

sfia

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One Life

Sofia 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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Portholes is a bi-monthly report to members containing SoF Network news and news from Local Groups.

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Earth from space

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Lake District

sfia is the magazine of
the Sea of Faith Network (UK)
which explores religion as a human creation.

Sofia does not think wisdom is dispensed supernaturally from on high, but that it can only be sought by humans at home on Earth.

Sofia is both anti-fundamentalist and anti-restrictive-rationalist, believing in the value of humanity's poetic genius and imagination, as well as reason and experience, in its search for wisdom.

Sofia is for diggers and seekers in its own native radical tradition and everywhere.

One Life

We have one life and it is this one. There is no life after death. Earth has one life and we share it in kinship with all living things. Life on Earth evolved from inanimate matter and is material and mortal.

This issue opens with an article by Don Cupitt drawing on his forthcoming book *Impossible Loves*, which he gave as a talk to the North London SoF group in January. In it he attempts a 'thoroughgoing reinvention of religion'. In *After God* Cupitt brilliantly charted the death of God as a historical cultural process and he has now reached the position that there is no possibility whatever of bringing him back to life. He was very firm about this in answering questions after his talk. When one questioner suggested that the 'wonders of modern physics' offered a new opening into a totally mysterious, perhaps supernatural world, Cupitt categorically refused to allow a 'sliver' of the supernatural to slither back in.

This is a radical and brave position. In his talk Cupitt made us very aware that he was contemplating the purely human world we live in today 'without stay or prop but my own weak mortality' and his listeners could not fail to be moved. The quotation is from Keats' *Fall of Hyperion* and it struck me that, like Keats in that poem (which is unfinished), Cupitt's work has been a struggle to *see* and that he is a writer, an artist (in his most recent book *The Way to Happiness* he writes in 'riffs'), who to some extent sees by saying. (How can I know what I think till I see what I say?) When he says [the good life] 'achieves expressed selfhood only "retrospectively" and in passing,' he is speaking from personal experience.

He describes the old European civilisation with its epic story resting on 'an alliance of Greek metaphysical philosophy and Judeo-Christian religion' as having broken down, being replaced by American consumerism. As an artist Cupitt does not write epics – indeed it is true that few poets do write epics today either. They are more likely to write lyrics that capture the feeling or insight of a moment, are 'mini-epiphanies'.

This is not true of all poets, especially in Latin America, where for example Pablo Neruda's *Canto General* or Ernesto Cardenal's *Cosmic Canticle* are massively architectonic (Cardenal incorporates into his *Canticle* many poems he first published as short lyrics). The Caribbean writer Derek Walcott's monumental *Omeros* is a nod to a great predecessor. The Suffolk-based Michael Hamburger's book-length poem *Late* is a meditation both on his personal situation late in life and the social/political situation late in European

civilisation, which, like Cupitt, he sees as ending. However, many poets today write mainly shorter poems. But among these, I find the more interesting ones seek a kind of coherence, so that each individual mini-epiphany – moment of 'seeing more' – adds up, at least to a book or, more ambitiously, to a body of work with its own clear voice. For example, Mimi Khalvati's book *Entries on Light* is a series of individual 'entries' or 'moments' but the whole book adds up to something more, a vision.

Listening to his talk in Muswell Hill, I began to think of Cupitt in a comparable way. His earlier work, which describes the receding of the sea of faith, the historical trajectory leading to the death of God, is a grand narrative of a kind. Perhaps it could be described as an anti-epic; he does not see this narrative as continuing without God in a purely human struggle for a 'reign' of justice. Religion today, he says, is concerned with conquering nihilism. Now his work is as an *artist* of spirituality, a philosopher and writer who has renounced the epic but continues to produce books, where the viewpoint may shift a bit (or the author grows a bit) each time, which add up to a pilgrim's progress, a humanistic quest to make 'a small but unique personal contribution to the overall value and beauty of the whole human life-world.' Epic becomes lyric: With 'ardent world love...we live expressively, by passing on and passing away all the time.'

One fascinating way in which Cupitt's writing seems to be shifting is an increasing respect for the body with its powers, pains and passions. (The current article offers a striking insight into passion's *volatility*, how terror can change to reverent awe and 'rage against the dying of the light' to a blissful, mystical drowning.) In his talk to the SoF Conference last summer (reprinted in *sof* 73), I noticed particularly his injunction: 'Value every aspect of the body, this life, each person and this world as highly as is self-consistently possible.' The thing I hated most about postmodernist philosophy which reduced everything to language was a *discounting* of the body, accompanied by a seeming indifference to physical suffering in the individual body, injustice in the social body, and to the Earth herself, which seen from the moon, is a heavenly body like Venus.

Cupitt's interest remains focused on *language* because that is his artistic medium, but this increasing respect for the body has introduced a new tension or dialectic into his work and it will be interesting to see where that leads. I was thinking that one can focus on language (Cupitt, in this article speaks of 'the world our language gives us') without adopting a reductionist position. (If you say the world is *nothing but* language then this ignores the physical reality of Earth and its inhabitants). But it is possible to hold that 'language goes all the way down' in a *non-reductionist* way, i.e. as an *aspect* one is focusing on of a total reality. Similarly, it is possible to hold that 'matter goes all the way down' and everything, including all art and poetry, can be expressed in terms of brain activity. For example, the humanist writer Tom Rubens says this in the current issue of the *Ethical Record*. But he appears to be saying it in a *non-reductionist* way, because he has a great respect for poetry, indeed writes poetry himself and does not reduce it to *nothing but* brain activity. The brain activity is one *aspect* of the poetry; the prosody, for example, is another. Word made flesh and flesh made word continually combine in one reality.

Cupitt's fresh emphasis on the body can be seen as what he described in Muswell Hill as an increasing 'feminisation' of his writing. Women are forced to think in more bodily terms than men, particularly when they become mothers. One woman will give birth to a healthy child and another will miscarry. Like pain and hunger, life and death are not 'non-real' or nothing but language, although, of course they are also steeped in language: 'Rachel mourning for her children and will not be comforted...' I wondered whether a male tendency towards idealism – devaluing embodiment – had any connection with the fact that when a woman tells a man he is to be a father, he has *only her word for it*; she could be lying. Whereas the woman starts with physical signs and before long feels her unborn infant giving her a hefty kick in the guts.

