and democracy free of metaphysical influence that Vattimo reinvents Christianity as biblical revelation. His reinvention of Christian revelation is not a return to what Christianity was in the past. Rather, Vattimo is ‘rethinking revelation in secularised terms in order to ‘live in accord with one’s age.’⁷ He believes that reconstructing Christianity as a *kenotic*, non-metaphysical and, therefore, salvific faith provides a persuasive interpretative matrix for understanding our own times which does not succumb to a humanistic metaphysics. Whereas Habermas, Rawls and Rorty want to exclude words and phrases like ‘salvation’, ‘the events of revelation’, ‘creation’ and ‘incarnation’ from public debate, Vattimo gives them new meanings which allow them to be heard once more in this forum. For Vattimo, recollecting ‘the history of being’ as a history of weakening extends the limits of public discourse beyond the boundaries of scientific and socio-political cooperation to include not only the Christian precept of charity but also the whole biblical drama of creation, incarnation and redemption because without this biblical provenance public discourse will itself remain captive to the authorising traits of theologico-metaphysics. *Pace* Rorty, Vattimo notes:

An ethics of respect and solidarity can become reasonable, precise in what it says and capable of holding its own in conversation with others precisely by relating itself explicitly to its provenance.⁸

Vattimo suggests that philosophical pluralism can be persuasively articulated only insofar as it acknowledges its own provenance in biblical revelation. Social co-operation resulting from persuasion rather than force and an ethics based on respect and human solidarity – both marks of Rortyan public discourse – are possible in a Western post-metaphysical pluralistic culture precisely because this culture stands in relation to a heritage of biblical revelation. Our pluralistic culture, Vattimo argues, can neither understand itself nor recognise its emergence from a period of history dominated by metaphysics unless it acknowledges its indebtedness to a biblical heritage. This heritage can no longer be received in orthodox, non-hermeneutical, or anti-pluralistic forms but while it remains mute in the public square post-metaphysical discourse is itself denied a plausible public voice.

For Vattimo, secularisation is the destiny of Christianity understood as the *kenosis* of God.

If one believes in God – and, Vattimo notes, ‘the decline of metaphysics ... has made the philosophical denial of God’s existence impossible,’⁹ – the recovery of religion is not a return to metaphysics and the God of realism but an outcome of their dissolution and this outcome is ‘the message of Christian salvation [consisting as it does, for Vattimo] in dissolving the peremptory claims of reality.’¹⁰ If one believes in God, this God will be a non-realist God, the God of the book ‘who does not exist as an objective reality’,¹¹ but in the plural babble of interpretation as this is handed over to contingent history. It will be the God of the book in the story of *kenosis* read as the history of salvation – the history of secularisation, the weakening of the strong structures of being, the rise of interpretation, pluralism and democracy – that opens upon the truth of the Gospel which will set us free, the truth of love over power, which Vattimo fleshes out in his books *Belief* and *After Christianity*. As Vattimo notes:

We cannot *not* call ourselves Christians because in a world where God is dead – where the meta-narratives have been dissolved and all authority has fortunately been demythologised, including that of ‘objective’ knowledge – our only chance of human survival rests in the Christian commandment of charity.¹²

Nothing more publicly relevant and nothing more true.

- 1 Jeffrey Stout. *Ethics After Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents*, (James Clark & Co, Cambridge, 1988) p. 163.
- 2 Richard Rorty. *Philosophy and Social Hope* (Penguin Books, London 1999) p. 171.
- 3 Gianni Vattimo. *Belief*, translated by Luca D’Isanto and David Webb (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1999), p.43.
- 4 Vattimo. ‘After Onto-Theology: Philosophy Between Science and Religion’, translated in Mark A. Wrathall (ed), *Religion after Metaphysics* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003) p. 35.



Dante, Virgil and the 3 Beasts
Illustrations to *The Divine Comedy* by William Blake

- 5 Vattimo. *Beyond Interpretation: The Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy*, translated by David Webb (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1997) p. 48.
- 6 Vattimo. ‘The Age of Interpretation’, translated in Santiago Zabala (ed), *The Future of Religion* (Columbia University Press, New York, 2005) pp. 51-52.
- 7 Vattimo. *Belief*, *op.cit.* 1999, p. 75.
- 8 Vattimo. *Belief*, *op.cit.* 1999, p.45.
- 9 Vattimo. *After Christianity*, translated by E.T. Luca D’Isanto (Columbia University Press, New York, 2002) p. 15.
- 10 Vattimo. ‘The Age of Interpretation’, *op. cit.* 2005, p. 49.
- 11 Vattimo *After Christianity*, *op. cit.* 2002, p. 8.
- 12 Vattimo. ‘The Age of Interpretation’ *op. cit.* 2005, p. 54 (emphasis added).

Dr. Philip Knight studied theology at Durham University and teaches Religious Education in Canterbury. This article is a summary of the workshop paper he gave to the SoF Conference in July 2005. An earlier, much longer version of the paper (including a bibliography) was published as ‘Pragmatism, Postmodernism and the Bible as a Meaningful Public Resource in a Pluralistic Age’ in John M. Court (ed.), *Biblical Interpretation: The Meanings of Scripture – Past and Present*, (T & T Clark International Continuum, London, 2003) pp. 310-325. Parts of that longer paper have been reproduced here by kind permission of the publisher.

Professor Gianni Vattimo teaches theoretical philosophy at the University of Turin, is a former MEP (left-wing democrat section of the European Socialist Group) and regularly contributes to Italian and foreign newspapers, including *La Stampa*, *L’Unità* (Italy), *El Pais* (Spain).
www.giannivattimo.it

Love's Domain: A Eucharist



This Eucharist, composed by Peter Lumsden, is inspired by a theology of *kenosis*: Through this meal, we see that God resides only in humanity.

Leader: Friends,

We are about to re-enact the great event that gives meaning to our lives, so let us put ourselves in a suitable frame of mind. This celebration is one of thanksgiving, of gratitude, for the ability to overcome evil. To appreciate this fully, let us make ourselves open to the chaos, evil and futility in our lives. To see the task we have set ourselves, let us acknowledge – in a few moments of silence – the evil that we and our way of life inflict on the whole world.

SILENCE

READINGS

REFLECTIONS, WITNESS, TESTIMONY

BIDDING PRAYERS

Eucharistic Prayer

L: The love and peace of the Lord be with you.

All: And also with you.

L: Let us lift up our hearts to give thanks and praise to the Lord.

All: It is right for us to do so.

L: We give you thanks and praise that through you the vision of the kingdom has come to all humanity. That vision you proclaimed in the Synagogue at Nazareth.

In fidelity to this vision, we have left the security of the Age of Faith and gone forth into the desert of the modern world.

We have left the fleshpots of certainty, to live in the wasteland of moral relativism.

It is in this desolation, we can build the new Jerusalem and make the desert bloom like the rose. In this celebration, we bring together the future and the past.

The past which was your historical life.

The future which can be our making of your presence in the world.

It is through this re-enactment that we foreshadow the Messianic banquet.

When all humanity will have its fill.

When all will sit at the welcome table.

We proclaim that through you, we have the power to create Heaven on Earth.

Swords can be beaten into ploughshares and nations not learn war any more.

We proclaim the salvation of humanity, through you it no longer has any need of illusion.

It can have faith in itself.

It has come of age.