Cupitt's article dwells poignantly on time, chance and death, our mortal, *physical* state. He ends by saying the highest wisdom is to accept this transience and to say: 'I don't want to be an angel... I prefer to be a mortal whose loves are bittersweet.' Like some of the greatest poems of the young Wordsworth, whom Cupitt admires, this is a 'gain from loss' scenario. Once again I remembered Abelard's hymn about heaven:

*Nec ineffabiles
cessabunt jubili
quo decantabimus
et nos et angeli.*

There'll be no ending
the unutterable praises
that we and the angels
together shall sing.

The operative word is *unutterable*. Angels have no bodies and therefore cannot *utter* songs and poems like ours on Earth. Our visual artists create with a human hand and eye, using physical materials. Poetry is 'the darling child of speech and lips'. Its stress derives from the human heartbeat and all the fellow rhythms of life on planet Earth. It is in time. Like all our loves.

In the next article Dominic Kirkham traces the progress, which he calls 'a rather English preoccupation' from Natural Theology to the Theology of Nature. He points out that natural theology was patriarchal and that 'a feminine view of nature as the source of fertility, of the nurturing and care for life was something that had been heavily repressed from the outset of monotheism.' In the Bible Astoreth, the ancient fertility goddess is called 'shame'. He describes a radical change, a feminisation, in our understanding of nature from the 1970s and points to the 'breathtaking views of planet Earth taken from the Apollo spacecraft' (in 1969 – interestingly, the moon flight race was an apogee of male technological competitiveness). He recalls the publication of the Gaia theory of planetary self-regulation at around that time. 'As a species we now understood ourselves to be one part of a vibrant and almost inexhaustibly wondrous complex web of life.' We have moved from monotheism to 'monozoism'.

But with our increasing understanding of the Earth comes our increasing power to destroy it and ourselves. Life, he says, has now become the new metaphor for God. What we must do now is save the Earth, so that it continues to be able to nurture earthly life, including ours.

However, the DNA of life is a *double* helix. Sexual reproduction has enormously enriched the wealth of life on Earth. I don't think we should simply reverse the dualism that designated female as 'shame' and male as 'rational, spiritual' etc and tit-for-tat call men the 'shame'. I remember the Women's Free Arts Alliance in Regent's Park in the 1970s, which was so anti-men that no male was allowed, even if he was only a few weeks old and his mother was breast-feeding him. Even at the time I thought that was pretty silly. Although of course where there is repression it is right to struggle against it, I think we should value both sexes and all human potential (inevitably potential for good or harm): both fertility, nurturing *and* technology, imagination *and* reason, body *and* mind. After all they occur in all kinds of combinations in actual human beings. We need to summon *all* our powers to act wisely, value and save the Earth and Earth's humanity in the making.

Religion after the West

In his talk to the North London SoF Group in January, Don Cupitt drew from his forthcoming book *Impossible Loves*.

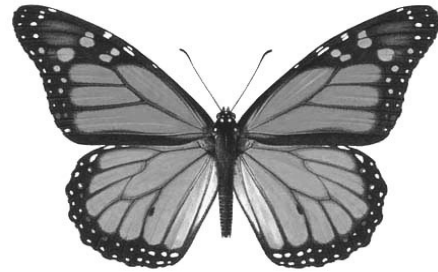
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During the past decade or so I have become gradually more preoccupied with the idea of attempting a reinvention of religious thought as such. This is partly because it has become obvious that none of the major religious traditions can survive as it stands. They have all been totally demolished by philosophical and historical criticism (or would be, if they allowed it) and they cannot now be modernised by well-meaning liberals because the changes in philosophy since Kant and Hegel have been too great. No proposed revision of any major religious tradition is likely to be able to satisfy *both* the present adherents *and* critical philosophers. If, nevertheless, we still think religion important despite the intellectual breakdown of all the existing traditions of religious thought, then we have to consider attempting a new beginning. This will not be easy, because most people still associate religion with belief in God and life after death: i.e., with aspiration after a higher and more-real spiritual realm beyond the world of sense.

Today, we live in a purely human world, the world that our language gives us. It is all on one level, finite but unbounded, and it has no outside – and I am proposing to try to recreate religious thought for this new and only-human world! Inevitably, what I come up with is something very different from conventional ideas about ‘religion’. There are some points of continuity, but they are not immediately obvious. If in the end you reject my ideas, but still want to be serious about religion, then only one option is available to you, namely fundamentalism. Or, if you would prefer to discard religion altogether, today’s postmodern entertainment culture is now firmly established, and it is the popular choice.

A reinvention of religious thought is already under way in ordinary language.

The second reason why I have felt attracted to the project of a large-scale reinvention of religious thought is that in 1998/99 I found that precisely such a reinvention is already under way in ordinary language. I thought and I still think, even though I remain in a minority of one, that this discovery is very important. Plato made Philosophy a pursuit for Supermen, master human beings, and it remained so up to Nietzsche and beyond. In reaction I have talked hopefully about attempting to democratise philosophy, and now comes the exhilarating discovery that the thinking of ordinary people and the thinking of the leading philosophers are currently developing in close parallel with each other. This enabled me to say to my critics that my own



thinking was not so wildly extreme and objectionable as they have invariably claimed. I said: ‘I am not trying to foist *my own* ideas upon you: I am trying to show you what *you yourself* are already beginning to think’.

So when I give a very brief sketch of my reinvention of religious thought so far as I have as yet been able to carry it, please do not forget my claim that this is *what you already think*, because much or even all of it is already written into the idioms of your own everyday speech. As for the content of the reinvention, I repeat that we must entirely forget the old type of traditional organised religion, which involved a special alliance with a particular culture-area and language, a vast cosmic myth of Fall and Redemption, and a distinction between Heaven and Earth. Instead, we take up religion as ‘spirituality’ a personal religious style. For each of us, our personal style of life needs to express an appropriate response to the human situation through which we can become ourselves, make our own lives ‘meaningful’ and make a small but unique personal contribution to the overall value and beauty of the whole human life-world. In this way I find my own salvation as I do something, however small, to assist the salvation of others.