It is able to accept sole responsibility for the world. Let us now give the sign of peace as a foreshadowing of peace on earth.

KISS OF PEACE

All: The night before you died, you showed us your vision of the future. You took bread, broke it, gave it to us saying:
Eat! I shall not eat again until the Kingdom comes!
When supper was ended, you took the cup and said:
Drink! I shall not drink again until all is accomplished!

L: From this we understand how it is going to be. When all is shared, you will be with us. When each receives according to their needs and gives according to their ability, you will be present.

All: We have come to interpret your actions and your subsequent death as an act of self-giving. We have come to understand this bread and wine as your flesh and blood.

COMMUNION

L: So through this meal, we see that God resides only in humanity. We declare the heavens empty, the Lord reigns only in the human heart. God has become human, so that the human can become divine. In this surrender of supernatural power, this *kenosis*, we see what we must do. The global capitalism we have created and which we benefit from, must surrender its power to the poor. We need to see that it is our economic choices that determine who lives and who dies in the Third World. We must cease consuming many times our fair share of the world's resources. This is how the Kingdom is created in our era. Let's go and do it!

All: AMEN!

Peter Lumsden is a member of SoF Steering Committee.

Asking Why



Richard Holloway

Michael Senior offers a philosophical response to Richard Holloway's *Looking in the Distance*.

Richard Holloway's book is subtitled *The Human Search for Meaning*, and in at least part of it he complains that it is meaning which the universe lacks. 'Everything I once thought to be steady and enduring has disappeared into the ceaseless flux of a universe without meaning' (p.11). He finds he has a 'sense of bafflement at the massive indifference of the universe' (p.13). This unease he equates with the inability to understand why things are as they are: we are 'no closer to understanding why there is a world' (p.31) – and although we know quite a lot about how all this came about', there is no satisfactory explanation as to *why* we came about' (p.5).

We all know what it feels like; here I want to consider briefly what it means.

If one asks 'Why does the world exist?' one immediately proposes the possibility of a motivated force *outside* the world.

It has been pointed out by several philosophers (Wittgenstein, for instance, and Carnap) that while you can perfectly well ask questions within a context, a system – what Carnap calls a framework – you cannot, within that framework, ask questions about the framework as a whole. The simple reason is that such a question would lie outside the framework. (Wittgenstein says 'outside the world') and so we would have to posit a sort of super-framework for the question to be in, and this process could go on for ever.

To put it another way, the problem about asking questions about *everything* is that one is implicitly asking questions about something which lies outside of everything, which is inherently impossible. You can see at once which way this line of thought must go. Something, call it a First Cause, has to provide a cut-off point, if we are not to carry the matter to infinity. Something about which no further questions can be asked. The job-specification narrows down the short-list candidates: 'must be outside of time and space, has to be good at avoiding answering direct questions...' So we end up with the Usual Suspect – capital U, capital S, of course – one wouldn't wish to sound irreverent.

Yet even without this problem the question **why** has itself led us in that direction. Asking **why** is an activity relying on concepts of causal or purposive action, and so carries a motivational connotation. If one asks 'Why does the world exist?' one immediately proposes the possibility of a motivated force *outside* the world. It is the same point, with different emphasis. You can only ask a question about a system as a whole by assuming something lying in a context outside that system.

In any case there are a number of points I would wish to make about the whole business of looking for meaning in the universe (and failing, in this case, to find it). **Firstly**, meaning is not an attribute appropriate to universes. Meaning is a concept *within* our system of thought, to do with our communication and sign systems, and so a human construct. Of course we can, if we choose, apply this idea to the universe, or to anything else, by, as it were, intentionally reading it as a code, or a message. Holloway gives examples, in fact, of the way this has sometimes been done, as by supposing that the Earth was constructed as a backdrop to the human drama (p.68), which he calls 'the classic Christian epic' – but he dismisses such fantasies as myths, rather than adopts them. The point is that any such meaning has to be given to the universe by *us*, rather than being presented to us by *it*. There is no point in looking to the universe for meaning, unless you have already put it there.

The point is that any such meaning has to be given to the universe by *us*, rather than being presented to us by *it*.

The **second** point is that to contrast a universe with meaning with a universe without meaning, he would have to be able to say what such a universe would be like. What extra feature would it have, such that he would be moved to say of it 'Ah, a universe with meaning!' How would he be able to tell the one from the other, just by looking?

A **third** point one might make about this business of looking for meaning, and being aggrieved not to find it,

would be to ask what reason he has been given to think that the universe might – he implies *should* – have a meaning. Clearly there is no clue there which implies that a meaning has gone missing, or somehow been omitted by oversight.

You cannot blame a non-existent being for being absent.

For this unsatisfactory state of affairs Richard Holloway blames the absence of God: 'And it is God who is absent' (p.16). God is an absent parent (p.14). Yet God could only be found absent if he could have been present. And to have that capacity, to have been able to be present, he would first of all have to exist. You cannot blame a non-existent being for being absent.

So are we to understand that God exists, but has withdrawn? If so, how did we come to know the truth of either, let alone of both, these propositions? But if all

that is meant is that he does not observe God as a feature of the universe, one would have to ask: why should he expect to do so? What reason has he been given for such an expectation?

The Earth is 'far from having a divinely ordained purpose and direction' (p.91). 'We find ourselves in a universe without any discernible purpose' (p.92). Was there any clue given that it might be otherwise? All that one can complain about, in the end, is one's own inability to impose an interpretation on a neutral state of being. And in the end the only person to whom one can address the question **why**, is God, with the concomitant requirement that for this purpose, if for no other, it may be necessary to invent him.

Michael Senior is a doctor of philosophy and a full-time writer. He is a long-term member of SoF Network. This article is based on the workshop he gave at the SoF Conference in July 2005.

Bring Me the Sunflower

Bring me the sunflower for me to transplant
in my earth scorched by the salt sea wind,
so that its gold face yearns all day
up to the blue mirror of the sky.

Dark things tend towards brightness,
bodies run into tints and tones
diluting to music. Lightness
becomes the fortune of fortunes.

Bring me the plant that climbs there
where blond transparencies stir
and life distils like spirit,
bring the sunflower crazed with light.

Eugenio Montale

Translated from the Italian by the Editor

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Does Cosmic Order Imply an Orderer?

John MacDonald Smith reassesses the ‘anthropic’ argument for the existence of God.

Long Odds on an Ordered Cosmos

Some years ago I was asked by a colleague, a teacher of students for the ministry, what I thought of the Anthropic argument for God. As it happened, this was some thirty years after I ceased work as a nuclear weapons scientist to become a priest, and had written an early paper on the subject. I replied that just as I did not then think the argument held water, I still did not. In what follows I hope to show why this is the case despite the much more detailed knowledge of the cosmos which has been developed over the past few decades.

There is no doubt that anthropism can present a powerful case. The presence of observers, in a complex, long-lived universe – the condition that the universe be hospitable to observers – does depend crucially on the fine-tuning of certain fundamental constants of nature. If the masses of the proton, neutron, electron and neutrino along with the Planck constant and the mass associated with the cosmological constant are chosen randomly, the odds against their conspiring to produce such a universe are 10^{229} to 1.