This general shift from organised religion to spirituality is summed up in the formula, ‘From *The World, the Soul, and God to Life and My Life*’. Our world-view is postmodern and nihilistic: there is only the human life-world, a world made of language, a world without any absolute Beginning or End. In this transient scene each of us has a brief part to play ‘my life’ and each of us needs to find a lifestyle through which one can become oneself, and learn to do one’s own thing in one’s own way. By ardent world-love we can work out our own salvation, and at the same time make life more valuable for those who will follow us.

Today, the human life-world has, for many or most people, no objective ‘meaning’ or ‘value’, or even reality, apart from what human beings themselves put into it. Thus religion today is concerned not with finding redemption from sin, but with conquering nihilism. The way of life that does the trick is called solar living. It is a synthesis of living and dying: we live expressively, by passing on and passing away all the time – committing ourselves to life so intensely that it is as if we conquer death by living a life that dies all the time.

Against this background a small book called *The Way to Happiness* was about how the practice of 'dying to the self' can help us to find great happiness in cosmic and selfless feeling. The present essay is about the part in our lives that may be played by various impossible loves, both love for non-existent objects and love for unattainable persons and ideals.

2

At the very beginning of the nineteenth century, Hegel introduced into Western thought the notion that the entire Western cultural tradition was coming to completion. He described a vast synthesis that united Plato's ascent through a series of stages of knowledge and up to a total vision of the Good with the old Judeo-Christian vision of divine Providence orchestrating all human history towards a grand climax, the ultimate happy ending. Versions of this optimistic story about the end of the Western tradition were put forward by several subsequent thinkers, including Karl Marx. But in the later years of the century the mood darkened, and the End as consummation was replaced by the end as disintegration and termination. The received Enlightenment optimism about reason, progress and human perfectibility had overreached itself, and began to break down. Nietzsche announced the coming of nihilism, and Oswald Spengler prophesied *The Decline of the West*.

The history of the West during the twentieth century has largely confirmed these fears, as catastrophic wars and political upheavals rapidly ended the old European world-leadership which had lasted for nearly four centuries. Spiritually, the West had rested on an alliance of Greek metaphysical philosophy and Judeo-Christian religion; but by the end of the twentieth century Europe had disowned both. The old European civilisation was replaced, even in Europe, by the new – and very different – American consumerism, and America itself now paid no more than lip-service to what it had inherited from the old Europe. This is not surprising, for as the current rip-roaring development in East Asia shows, the new capitalist-consumerist culture is independent of the old West and does not need its values. It can and does flourish anywhere, if intelligently managed and led. It does not need philosophy, it does not need religion: all it really needs is *technology* and the rest is no more than decoration. As for the human spirit, whatever was that? Nobody can remember any longer: in consumer society an inclination to serious philosophical and religious thought is merely an indication of trouble with one's serotonin levels, and is soon put right by appropriate medication.

Within the old Europe, we find it hard to avoid the feeling that we have nowhere left to go – except perhaps towards a 'black' and post-historical kind of art, our version of Dada and Surrealism; or towards Buddhism. This pessimism is only confirmed by the way our last great philosophers always seem to have ended up stuck inside their own systems of thought, leaving their followers with nowhere to go next. This is true of Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Derrida. When you have fully absorbed their final messages – what next?

Is there any possibility of reconstructing or renewing the Western tradition? Nietzsche – still perhaps the greatest of the modern philosophers, and not yet eclipsed by his successors – foresaw the need for reconstruction, but is rather vague and uplifting when it comes to making concrete proposals. A new kind of human being will have the strength to create new gods, new myths, and new values. Heidegger does a little better, when he takes up another Nietzschean theme and suggests that Western thought must now return into its own origins, and confront again the question of Being, as it was confronted by the first Western philosophers. I have tried to develop this theme by talking of the way that the end of dogmatic metaphysics and the end of dogmatic religious belief have effectively stripped us naked, so that we are defenceless in the face of the contingency of existence, and have experienced in very intense form 'the Return of the Great Questions'. I'm saying, in effect, that the

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end of dogmatic metaphysical philosophy, historical criticism of our great religious traditions, and our contemporary craze for technology and consumerism have between them already wiped out our inherited religious traditions. Almost nothing of any value is left. It is now too late for reconstruction, and too late for any salvage operations. We should let the dead bury their dead, and get on with the task of reinventing religion *ex nihilo*, from nothing, from scratch.

Why? And how, if, as I have suggested, postmodern consumer society has successfully eliminated any felt need for philosophical and religious foundations by regarding it as the expression of a 'mood disorder'? In postmodern entertainment culture people live absorbed in contemplating the 'mediascape', the rich, complex imaginary world projected out to them by the mass media. The mediascape is like a vast soap opera, beginningless, endless, rambling in all directions, and filling the whole of cultural space. It is totalitarian: it is a box that hardly anybody has the strength to 'think outside'. Like a black hole, it swallows everything. I have no answer to it except an obstinate conviction that there must be more to life than this. Even the people who are most hypnotised by the mediascape must surely know in their hearts that human beings can do better than this wretched opium dream.

I persist, therefore, in saying that after the end of the old West and of all the other major cultural traditions, we need to think about reconstructing the whole of humanity's ideal culture. To begin with, we must go back into the original nakedness and emptiness, and move step-by-step. We need to establish a minimal notion of what the world is and what our place in it is, and we also need to show how human animals can learn to bear the knowledge of

what they are and where they stand, and then be reconciled to their own lives.

We have to start, I say, with a minimal conception of the facts of life, and of what it is to be human in a human world. We have to learn how to live and die with a knowledge of the facts of life that other animals do not have to bear. In this sense, and in spite of everything, I still believe that philosophical and religious thinking has a certain logical priority. It alone provides the platform on which a sane and healthy ideal culture can be built. (If you disagree, then you will presumably hold that it is no longer possible to get any leverage against technology and the mediascape, and you should throw this article away at once.)

So we begin: we begin, I have suggested, with the simplest and clearest possible *world-view*. It recognises only two entities, life in general, and my life. Life is the general going on of events and of symbolic exchange in the human social world. My life is my own personal role in it all.

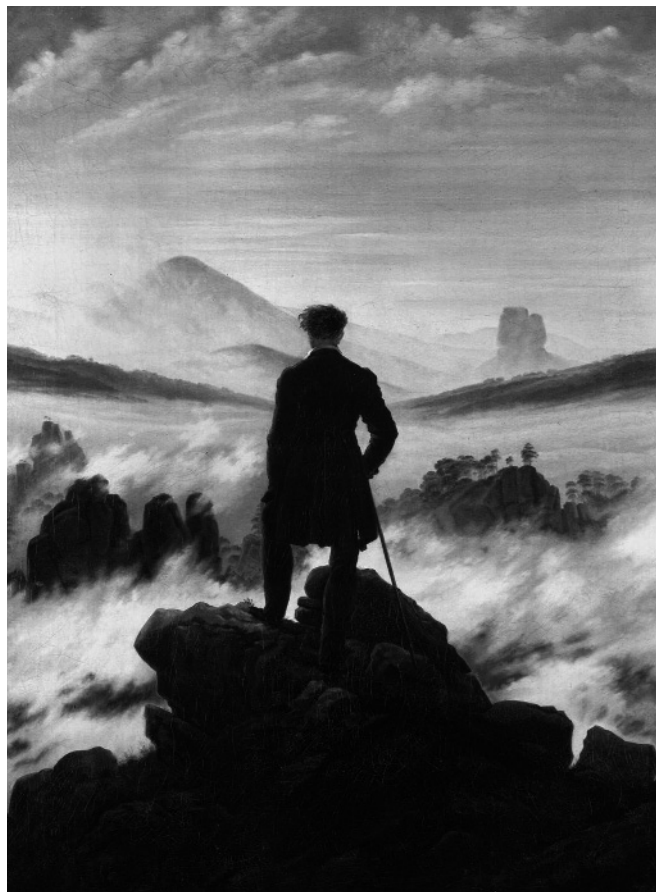
Against that background, we next define *religion*. Religion, I suggest, is the complex of ideas and practices by means of which we try to reconcile ourselves to, and make the best of, life in general and our own lives in particular. Religion is about coming to terms with life and learning how to live and how to die.

Why do we need to be reconciled to life? Because our life is subject to certain permanent *limits*, of which we (unlike animals) are highly aware, for our language teaches us about them. These limits are mutually implicated with each other, and are so deeply a part of our experience that we cannot really imagine life without them; but they cause us to fret a great deal, and we keep looking for ways round them. They are time, chance and death – or, in traditional language, *temporality*, contingency and finitude. Life is always

Religion is about coming to terms with life and learning how to live and how to die.

subject to temporality, in such a way that nothing is ever done, or enjoyed, or achieved totally and simultaneously. We do or enjoy everything only in a chain of succeeding stages, a bit at a time. Life is a one-way journey, with (as everyone knows) no retakes and no return tickets. Life is always subject to *contingency*, and (despite what the insurance industry says) there is no guaranteed cover against the disasters that may strike any of us at any time. We have to try hard to take full control of our own lives, even as we know that we can never entirely succeed. Fortune wins. And life is always subject to *finitude*, in that it will never deliver to us the endless and unalloyed perfection we dream of, and it is always terminated by death.

We have just emerged from a cultural epoch that has lasted nearly 3000 years, since the beginning of the Iron Age. It was a period in which great religious belief-systems and philosophies, very widely diffused,



The Wanderer by Caspar David Friedrich

acted to protect people from too naked a view of the contingency of human existence and the nothingness of death. But in recent years the old painted veil has crumbled away, bringing about a return of philosophy's primal terrors. Many, many people now find that their personal happiness in life is ruined, permanently ruined by the nagging, inescapable, unanswerable terror of the great questions that prey upon their minds. That is why religion is so much needed: it helps to pilot us through the terrors, and helps us to find personal happiness and fulfilment in life in the face of those unanswerable Questions.

This is in short to say that whereas the older kind of religion was often about salvation from sin, the chief interest of modern religion is in learning how to live with nihilism. Not the 'conquest' of nihilism – a romantic cliché but the *familiarisation* of nihilism, and the acceptance of everything's radical contingency.

At this point we should also briefly refer to the distinction between *organised religion* and *spirituality*. 'Organised religion' is large-scale, traditional and authoritative, in the manner of the world faiths with which we are familiar. A 'spirituality' is a religious style that someone has personally worked out for herself. Today, when the old world faiths are dying and many people are finding themselves suddenly stranded by the rapid decay of their own tradition, there is perforce a good deal of spirituality about. But it is very difficult indeed to face these great questions on one's own, and very difficult to frame any kind of rational response to them for oneself. We still need conversations with others, to stabilise our vocabulary and to maintain our sanity. Which is to say that the

religion of the future will need to have a social dimension.

We next need to spell out in a little more detail how religion may help us to come to terms with the great questions of life.

Many people, I know, will think it impossible. They'll say that we humans are like a line of rather nervous beasts walking into an abattoir. Suddenly a heavy rubber curtain parts, and their nostrils twitch as they get an unmistakable whiff of what is coming. They go into a desperate screaming panic, but it's too late, for the bolt hits the back of the skull and it's all over. The people I have in mind will tell you that the whole of our human life is compressed into that final stage of animal life, the second or two between the moment of realisation of what's coming, and the end. That is the human condition, as it has often been described by Pascal, Nietzsche and others: to live all your life knowing what pigs and cattle realise only in the last few seconds of their lives. What possible remedy can there be for that?

Religion has the power to revalue overwhelming feelings of dread, anxiety and terror and turn them into cosmic emotion, feelings of cosmic exaltation, awe, bliss and peace.

My answer is threefold. First, we should not attempt to escape from the terrors of existence. Instead, we should by faith cast ourselves into existence in all its one-way temporality, its contingency, and its transience. We must both recognise clearly what our life is, and find the courage for the *solar living* that nevertheless says Yes to life, and steps boldly out over the abyss.