This is long odds and implies a very high degree of order. But order does not imply an Orderer and in any case a cosmos as complex as ours requires a high degree of order to account for its survival and its creativity. The question at issue is whether 10 followed by 229 zeros is evidence of design, for it is design which implies a Designer. Professor Keith Ward of Oxford thinks it does and in his book *God, Chance and Necessity* (Oxford, 1996) states on page 52: ‘The existence of the laws of nature does not render God superfluous. On the contrary it strongly implies that there is a God who formulates such laws and ensures the physical realm conforms to them.’ Newton’s contemporary Samuel Clarke said something like that three hundred years ago, with the suggestion that God nudges planets back into orbit when, because of their imperfections, they stray.

The Historical: Causality and Falsifiability

Ward’s conclusion that God is implied by cosmic structure seems to reduce God to the status of a concept in a scientific theory; or, it suggests that science has

come to an end at the point at which God is invoked as an explanatory hypothesis. Neither of these is acceptable and both rest on a misunderstanding of the meaning of the concept of a law of nature.

The underlying assumption here is that law is imposed or prescriptive in a mechanical, clockwork universe. Samuel Clarke adds the third element, the Platonism which thinks that this world is an imperfect copy of a Heavenly Idea and therefore not wholly comprehensible without remainder, on its own terms.

This is unrecognisable as theology by anyone who is not a deist, and as science by anybody at all. So we consult Leibniz, another contemporary of Newton, who, unlike Newton, refused to invoke occult qualities in order to dig himself out of the hole created for theology by a mechanistic cosmology. To Newton’s idea of absolute time he asked the question whether it made sense for God to have created everything a year earlier and asserted that space and time are relational, that the universe is a collection of things in relationships which define space and time. In more explicit terms, Alibis asserted the principle of sufficient reason as basic to an understanding of nature, along with the appeal to the historical as an essential aspect of the study of the cosmos.

Science, we are suggesting, is a matter of explaining things in the world in terms of other things in the world, holding that the universe is intelligible on its own terms. This involves an invocation of causality as a fundamental cosmological theory, first expressed by Charles Lyell in the 1830s, who wrote ‘...all former changes of the organic and inorganic creation are referable to one uninterrupted course of physical events, governed by the laws now in operation.’

As we know, it is not quite plain sailing from here on. As Karl Popper has pointed out, what marks off scientific statements from others is that the former, or one or more of their consequences, are falsifiable by experiment. This makes scientific doctrine essentially rather *ad hoc*, good-enough-for-now. Popper compares the growth of science to pushing piles into a swamp: you go down as far as is necessary to support the structure you wish to build.

An Evolving Cosmos

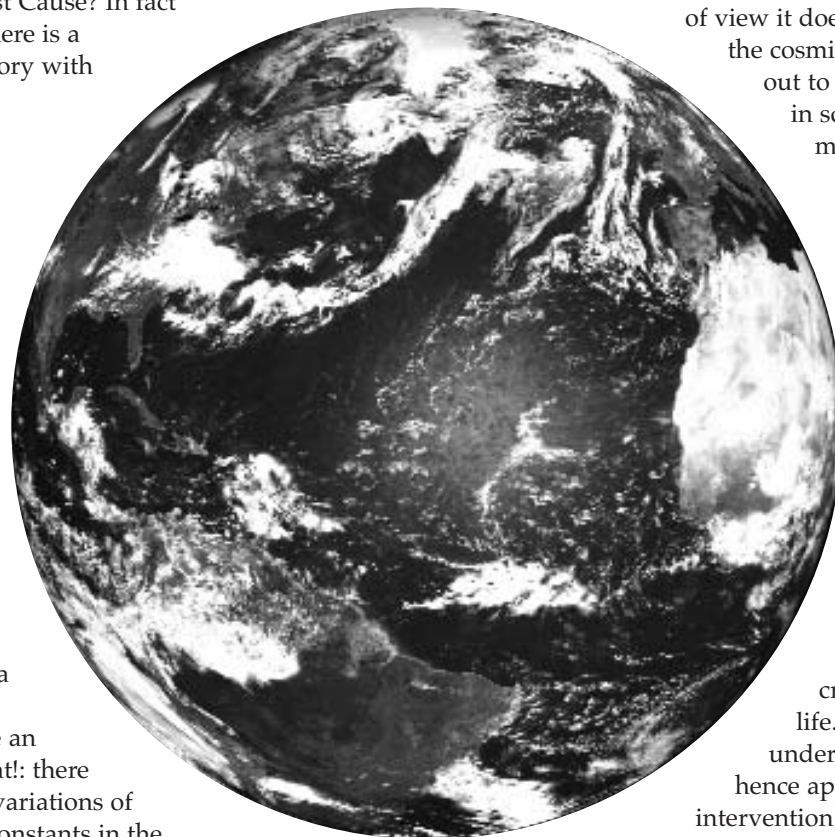
With these thoughts in mind we can look for a scientific, rather than a theological explanation of the very remote probability that there be a long-lived, complex cosmos hospitable to life. The key to this is explanation in terms of past history, or evolution. In *Dreams of a Final Theory* (page 74) Steven Weinberg traces the ancestry of the piece of chalk used by Thomas Henry Huxley, 'Darwin's Bulldog', to illustrate his lectures to the British Association in 1868, nine years after the publication of *The Origin of Species*. In principle, it can be traced back through many and varied changes, to the Big Bang itself.

But what of the Big Bang? Does that not point to a creative First Cause? In fact it does not, because there is a properly scientific theory with empirically falsifiable implications which accounts for the Big Bang and the fine-tuning of the cosmic constants all at the same time. In *The Life of the Cosmos* Lee Smolin offers an evolutionary account of cosmic origins, in which black holes are the crucial agencies for the production of new space-time regions or universes. An imploding black hole is the 'parent' of a young cosmos, which will not necessarily be an exact copy of its parent!: there may well be random variations of the values of cosmic constants in the 'offspring'. Some of these will inhibit black hole production – remember how finely-tuned are the constants in our own universe – and will not 'reproduce'. There will, therefore, be a tendency for universes which maximise black hole populations to predominate because non-productive universes will die out. It does not, of course, follow that the more fecund universes will all be complex, or evolve life because that depends on other factors and in any case the smallest variations in cosmic constants can result in substantial changes.

For instance, carbon is crucial to the evolution of life. Smolin is able to show that the quantity of carbon involved in creating life is radically dependent, both ways, on the weak nuclear force. Indeed, he points out that black hole population is dependent on twenty parameters in particle physics and cosmology, each of

which can vary up or down and that therefore the theory can be falsified forty times over, should black hole population be substantially increased by small variations or if no clear pattern emerges. He reports eight cases in which a parameter-change results in a dramatic decrease in black hole population, and so far there is no instance of a large increase.

Smolin suggests that this evolutionary theory of cosmic development is strictly parallel with evolutionary biological theory and therefore insistence on small random variations in cosmic constants has a basis in reality. The fine-tuning of cosmic constants is susceptible of a straightforward scientific explanation, and the God of the gaps explanation is unnecessary. The cosmos is evolutionary but so far, cannot on its own terms be shown to be teleological. From this point of view it does not matter whether the cosmic evolution theory turns out to be true: many theories in science have not. What matters is that it exists.



A growing understanding of the things in the universe as distinct and different entities, rather than anonymous 'particles' deepens our knowledge of the cosmic causal nexus, as an evolutionary set of relationships, in which the values of the cosmic constants are crucial to its hospitality to life. In addition, it can be understood on its own terms, hence appeal to external intervention or teleology cannot be sustained. Yet this apparently negative truth can be the spur to a deeper understanding and exploration that is not only scientific but also spiritual.

John Macdonald Smith has been a parish priest and founder member of Clergy against Nuclear Arms. His book *On Doing without 'God'* was published by Emissary (Bicester, 1993).

No Turning Back

John Challenor gives an account of his pilgrim's progress.

I was ordained priest in June, 1955, aged 32. My experience of the world of the 1940s as soldier, student and teacher had convinced me that to live a conventional life would be madness. The world needed saving. Humanity was threatened. Statesmen, shocked by the havoc and suffering of a second Thirty Years War in Europe (1914-1945) were taking early steps to European Union; my response was to join the Catholic Church, drawn by reading Lord Acton, Christopher Dawson, Jacques Maritain... To be active in the Church, ordination seemed necessary. I gave up on a girl friend, and on the idea of becoming an academic.

I had joined the Birmingham Oratory. The Novice-Master was doubtful. 'Everyone here studied in Rome,' he said. 'Even Newman was there for a while – not a happy time for him... But I dare say it will be all right.' I had studied, so far, in Paris, where as part of the course at the seminary of Saint-Sulpice I had had to give a presentation to fellow-students on some saint or spiritual teacher. I chose Newman, and was drawn to join his bookish community of ten or so priests.

Back from a short holiday after ordination, I passed the Father Superior in the hall. 'They want you in the School,' he said. 'Short of RE. teachers. Not for long – we' re finding a layman. Just see the boys know the Catechism.'

I was still in the School six months later when a new Superior was elected – the scholarly liberal Stephen Dessain. As Chairman of the Governors he had a vision of raising academic standards and making St Philip's Grammar School into a sort of Catholic King Edward's, the foremost Birmingham school. I worked in St Philip's for twelve years as Head of the RE. Department. with a group of committed teachers that included Hamish Swanston and Duncan Macpherson. We took the Catechism as read, and taught the synoptic gospels to all the boys for O Level, and scripture to a few at A Level. We taught quite a lot of church history, some philosophy, current affairs – the Vatican Council – and we tried to answer questions about the Pill.

For Catholics, the early 1960s seemed good times. Statistics for church-going were at a peak. Even before the Council opened, Hans Küng's books were

presenting hopeful prospects of what it might do. When the Council ended, in 1965, we felt we had a wonderful message to communicate. I felt sure I was in the right place.

But in December 1966, the sky darkened. Charles Davis, Britain's leading dogmatic theologian, left the Church. Cardinal Heenan and the Apostolic Delegate seem to have feared losing control of the runaway Church, and to the great satisfaction of many conservative Catholics who disliked the Council and all its works, they began to apply the brakes. Already, our liberal Superior had been replaced by a conservative. Restrictions were put on my work. The hottest issue was a 'Parish Open Discussion Group', which I had started, to talk about the Council. It was accused by traditionalists of being controversial and divisive, and the Oratory community sought to censor its topics and speakers. The group found this unacceptable. Had not the Index just been abolished? Lacking clerical approval, the group wilted and died – but in several years of fortnightly meetings, much was learnt, including the limits of official tolerance.

The dark side of the story had always been there, of course. I recalled how at St Sulpice the works of Congar had circulated in samizdat form, and how earnest students, described as '*engagés*', '*passionnés*', and even '*angoissés*', who aspired to be priest-workers and missionaries to the de-christianised masses, found their way blocked by 'Rome'. At the Birmingham Oratory, Superiors became less supportive of the Grammar School; politicians turned against selection, and a party surfaced in the Oratory saying we should be into pastoral work and devotions, not schools and learning. (These men had their way in 1994, when the Sixth Form College, which the Grammar School had become, was closed down.)

In the spring of 1968, feeling my work under threat, I appealed to 'Rome,' to the Visitor appointed by the Vatican to oversee the Oratories. Early in 1969 he sent his judgement, on the whole defending me. 'It does not seem,' he wrote 'that Fr Challenor has gone further, in the matter of the "novelties" complained of than the Church herself, which is advancing with quickening steps.' My community decided the Visitor had failed to understand the situation.



And by this time, my crisis had intensified. In August 1968, the *Birmingham Evening Mail* reported a 'pray-in' – in effect a protest – about *Humanae Vitae*. There was a photo of me handing out leaflets outside St Chad's Cathedral. Next day, a Sunday, the Superior mounted the pulpit at all Masses and read out on behalf of the clerical community a declaration of loyalty and obedience to the Holy Father. So I was isolated, and with me an unknown number of lay people. (No one thought of consulting the laity.) Six weeks later, I was one of fifty-five priests who signed a letter to *The Times* saying we could not agree that artificial contraception is always wrong. After that, I was strongly urged to resign from the Oratory. I refused, and urged my brethren instead to engineer my dismissal. I was left officially unemployed. With nothing to lose, I was in a powerful position, and I admit I used it to make myself a nuisance some of the time.

Not that I wanted to get out. I persevered for four whole years, a self-employed free-lance, writing, taking part in CRM (Catholic Renewal Movement), lecturing in the evenings for the University Continuing Studies Department (where my immediate boss was Michael Goulder, then Staff Tutor in Theology). Eventually, I saw that I must make a new start in life. I resigned in September 1972, when the impasse had solidified, men's health was suffering, and a day job in a non-catholic College of Education was offered me. I worked as a weekend priest for the diocese for some months, but found that the archbishop – George Patrick Dyer – had instantly summed me up as a delinquent. I felt free.

A young woman, who enrolled for one of my

courses from October 1972, aroused my interest. We married a year later in the Church of England, to which she belonged. She had done a degree in theology, and was working as a probation officer. After we had a child, she moved on to study music and became a singer. I moved too, to be Head of RE in a large multi-faith inner-city comprehensive school, which took in pupils from the Caribbean, from Pakistan, and from India by way of Uganda and Kenya. I worked there for eight years.

For fifteen years, family life and demanding work reduced my input to CRM to subscribing, and reading *RENEW*. When I read in 1989 that CRM was thinking of closing down, I offered to take an active part again. I put in another fifteen years on the Executive, until last year when age indicated retirement.

The question has been put to me – am I a Catholic now?

After marrying, I was for thirty years a church-going Anglican. At Catholic weddings and funerals, invited to receive the wafer, if in full communion, I usually felt excluded, and refrained. But nor would I claim positively to be an Anglican. After July 2003, when conservative evangelicals pushed Rowan Williams into making Jeffrey John forego his bishopric, I ceased to be an active member of the C of E. To exclude gays from church office seems to me a betrayal of the gospel, analogous with the disgraceful purge of 'racial' Jews from office in the German Lutheran Church in 1933-4. So I am perhaps a former Catholic and a lapsed Anglican. Positively, I would describe myself as a Jesus Seminar/Sea of Faith type of Christian, concerned to stand in the prophetic and wisdom traditions.



John Challenor is a former editor of *Renew* (the newsletter of Catholics for a Changing Church). This article was first published in *Renew* in June 2005 and is reprinted here by kind permission of the current editor.

This I Can Say

Peter Mavromatis thinks of God as a ventriloquist's dummy and imagines what he might say.