In the second place, we will and we do of course often find ourselves flooded by anxiety and terror: but it is a psychological fact that the passions are easily deflected, and easily revalued. Notoriously, we readily eroticise the things of which we are most afraid. Still more strikingly, religion has the power very cannily to allow overwhelming feelings of dread, anxiety and terror to overflow, decentering the self and freeing us from self-concern, and then the power also to revalue these same vast feelings and turn them into *cosmic emotion*, feelings of cosmic exaltation, awe, bliss and peace. In this way, a man who is dying is not obliged to go kicking and screaming into his own final extinction. He can if he chooses make of his own dying a blissful, mystical drowning in God, and so revalue his own extinction even as he slips into it.

I am saying, then, and in the third place, that a new and thoroughly post-Western reconstruction of culture will not dream of attempting to escape or transcend the facts of life. There is no transcendent or supernatural order. We are our own lives in all their temporality, contingency and finitude, and there is no supernatural

or transcendent realm. We reject medieval religion's painted screen, and we reject modern technology's mediascape. Instead, we'll try for a culture that is not built on illusions, but is truthful, honest and open all the way down.

What does a solar religious life look like? It involves an attempt to find one's own voice – which means, to find the lifestyle through which one can best and most fully express oneself. Secondly, you must attempt to *appropriate your own life* and assume full responsibility for it. Thirdly, your personal living should be as affirmative and extravertive as you can make it: *we should so act as to enhance and increase the overall value of life*.

It is worth commenting here that all the greatest moral advances of the past seventy years have been of this type: feminism strove to raise the general social valuation of females; environmentalism strove to raise our valuation of our physical environment and of all the living things that populate it; anti-racism and the many movements descended from it strove to raise our valuation of racial groups other than our own; and finally, humanitarian ethics responds simply to human need, without regard to any calculation of relative merits.

If we are still able to be hopeful about human beings and the human future, it is largely on the basis of what these four great movements have already done to make the human world a better place today than it was in earlier periods. That is why, for an absolutely minimal basis for ethics in the future, I argue that we should learn to love life and to try to live as affirmatively as we can, acting always to raise rather than to lower the valuations of things that are already built into our common language.

That is about as far as I have yet been able to take my proposed reinvention of religious thought. It is an astonishingly slow, difficult and painful business, it has taken me many years, and that is all I have done. In the present essay I have been trying to understand a complication that has arisen: in recommending solar immediate commitment to life, I seem to be commending an energetic ethic of living intensely and energetically. But how is this compatible with the fact that we moderns spend so much of our time dreaming about and lamenting lives that we missed living, kinsfolk who are lost to us in death, opportunities that we missed, unattainable ideals and dead gods? We are much more aware than previous generations of all the roads that for one reason and another we did not take. Maybe I can learn to say Amen to the one contingent life that I have actually had; but I cannot help thinking that the one life I did live is surrounded by an indefinitely large number of other possible lives that might equally well have been mine, if I had only happened to take different turns at various points along the road. And why do I cling to various religious and human loves that were never very practicable, and by now are permanently lost to me?

By way of an answer I point out, what I think has never been observed before, namely that the real world out there, a God-made, law-governed, finished work, was never just given to us. It was *an object of credal belief*. In the Creeds, it is 'heaven and earth'; or it is 'all things visible and invisible'. When dogmatic religion



died and God died, the real world out there died too, to be replaced by the humanly-constructed world, a shifting, slightly fuzzy, consensus product.

In this process, our life changed radically. In the old God-made world your life was single. It was created, predestined in the minutest detail, guarded, guided and eventually ended by God. People knew nothing of the modern idea that one should try to take full control of and responsibility for one's own life. God and God only controlled your life, and knew it all: when it began, how it was to be lived, when it would end. In a world ruled by the will of God, there was simply no reason to think about unfulfilled possibilities and missed life-chances. God's Will missed nothing. Your job was just to live the life God had pre-programmed you to live.

Today, in our relatively fuzzier man-made world, our human life looks quite different. The one life I have actually lived is surrounded by an indefinitely large number of other imaginary lives that I might well have lived, but happened not to. The gap between the contingently-actual and the surrounding contingently non-actual is only very narrow. So I am driven to conclude that all our lost, missed, 'impossible' loves are part of the truth about ourselves, and it is not surprising that we should brood over them in our effort to make sense of our own lives.

A further and very tantalising thought presents itself: I begin to suspect that in the new, emergent world-view the whole realm of 'the Impossible' corresponds approximately to what the Supernatural realm was in the old world-view. The actual life I, Don Cupitt, have lived is a single strand made up of a chain of contingencies, choices, misfortunes and at least two outstanding bits of good fortune. It is surrounded by the whole realm of the Impossible, all the things that might once have been for me, but which now with the passage of time have become lost and impossible. Contemplating all these impossible loves, I feel the old pang. I smile wryly: but they do help me with the one vital task of learning how to end content with what I have been, what I have had, and what I have done, be it little or much.

3

The thoroughgoing reinvention of religion that I am proposing turns out to be, at its centre, very simple. (That is not surprising: I have been trying to make it as simple as I could.)

First we make a single broad 'cosmological' distinction, that between life in general and my life.

Secondly, we say that religion is a way of seeking to become reconciled to, and at ease with, life in general and one's own life in particular.

Thirdly we ask, Why the need for reconciliation? and we reply that life is always subject to certain very general limits, as summed up in the formula: Time, Chance and Death. We fret against these limits and dream of being able to get around them, conquer them, or transcend them. But true religion finds salvation by choosing and affirming our life, with its limits, as a package deal.

Then fourthly, we describe the good life as 'solar'. It

(a) achieves expressed selfhood only 'retrospectively' and in passing; and

(b) seeks to add fresh value to the common world.

And finally, the new religious life in our new world is a life of love. But the self and its world are now so changeable and transient that all our loves have a poignant, 'impossible' quality about them. The highest wisdom now is to accept this, and to say: 'I don't want to be an angel, and I don't want a world that is pure sweetness. I prefer to be a mortal, whose loves are bittersweet.'