Moses, Jesus and Muhammad believed in the same God and yet, not quite the same God. Each of them created a version of that 'same' God, the result of their different personalities, ambitions and needs. With the possible exception of Jesus at times, they believed their God to be something external to themselves. I am unable to believe in an external God, an internal God, 'that of God in everyone' (whatever the 'that' means) or in any other kind of God. If you do not believe in any kind of God, then real human beings have to be the answer to the unreal Gods; the answer but not a replacement. We are human beings and all we need to be are good human beings, not godlike human beings.

In 1 John in the New Testament, you will find the sentence, 'No man has ever seen God.' That doesn't matter to me and I hope it doesn't matter to you. What must matter, though, is that we have seen each other. Not only has no man or woman ever seen God but they have never heard God either; what they have always heard is someone claiming that their words are God's words. If a God were to ever speak to me in a dream, I would not be at all surprised to hear it say:

You, Peter, came to the conclusion some time ago that anyone who said they had a God, was a ventriloquist and that their dummy was the only kind of God they could possibly have. Their 'God' was within them, for they were simply talking to themselves!

The ventriloquist's dummy can be loving, helpful and forgiving, only if the ventriloquist decides to be loving, helpful and forgiving. The dummy is only as good as the ventriloquist and he who has seen the dummy has seen the ventriloquist. Remember also that if the ventriloquists did not exist, then their Gods would not exist.

I now want to tell you a little more about what I am and what I am not. I am not a resident in any building, no matter how grand. I can reside only in human beings. I cannot answer prayers, only human beings can sometimes do that.

I now need to tell you what I have had nothing to do with. I have had nothing to do with the creation of the universe, not even with the creation of the Earth; not with a six-day manufacturing process or with a lengthier evolutionary process. I did not even exist until I was created by some human beings, after they had evolved to a state where they could ask some deep questions and come up with a fairly shallow answer – me. There are some who, able to accept a theory of evolution and even a "Big Bang" at the beginning of it all, insist on saying that I must have existed before these things happened, so that these things could happen. Utter rubbish! I have no idea how it all started and unless someday you somehow find out, then I, your dummy, will never know. I have not created the flea or the mosquito, nor have I created the gardener or the singer of songs. These are simply some of the infinite number of pieces which go to make up nature. Only you, or other parts of nature, can help or hinder nature. Only nature exists, and nature is the whole of what exists.

I know that you, Peter, will agree with everything I have just said because it was you who said it. One request before I go; please ask your friends never to use the meaningless phrase, "God is good". It is only human beings who are or could be good and who can also take good care of their "Gods."

I conclude with a saying from the *Gospel of Thomas* (translated by Professor George MacRae). 'Jesus said, "If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you."'

Peter Mavromatis lives in Tasmania. He is a Quaker Attender and has been a member of SoF UK for eight years or so.



sof's new Letters Editor is Ken Smith, who also continues as Editor of Portholes. He is eagerly awaiting letters from readers. Please send your letters by email or post to:

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revkevin19@hotmail.co.uk

Oliver Essame has become Secretary to the SoF Network and all membership and subscription enquiries should be sent to him:

Oliver Essame,
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Mayday Notes

Mr Danger

'I am driven with a mission from God. God would tell me, "George go and fight these terrorists in Afghanistan". And I did. And then God would tell me, "George go and end the tyranny in Iraq." And I did. And now again I feel God's words coming to me...'

President Bush was reported as saying this during the 2003 Israeli-Palestinian summit by the then Palestinian foreign minister, Nabil Shaath (*Guardian* 7.10.05). George Bush was born again as an evangelical Christian in 1985 with the help of Billy Graham and since then has had a strong sense of divine mission. 'The liberty we prize is not America's gift to the world,' he said, 'it is God's gift to humanity.'

On the train down to St Deiniol's in Wales, where SoF Steering Committee have their annual residential weekend, I travelled opposite an academic from the Department of War Studies in King's College London. He told me he had sat in on some of the US planning meetings for the war in Afghanistan. He said they always began with prayers and then a general would say: 'Let's go do God's work!'

President Bush is the most powerful ruler in the world; his wars in Afghanistan and Iraq alone have killed countless civilians and destroyed priceless treasures of ancient civilisations. It is hardly surprising that President Chávez of Venezuela calls Bush Mr Danger.

Criticised for demanding that US Special Forces should 'take out' Chávez (whose democratic credentials are far solidier than Bush's), US televangelist Pat Robertson replied: 'There are a number of ways to take out a dictator from power besides killing him. If he thinks we're trying to assassinate him, I think we really ought to go ahead and do it. It's a whole lot cheaper than starting a war...We have the ability to take him out, and I think the time has come that we exercise that ability. We don't need another \$200 billion war to get rid of one, you know, strong-arm dictator.'

Chávez' regime has promoted measures to benefit the poor of Venezuela and he further infuriated the US government by offering cheap oil to the poor in the US and substantial help after Hurricane Katrina. (Venezuela's ally Cuba offered 1100 doctors to the US immediately after the Hurricane, as well as sending doctors to Central America).

SoF regards religion as a human creation. As President Bush's God reflects the President himself, this God can justly be called Mr Danger too. We can



only hope this divine Mr Danger does not now tell Bush to invade Iran, kill and maim more innocents and destroy more priceless treasures. The British Museum's fabulous exhibition: *Forgotten Empire. The World of Ancient Persia* is on until January 6th 2006 and strongly recommended.

Ethical Society Debate

On Tuesday 18th October I attended the Ethical Society's debate in the Conway Hall on the motion: 'This House believes the Christian God to be a Myth'. The proposers of the motion were novelist, broadcaster and National Secular Society member Joan Smith, and NSS Councillor and editor of the *Ethical Record* Norman Bacrac. The opposers were both from the Alpha Course and Holy Trinity Brompton: Rev. Sandy Miller and Rev. Paul Cowley. The Chair was a jovial Unitarian, courteous to all.

The most striking difference between the two sides, both the main speakers and contributors from the floor, was that the Humanists offered arguments and the Alpha Christians offered mainly personal testimony. Both the platform opposers of the motion called up individuals to give a personal testimony, rather as one imagines an AA meeting. One was an ex-prisoner and I felt rather sorry for the other one, a somewhat weedy little man who said he had been in the army and lived it up, having as many women as he wanted (says you, I thought), but since he had had a personal encounter with Jesus, he had led a good and faithful life.

Many of the Secularists passionately loathed religion and dwelt exclusively on the harm it has done. Others were prepared to consider that yes, God is a myth, but myths and stories belong to humanity's cultural and imaginative treasury and it would be a pity if this were lost to our children.

A vote was taken before and after the debate. Beforehand there were 150 in favour, 68 against and 15 abstentions. After the debate there were 138 in favour, 74 against and 15 abstentions. Only one person was prepared to own up that she had changed her mind. The debate, as promised, was vigorous, lively and entertaining, the latter mainly because it was such a bizarre clash of cultures in contemporary Britain.