Don Cupitt made the original *Sea of Faith* tv series in 1984 for the BBC. Since then he has written many books, the latest being *The Way to Happiness* (Polebridge Press 2005).

The God and I

The day has come
For me to believe
I have lived long enough.
I have done some good
And some harm.

As all the above
Could just as truthfully
Be said about God,
I will be leaving,
Feeling at peace.

Peter Mavromatis

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

From Natural Theology to a Theology of Nature

Dominic Kirkham writes about what he calls ‘a very English preoccupation’

For the past four centuries natural theology has been a very English preoccupation. In its search for a way between the Scylla of Catholic theological authoritarianism and the Charybdis of Puritan biblical literalism the Elizabethan Settlement of the sixteenth century saw natural theology as the ideal basis for a *via media*. In his influential *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, the Anglican divine, Richard Hooker argued that by turning to reason and evidence all men of good will could find sufficient truth about the Creator; all that was needed was a little observation of nature for, ‘Nature and Scripture do serve in such full sort that they both jointly and not severally either of them be so complete that unto everlasting felicity we need not the knowledge of anything more than these two may easily furnish.’¹

Such a view harmonised admirably with that of Hooker’s contemporary, Sir Francis Bacon, who was setting out his own empirical agenda for the advancement of knowledge, on a similar basis of the accurate observation of nature. Thus appeared a new breed of clergyman-naturalists such as John Ray (1628-1705). The title of his major work, *Wisdom of God, Manifested in the Words of Creation* (1691) really says it all. The living world is the work of the supreme designer, ‘There is no greater, at least not more palpable and convincing argument of the Existence of a Deity, than the admirable Art and Wisdom that discovers itself in the Make and Constitution of Heaven and Earth.’²

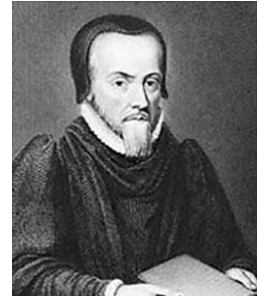
Henceforth, and by happy coincidence, the advancement of knowledge could be co-opted for the glorification of God. Such would be the purpose of natural theology. That there might have been a serpent lurking in the undergrowth of such ambition should have suggested itself from the pages of scripture itself on the temptation of knowledge. The disjunction between observation and revelation first became apparent to Thomas Burnet. When this Cambridge scholar and royal chaplain to Charles II was taking a trip through the Alps its rugged terrain of ‘indigested heaps of Stones and Earth’ prompted him to reflect how such ‘confusion came into Nature’.³

In his *Sacred Theory of the Earth* he argued that it was all a result of the Flood, which had necessitated the defacement of the original creation. If he thought this cleverly harmonised observation and revelation, the storm of outrage that his theory caused showed him otherwise. For the newly sanguine natural theology held that the world was not ‘a great Ruine’, defiled by human sin, but a wondrous creation expressly designed by God for the edification and convenience of His favourite species. But the nub of the issue was that Burnet’s loose reading of scripture, so as to coincide with observation, would encourage the irreligious to scepticism: as one churchman put it, ‘That way of philosophising all from Natural Causes I fear will turn the whole World into Scoffers.’

This prescient remark was a portent of things to come. The more carefully naturalists observed the Earth, the odder it all seemed to be. It was in the study of the new science of geology that cracks in the edifice of natural theology began to appear: by the end of the eighteenth century they had become gaping chasms! It was particularly through the study of fossils that it became apparent that the world was not only far older than ever envisaged by scripture but that whole worlds had come and gone, inhabited by demonic creatures (dinosaurs) ‘armed with the virility of Evil. a teeming Spawn fitted for the lowest abysm of Chaos.’ To the faithful such discoveries brought great disquiet; if (and for long it was contested that it was only an ‘if’) such creatures had existed they could only be the work of the devil. It was only after much hesitation, and before languishing into insanity, that the first holder of Oxford’s chair of geology (created with the explicit purpose of strengthening the scientific basis of belief), the Rev. William Buckland was forced to admit that such a world was ‘inconsistent with a Creation founded in Benevolence.’⁴

Buckland was a colourful character, given to concluding popular lectures on fossils with the singing of the national anthem in thanks for vital minerals, such as coal, which ‘expresses the most clear design of Providence to make the inhabitants of the British Isles, by means of this gift, the most powerful and richest nation on Earth.’ If, in the larger picture of natural theology there was no justification for metaphysical beliefs, then where indeed would it lead not only scoffers but the devout? When the one time aspirant to Holy Orders, Charles Darwin, visited Galapagos, what he observed undermined his belief in natural theology, for the God of Galapagos was careless, wasteful, indifferent and almost diabolical, certainly not the sort of God to whom anyone would be inclined to pray.⁵

The high water mark of natural theology is undoubtedly the work of William Paley. It was of this that Darwin wrote with such affection in his autobiography of his time at Cambridge that, ‘The careful study of these works was the only part of the Academic Course which, as I then felt and still believe, was of the least use to me in the education of my mind.’⁶ It was, therefore, highly ironic that the first casualty of the new theory of natural selection should be the natural theology of Paley’s argument to design. It is also tragic that at this point, about 1875, that, according to the philosopher Michael Ruse, ‘natural theology took a wrong if understandable turn’ in not only abandoning the argument to design but the argument to complexity on which it was based.⁷

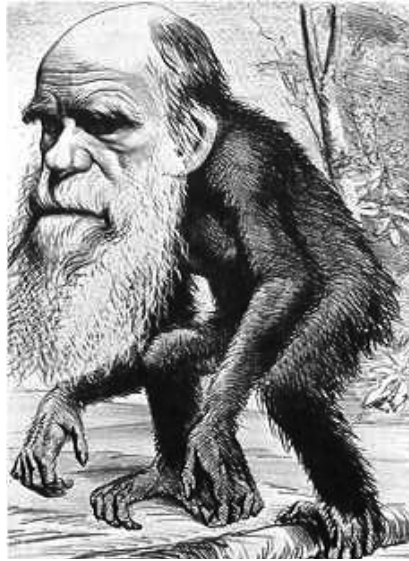


Richard Hooker

This is a view supported by Fritjof Capra in his study of the development of European scientific thought, *The Turning Point*. Because of the focus on individual organisms and species, he writes, 'The creative unfolding of life towards forms of ever increasing complexity remained an unsolved mystery for more than a century after Darwin.'⁸ It is something that a more holistic view of systems theory, that focuses on the dynamics of self-organisation and the role of the environment, has now remedied with such concepts as the 'eco-system' or 'bio-diversity', pioneered by the naturalist E.O.Wilson.

Meanwhile, the agenda of Bacon and the enthusiasm of the new naturalist-scientists had led to the emergence of a wholly new kind of industrialised society in which the new knowledge and exploitation of nature's resources, regarded as a source of endless beneficence, was becoming insatiable, destructive and unsustainable. It was John Ruskin, amongst others, who complained not only about geology – 'those dreadful Hammers! I hear the clink of them at the end of every cadence of the Bible verses'⁹ – but of the destruction of the human spirit. He too lapsed into a depressive dementia.

Clearly something was very wrong. It was not long before questions began to be raised about the very foundational principles of this civilization. The distinguished historian Arnold Toynbee wrote, 'Some of the major maladies of the present world – in particular the recklessly extravagant consumption of nature's irreplaceable treasures, and the pollution of those that man has not already devoured – can be traced back to a religious cause, and this cause is the rise of monotheism.'¹⁰ It seemed that the Western 'religion of modern times' (Christianity) had first robbed nature of its mystery and then encouraged the growth of a destructive scientific mechanism which now threatened not only to destroy nature but humanity as well.



Charles Darwin portrayed as an ape

The more carefully naturalists observed the Earth, the odder it all seemed to be.

And there was something else. Just as the ecological implications of this religion had not been recognised neither had another feature: its patriarchalism. By the twentieth century women were beginning to challenge the assumptions and values of a society run largely by men for men. Nor did it take much insight to realise that the whole edifice of natural theology was a very male affair: like women the Earth had always been regarded as feminine and, like women, the male view was that both were there for man's pleasure and exploitation. As the feminist theologian Mary Daly wrote, 'Where God is male, the male reigns supreme.'¹¹ Female theologians have been prominent in reappraising our understanding of nature.

A feminine view of nature as the source of fertility, of the nurturing and care for life, was something that had been

heavily repressed from the outset of monotheism: the Bible simply designated the ancient goddess of fertility, Ashstoreth, as 'shame'. In the Christian era the ancient rites of nature were simply condemned as 'witchcraft'. The apparent dualism implicit in Christian theology whereby the natural was subverted to the supernatural, this 'dirty little world' to the 'heavenly Jerusalem', was clearly becoming untenable.

The cumulative effect of such profound cultural reappraisals has been to propel theological thought about nature onto a new level of understanding. As the New Zealand theologian Lloyd Geering has written, 'Our growing knowledge of how life has evolved, and of the earthly parameters within which all creatures live, has amounted to a new revelation that supplements but largely replaces the supposed revelations of the past.'¹² The heart of this new sense of revelation is what is now called 'Green Consciousness'. It was epitomised by the American Catholic priest Thomas Berry when he wrote in *The Dream of the Earth*, 'There is an awe and reverence due to the stars in the heavens, the sun and heavenly bodies; to the seas and the continents; to all living forms of trees and flowers; to the myriad expressions of life in the sea; to the animals of the forest and the birds of the air. To wantonly destroy a living species is to silence forever a divine voice.'¹³

Here we glimpse the emergence (evolution?) of a new kind of theology: a theology of nature. Unlike the previous natural theology it sees nature simply in terms of itself, as an inviolable, mysterious 'other' which makes its own epiphanies. In his Gifford Lectures of 1953, on the theological implications of the new understanding of nature, Canon Charles Raven – amongst the last of that great tradition of clerical naturalists – captured something of this spirit when he wrote of his sheer pleasure in observing butterflies, 'Every specimen differed from the rest. To move from one to another, to sense the difference of impact, to work out the quality of this difference in the detailed modifications of the general pattern, this was a profoundly moving experience.'¹⁴

If the 1870s were a time of crisis for natural theology the 1970s were a time of radical change in our understanding of nature. With the breathtaking views of planet Earth taken from the Apollo spacecraft and the publication of the Gaia theory of planetary self-regulation New Age mystics and environmental activists began to look at the Earth in a new way – as a fragile life-support system hovering over the abyss. As a species we now understood ourselves to be one part of a vibrant and almost inexhaustibly wondrous complex web of life that surrounds the Earth: what Teilhard de Chardin called the 'biosphere'.¹⁵

The truly awesome thing is that now, small as we are, we have the power not only to comprehend this but to destroy it – and ourselves with it. This brings a sense of urgency to reconnect with the natural world, such as that expressed by Sally McFague in *Super, Natural Christians; How we should love nature*.¹⁶ In this new dispensation there has been a metamorphosis of the old religious vocabulary: 'salvation' is now about saving the planet, 'sanctuaries' the last refuges of the wilderness.

In a sense we are now living between two stories of nature. While we are still trying to accept the implications of the new, evolutionary story, much that belonged to the old creationist story still lingers on in our thinking. It is a bit like the vehicles one sometimes see in Third World countries, bedecked with all sorts of medallions, charms, and statues: if one breaks down who do you call upon, the gods or a mechanic? Lloyd Geering comments that this transition replicates that from polytheism to monotheism: it wasn't achieved overnight and not without much controversy. But it triumphed because it was a more persuasive idea.

The 1970s were a time of radical change in our understanding of nature... with the breathtaking views of planet Earth taken from the Apollo spacecraft.

To some the new theology of nature will be no more than a confirmation of the worst fears of the critics of Thomas Burnet, that the world would be turned into scoffers. But this is facile; as perhaps the greatest evolutionary biologist of the last century, Ernst Myer, once said, 'People forget that it is possible to be intensely religious in the entire absence of theological belief.' Call it Nature Mysticism, Green Christianity or whatever, the new theology of nature now incorporates all that we have learned about the human species and the natural world. 'Life' has now become the new metaphor for 'God' as the symbol of totality. Now, as the theologian Gordon Kaufman wrote *In Face of Mystery*, 'To believe in God is to commit oneself to a particular way of ordering one's life and action. It is to devote oneself to working towards a fully humane world within the ecological restraints here on planet Earth, while standing in piety and awe before the profound mysteries of existence.'¹⁷ Such is the basis of the new theology of nature.