Janet Trisk reviews

The Greening of Christianity

by Lloyd Geering

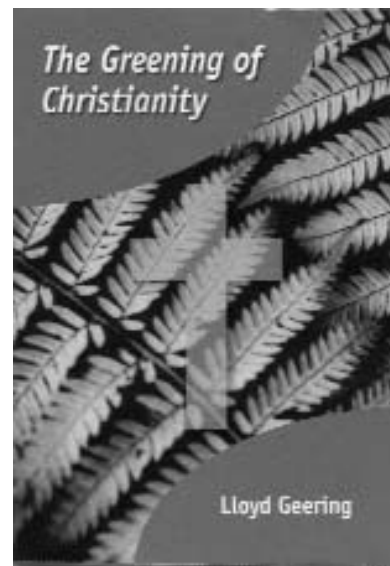
St Andrew's Trust, New Zealand. 2005. 56 pages. £5.75.
ISBN 0958364591

Lloyd Geering has an enviable ability not 'simply' to render complex theological concepts comprehensible (though this is no mean skill), but he also is willing to do so. This most admirable trait both opens his writing to popular understanding but also to possible challenge from a wide spectrum of readers, and not simply academic theologians. There is no doubt that this newest piece of writing will (if it is read by them) face criticism from many Christians of the fundamentalist type. As part of what seems to be an on-going project to render a believable and life-giving Christianity, Lloyd Geering has once again in *The Greening of Christianity* described the complexities of the global crisis, Christian contributions to the crisis and some creative ethical and practical responses, in under 55 pages and in the most accessible language.

The book consists of four chapters which originated as lectures. The first chapter deals with the frightening ecological crisis which faces us. The second traces the links between monotheism and the crisis. The third chapter outlines some ethical responses open to Christians. The fourth chapter is a creative re-imagining of Christian festivals in such a way that they may offer a liturgical basis for an ecological Christian practice.

By showing the links between ecological degradation and religious fundamentalism (the kind that predicts the 'last days' as a precursor to the establishment of God's heavenly kingdom for the chosen) Lloyd Geering demonstrates that 'green' issues should not simply be the concern of a marginal group of bunny-huggers. 'At the very time when the Christian community is being challenged to direct its energies to the ecological crisis now looming as a present reality, its fundamentalist wing is giving attention to a mythical global crisis expected 2000 years ago' (page 15). 'Green issues' are inextricably connected to a this-worldly spirituality which rejects 'the ancient expectation of a final Armageddon and the literal return of Jesus Christ' (page 16). The crisis also invites (or perhaps 'compels' would be a better word) us to reconsider our images of God. This, I would suggest, is the responsible task of all spirituality, viz. to keep returning to the implications of the God whom we describe, or the highest values to which we ascribe.

The most innovative part of the book is the attempt to re-imagine the major Christian festivals in the light of a greener Christianity. Drawing on ancient



reviews

creation-centred festivals as well as shifts which have already taken place in some Christian liturgy (for example the eucharist and funeral services) Lloyd Geering suggests reforms for Christian worship. These reforms will not be popular in all quarters (as indeed much of his writing is not universally acclaimed!). However, as the pun in the title suggests, for those who have become sceptical of the value of Christianity and its other-worldly focus, such reforms might just 'green up' the Christian church too.

Credit must go to Becky Bliss for a most attractive cover design. However, there are some editorial details one might wish to see corrected so that the production matches the high quality of the writing. For example the type size for the heading to chapter 2 is different from the size of the other chapter headings. The word 'God' in the title of Sallie McFague's book *The Body of God* (page 33) is not rendered in italics. The list of further reading (page 55) contains inconsistencies in the style and setting of the references. These of course are not hindrances to reading, but it would be good to see such a well-written book well-produced too.

Such quibbles aside, this is an excellent booklet and one which could usefully form the basis for local discussion groups in SoF.

Copies of this book are available at £5.75 postfree from Stephen Mitchell, All Saints Vicarage, The Street, Gazeley, Newmarket CB8 8RB

Counterpoint: a Way to Unity

Cicely Herbert listens to some recent initiatives for peace by musicians in London.

When I was a child the highlight of our annual family holiday in Scotland was always a visit to the Edinburgh Festival where I was carried away by the stirring martial music of the Military Tattoo with its precision marching and the poignant appearance of a lone piper on the battlements. I must confess to having failed then ever to make any connection between that event and the ugly rusting warships I so hated to see despoiling the beauties of the West Highland waters – ships that would later give way to UK's fleet of nuclear submarines bearing names like 'HMS Revenge' and later, 'Vengeance'.

I was reminded of this during a recent enjoyable recital given in London by pianist John Flinders and the principal clarinettist of the English National Opera, Tony Lamb, who is current Chairperson of MANA (Musicians Against Nuclear Arms). The evening's entertainment incorporated an interval talk by Jeremy Corbyn MP. A direct forerunner of MANA was 'The Musicians' Organisation for Peace', whose President, the conductor Adrian Boult, wrote in 1958 that musicians have 'special opportunities through practice of an Art that knows no language, religion, or national barriers, to foster international understanding and make common cause with their colleagues throughout the world. This is an opportunity and obligation to humanity that we wish all British musicians to recognise and carry out.'

As it happens, this summer London has hosted several important concerts, each with the ideal of peaceful co-existence between people of differing cultures and religious beliefs at the heart of the way the music is presented. On September 18th at LSO St Lukes in the City, an audience of Jews, Arabs, Israelis and Palestinians along with people of many other nationalities, sat together to hear music from across the cultural divide. Songs were sung in Arabic, Hebrew, English and Yiddish at the fund-raising concert organised on behalf of the 'Israeli Palestinian Bereaved Families For Peace'. A central theme was 'the need to find a way to understand each other and to humanise each other.' The concert ended with artists and audience joining to sing together words from Isaiah: 'They Shall Study War No More.'

in Hebrew:

*Lo yisa goy el goy herev
Velo yilmedu od milhamah*

in Arabic:

*La yushheru elnasu alhuruba didha baadehem baadah
Wala yataalamu alhuruba baada alyon*

in English:

Nation shall not lift up sword against nation
They shall study war no more.

Televised highlights of this year's Prom season at the Albert Hall, were the concerts given by two orchestras, each

founded with the specific intention of finding a way to disperse racial and religious antagonisms through musical harmony. The late George Solti's 'World Orchestra For Peace' is made up of more than 200 players from 40 nations, all top-class musicians, who make time in their tight schedules to play together, unpaid, for the simple yet profoundly complicated cause of world peace. Solti's widow Valerie Solti is optimistic: 'The orchestra is living evidence of how music can bridge the divide. The more you have dialogue, co-operation and understanding, the more there's hope.'

Perhaps the highest profile musical initiative of this kind in recent times is the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra founded by Israeli conductor Daniel Barenboim and the Palestinian-born writer, the late Edward Said. The two men had long agreed that there can be no military solution to the Middle East conflict because, however powerful the military strength of Israel, 'it cannot win a war against a people fighting for its own identity.' For:



Music is about listening to each other, about communication. War is about *not* listening, about depersonalising the enemy. When you play together that is no longer possible.

The West-Eastern Divan Orchestra is made up of young Jordanians, Israelis, Lebanese and Egyptian players and as Barenboim has said, 'it is little more than a miracle.' Few

people listening to the players in the Albert Hall that night or watching the televised concert could have doubted music's ability to unite a group of dedicated young people; nor was it possible to separate the identity of a Jew or an Arab musician as the players collaborated in their art with such fervour and dedication, communicating to their listeners the healing power of music.

The title of this review is taken from the words of Edward Said who said that 'counterpoint is a way to unity.' *Parallels and Paradoxes – Explorations in Music and Society: Dialogues between Edward Said and Daniel Barenboim* (Pantheon Books, 2002).

Friends of The Bereaved Families Forum UK donations/membership details:
F.B.F.F. 5, Temple Close, Cyprus Road, London N3 3SB
www.familiesforum.co.uk

MANA (Musicians Against Nuclear Arms) Information about future concerts and membership details from:
The Administrator Joan R. Horrocks, 71, Greenfield Gardens, London NW2 1HU (tel: 020 8455 1030)

The editor would like to thank Tony Rudolf for checking the Hebrew transcription. The Arabic transcription has been checked by a native speaker.

Saturday

by Ian McEwan

Jonathan Cape. London. 2005. 279 pages. £17.99.
ISBN 0224072994

I have never really considered Ian McEwan in the top rank of writers. I enjoy his books, but they tend to rely just a bit too much on some sort of horror, whether physical or psychological, and whether completely serious or served up with a dose of black humour. If, as Martha Nussbaum tells us, the best fiction teaches us how to live by showing us situations where we can imagine what choices we might make, McEwan's books often seem just outside the realm of normality, the realm that I could imagine inhabiting. Some of that same horror threatens *Saturday*, but the effect is different: more believable, less an end in itself, perhaps simply the backdrop against which we all, post 9/11, live our lives.

Saturday traces a single day in the life of a London brain surgeon, Henry Perowne. The story takes place on 15 February 2003, the day of the huge public protest against the war on Iraq, and at one level the plot is extremely simple: Henry, going about his Saturday errands and preparing for a family reunion that evening, narrowly escapes a mugging. As the reunion gets underway, the mugger shows up again; and this time, escaping is not so easy.

Surrounding this apparently simple framework is a richly detailed exploration of the thoughts, ideas and concerns that run through Henry's day. Henry is a sort of upper-middle-class Everyman, and McEwan has intentionally given him a picture-perfect life: 'I thought,' he said in a recent interview, 'what would happen if you've got a man who is not about to get divorced or disastrously fall in love and wreck his life, who doesn't have a terminal disease and is not alienated, whose children are not drug addicts and who has a pleasing relationship with his wife?'

Through Henry, McEwan explores arguments for and against the Iraq war; the competitive pride and aggression evoked by a squash game; the rivalry between two family poets; the satisfactions of brain surgery; the grief and tenderness evoked by a senile parent; the mystery of children whose talents and interests are entirely different from your own; and a great recipe for fish stew. Below this, though, runs the darkly murmuring threat: no matter how comfortable you are, how perfect your life is, or how rationally you behave, the border between safety and danger, life and death, the protection or destruction of those you love is perilously easy to breach. Not simply because the world is random and brutal; but because your own actions rebound in ways that you neither intend nor foresee.



A lighter theme is Henry's own lack of sympathy for literature, which evokes considerable irony from McEwan. Henry's daughter Daisy continually assigns him novels to read: he finds Anna Karenina 'apt and convincing enough, but surely not so very difficult [to write] if you were halfway observant.' Writing poems is 'rather occasional work, it appears, like grape picking'. The statement: 'This notion of Daisy's, that people can't "live without stories, is simply not true. [Henry] is living proof,' is, of course, uttered by someone who exists only in a story. In the end, Henry is saved by a poem; the mugger, brutal and half-mad as he is, is much more alive to the power of poetry than Henry is.

Prosaic though he is, Henry is not immune to wonder, but his wonder is for life itself, summed up by McEwan in a sentence too lovely to paraphrase, as Henry relaxes after a late-night emergency brain operation: 'The wonder [remains], that mere wet stuff can make this bright inward cinema of thought, of sight and sound and touch bound into a vivid illusion of an instantaneous present, with a self, another brightly wrought illusion, hovering like a ghost at its centre.'

Saturday struck me as somehow very Sea of Faith-ish, though not in the obvious sense where characters struggle with the loss of faith, nor because of the unexpected appearance of 'that' poem at a critical point in the story. Rather, because McEwan seems so in love with life itself, normal life, the 'brief privilege of consciousness' that we all share, and that we protect so fiercely against threats at whatever level. A phrase from Darwin (another book Daisy insists he read!) haunts Henry throughout the day: 'There's grandeur in this view of life'. Whether it refers to Henry's faith that we will eventually understand consciousness, to Darwin's portrayal of the 'endless and beautiful forms of life', or to McEwan's own attitude towards his story and his characters, it summarises the basic attitude of the book: to plumb everyday life itself, the good and the bad, the gains and the losses, is grandeur enough. In showing us that, McEwan takes his place in the top echelon of writers, who suggest to us that our lives, too, given sufficient attentiveness, can be grand.

Patti Whaley is SoF Treasurer.

Alison McRobb reviews

Meanings of Life

by Alex Wright

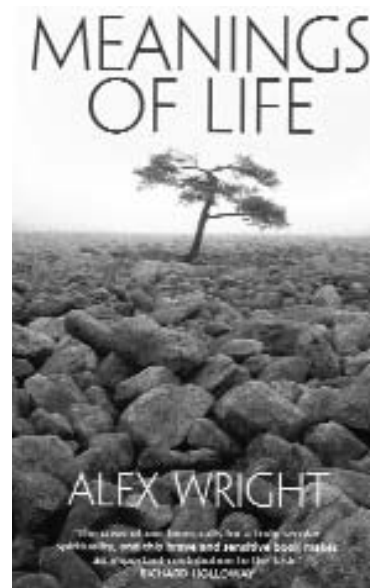
Darton, Longman and Todd. London. 2005. 144 pages. £9.95.
ISBN 0232524890

Holiday reading: the freedom to get sand between the pages of my trashy pot-boiler (yes, I gave in and bought *that* one), gallop through some light-weight romp from Virago, then a serious effort from Coetze – and finally settle down with Alex Wright's *Meanings of Life* on behalf of *sof* readers. Maybe the context was wrong, but I can't guarantee that a book which rather dampened my seaside spirits will raise anyone else's.

It's perverse but true that creative works which are bent on showing 'hope' or 'a way forward' sometimes only succeed in pointing up the depression and despair which their authors have encountered. This paperback's cover shows a green tree bravely flourishing in a field of rocks – but green for how long? Like the writing in this book, the image lacks the vital quirkiness and humour which make Dali's impossible, barren landscapes bearable and interesting.

Alex Wright tries supremely hard not to write *Making Some Sense of My Life*, despite including a great deal of autobiographical material. On the other hand, the profundity of the hurt he has suffered personally cannot help but underpin the whole endeavour. In brief, we learn that he lost his job as a successful publisher in the field of religion as a result of writing *Why Bother with Theology?* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 2002). Although this initial project fell foul of his employers and the religious establishment generally, it was, Wright gratefully records, enthusiastically reviewed in *sof* by David Boulton.

As far as the Sea of Faith Network is concerned this is not the happiest starting point for his latest book. So many of us have lost jobs and sponsors, or on principle given up 'promising' careers with substantial pensions and found ourselves in the wilderness of unemployability: surely we don't need to be dragged again over such rocky ground, even in the exercise of empathy? To be fair, this literary record of a similar body-blow is intended not to be about 'exorcising demons or lamenting that life can be unfair . . .' but about 'reflecting the cathartic time through which the author has passed.' In that it is put together with integrity it is worth attention, and may for some readers aid the healing process: how and when we can begin to take heart is different for everyone. Without resorting to an astringent 'Get over it!', however, I feel more affinity with Cupitt's advice to 'leave that country, emigrate', and Holloway's exhortation to extricate ourselves from the grip of 'The Force' – whatever damaged us, dragged us down.



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The book's sections (Self and World, Loss, Love, Fulfilment) certainly aim to impose some coherence, tracing rainbow through rain. The author is impressively well-read, and the notes and bibliography are carefully presented. There could be valuable material here for bereavement counsellors and for the bereaved themselves. The passages Wright selects from prose and poetry are discussed with considerable flair for lit.crit., but so much quotation on top of so much autobiography makes for an unsatisfactory anthology, leaving little room for the main thesis. 'This has turned out not to be a decisive or tightly compartmentalised book, but has emerged . . . impressionistically and unsystematically as a variety of categories and topics have come into frame one by one, like hikers looming out of the mist, only to disassemble like footprints washed away by the tide.' Quite so, but what about the 'meanings'?

Things do come together better in the last section (Fulfilment) and the Conclusion, but by that time too many potentially interesting questions have been touched on and left hanging: pantheism as an alternative to secularism, what justice entails, what are our duties to ourselves, each other and the planet in whatever age we decide to call the present moment. 'My reflections on "meanings of life" have taken the form of a cycle of meditations on my own memories' . . . 'I have wanted to discuss issues open-mindedly and non-prescriptively' . . . agreed, but he has to continue, 'and to connect with a variety of metaphysical material like water running over stone'. At this point one could perhaps hope for a little more precision. Wright's aim to 'connect' with as many people out there as possible could backfire if nobody finds here more than a glimpse of insight into their own personal, social or political concerns. Personally, though, he might have achieved a 'closure' which will open doors in the future.

Alison McRobb is chair of SoF Steering Committee.

Taking Flight

Christopher Hampton reviews

Mr. Dick's Kite

by Arnold Rattenbury

Shoestring Press, Nottingham. 2005. 81 pages. £9.50. ISBN 1904886132

If the title of Arnold Rattenbury's seventh collection of poems initially strikes an odd jarring note, it does turn out to have some sort of teasing relevance to the spirit of the book. It refers to an episode from *David Copperfield*, cited as epigraph to Section III, about a kite made by Mr. Dick, 'covered with manuscript, very closely and laboriously written' which, 'when it flies high,... takes the facts a long way'. And like Mr. Dick, Rattenbury flies his kites of words high to take their chance as to 'where they may come down'.

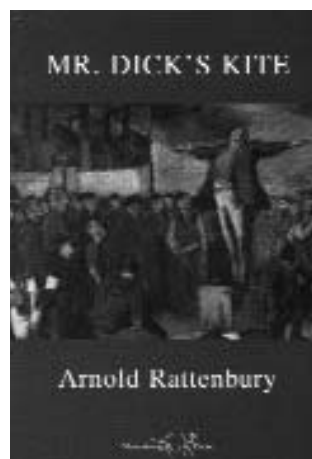
The range of these poems is, however, more interactive than the title suggests, their tone resilient, sharp, quirky, buoyant, geared through the book's three sections (each with its epigraph from a Dickens novel) to *Looking, Listening and Reading*. Nor do the poems, in taking flight, lose touch with the ground – rooted as many of them are in the physical details of the Welsh landscapes Rattenbury is so intimate with, celebrating the space and sweep of Wales, where:

Still the mountains remain, and the weather's mist,
which parts now to boast of later
scars: quarries and cemeteries
not single stones but sixties on sixties, slates
filled up with chiselled evidence...

And though 'quarries no longer breathe / and bleed with men' since 'profit has gone / elsewhere to satisfy its greed' (60), still it is 'as if the earth were being mown by light, old knowledge stooked and ricked / in the old way, everything else unknown, / fresh-sculptured, an artefact'. For this 'is real and so can cope / with the charges: Utopianism and Hope' (27).

Indeed, in delineating his sense of the historical record, Rattenbury speaks for the indispensable memory of what has happened and of what remains unchanged beyond the changes he observes. Surviving the defeat, for example, of all that the dissident Friggers fought for, their colourful banners now 'rolled in cupboards', still (as he puts it) 'sometimes we march... at Greenham or Treekeep', where 'people arise' (70), remembering the past, celebrating the living, in poems 'exemplary of change, / pricking me on to the immense things' (77).

And Rattenbury is nowhere more involved in the process of bringing back light to the darkened and damaged universe we live in than in his 27-poem sequence of Mozart Pieces, where, in response to the creative dissent of Mozart's genius, he listens to the music and reacts to the ways in which it survives (and thrives on) an alienating world, making 'life out of life at last, and the birth / of a golden Paradise on earth' (48). For though the blunt facts of the real world refute such transformations and all we can do is 'keep close to the earth as possible', with Mozart's music 'soon, / soon, the magic will come', (47), as it does repeatedly, bringing us as close as we shall ever get to the intangible pleasures of paradise.



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This in fact is what the sequence offers us – an affirmation of the Mozartian achievement, as in *The Andantino, K 449*; surely among Mozart's most delicate and searching slow movements. For here, as elsewhere, 'The mind stretches, wonders may never cease...'

This may be no answer to the fundamental injustices and inequities of our world, but Mozart's rejection of despair is for Rattenbury too a beginning.

Utopias? No – for that's imagined,
while this latter-time light that sweeps
an underclass of things is fact
undreamed of. (13)

And it is his obstinate belief in the continuity of creative delight that keeps the poet's word-kites flying high.

A Thing in Bach

There is a thing Bach does – after
some chuntering, baskets creaking with veg,
puffcheeks, rattle of keys, barter –
far, thin, on the very edge
of sound, a long note swelling
'til it fills all the dry air in the market,
a tune makes itself up as it spills.

No benison rain, no God's jacket
round a plump opinion (though Bach of course
was all in all religious: 'Alas
winter so mild,' he wrote, 'few calls
upon me for any requiem mass').

Others do the thing too, but this
winter is Bach's, who summersaults the whole
world over to my irreligious bliss

proving that revolution is practical.

Arnold Rattenbury

This poem is from *Mr Dick's Kite* by Arnold Rattenbury (Shoestring Press, Nottingham 2005).

Two Poems by Cicely Herbert

On Earth

If I cant go to heaven
I shall ask Chagall
to design me a carpet
so beautiful
angels will jostle
for a place on it.

I'll take his painting
to Serbian weavers
who will use natural dyes
to achieve colours I remember
filling a field in Autumn –
the sprouted blue of individual cabbages
yellow anarchy of weeds
and happy poppy red,
bedded in a heavy Suffolk soil.

If I can create some order from this,
a secure border
out of the tangled bramble hedge,
a safe enclosure,
where I can lie
free to find
the changing patterns of the sky

then

I shan't mind staying
here on Earth.

An Encounter with Rembrandt

Out walking, not a mile from home
I met old Rembrandt face to face
(a most desirable man)
and spoke to him of death.
The attraction lay in his self-knowledge
bitterness behind him, disappointments forgotten
a limitless ease remained on view
welcoming me in.

When I tried to explain who I am
I became so confused
he politely refused my offer to sit for him
saying it seemed his sight had failed.

As we parted
I remembered, quite suddenly,
that the man who'd crated his portrait
(the one I was looking at) and labelled it
'To Kenwood House on Hampstead Heath'
had suffered on the same day
a quite distressing attack of toothache
and had to have four teeth extracted
without an anaesthetic.

I thought later
probably I'd imagined the whole episode.
On the other hand
the man's existence is certain.



Rembrandt Self-Portrait