- 1 Quoted in Michael Ruse, *Darwin and Design*, (Harvard 2003) p. 36.
- 2 Ruse, *op.cit.* p..39.
- 3 For a discussion of the thinking of Burnet cf. Robert Macfarlane, *Mountains of the Mind* (Granta 2003) and Alan Cutler, *The Seashell on the Mountaintop* (Heinemann 2003), which is a biography of Nicolaus Steno, the man with the best claim to be the founder of Geology.
- 4 Cf. Deborah Cadbury, *The Dinosaur Hunters* (Fourth Estate, 2000).
- 5 For a discussion of Darwin's crucial paradigm shift from natural theology to evolutionary thinking see Edward J. Larson, *Evolution's Workshop: God and Science on the Galapagos Islands* (Penguin 2002).
- 6 Darwin, Charles, *Autobiographies* (Penguin Classics 2002).p. 31.
- 7 Ruse, *op.cit.* p.. 334.
- 8 Fritjof Capra, *The Turning Point: Science, Society and the Rising Culture*, (Flamingo 1982) p.310..

- 9 Quoted in *The Faber Book of Science*, ed. John Carey (Faber 1995) p.71.
- 10 Quoted in Lloyd Geering, *The Greening of Christianity* (St. Andrews Trust, 2005) p. 22.
- 11 Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Beacon Press, 1973).
- 12 Geering, *op.cit.* p.35.
- 13 Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (Sierra Club Books, 1988).
- 14 Charles E. Raven, *Natural Religion and Christian Theology: Experience and Interpretation* (Cambridge, 1953).
- 15 Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (Fontana, 1965). Though Teilhard hopelessly mixed up teleology and evolutionary thinking he is prophetic in grasping the need for a holistic theology of the Earth.
- 16 Sally McFague, *Super, Natural Christians* (Fortress Press, 1997).
- 17 Gordon Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery* (Harvard, 1993).

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

Inversnaid

This darksome burn, horseback brown,
His rollrock highroad roaring down,
In coop and in comb the fleece of his foam
Flutes and low to the lake falls home.

A windpuff-bonnet of fáwn-fróth
Turns and twindles over the broth
Of a pool so pitchblack, féll-frówning,
It rounds and rounds Despair to drowning.

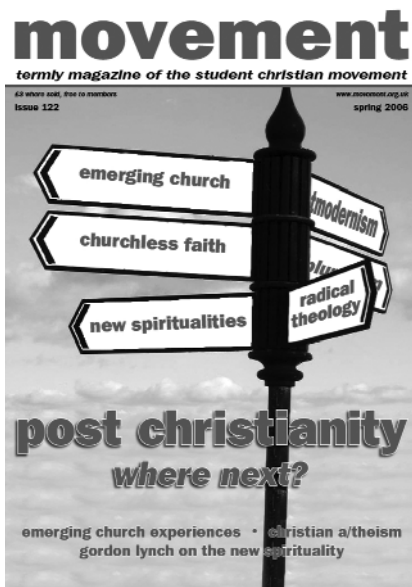
Degged with dew, dappled with dew
Are the groins of the braes that the brook
treads through,
Wiry heathpacks, flitches of fern,
And the beadbonny ash that sits over the burn.

What would the world be once bereft
Of wet and wildness? Let them be left,
O let them be left, wildness and wet;
Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.

Gerard Manley Hopkins

Students and Religion

Fewer students than ever before seem to be committed to causes of any kind, says Liam Purcell and asks what religion means to students in Britain today.



I was pleased to be invited to write an article for *Sofia*, but rather daunted when I sat down and looked at my brief. As editor of the Student Christian Movement's magazine *movement*, I've been asked to talk about not just SCM and the magazine, but more broadly about modern students' attitudes to religious belief. In an increasingly

diverse and pluralist society, one could probably find as many answers to this question as there are students – but I'll try to give the best overview I can from my experiences working for SCM over the past five years.

I imagine many readers of *Sofia*, coming from or remaining within a liberal Christian tradition, may be familiar with SCM from their own student days. I'm continually surprised and delighted by the number of people I meet in the Christian world (and the world of radical politics!) who are eager to share their warm memories of being part of the movement. But for the benefit of those who may be less familiar with the movement, I'll start by briefly sketching the historical background against which SCM operates today.

A Divided History

SCM was founded in the late nineteenth century as a missionary society for higher education students. Initially drawing its membership mainly from the evangelical wing of the Anglican church, it soon developed a more open and ecumenical character, and its focus shifted from overseas mission so that it became more of a fellowship for students in this country. As one of the oldest student organisations in the UK, it played a role in founding the National Union of Students. It was also a founding member of the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF), a global network of movements sharing similar values and vision. SCM and WSCF together were instrumental in setting up the 1910 conference in Edinburgh which gave birth to the World Council of Churches and the modern ecumenical movement.

At the same time, SCM conferences and events were reflecting a growing interest in liberal approaches, such as the higher criticism of the Bible. This caused tension with

some of the more conservative and evangelical groups within the movement. SCM leadership also became concerned that some of these same conservative factions were not as democratic as the movement would want them to be. All of this eventually came to a head when the local group in Cambridge 'seceded' from the national movement over these disagreements, saying that SCM had 'apostasised from the truths on which it had been founded' (David M Thompson, *Same Difference? Liberals and Conservatives in the Student Movement*, SCM, 1990).

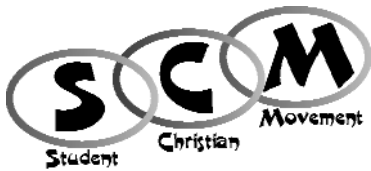
The split set the tone for student Christianity for much of the rest of the century. The Cambridge Inter-Collegiate Christian Union eventually became the starting point for a separate network of Christian societies, nowadays called the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship (UCCF). UCCF's member groups, Christian Unions, are expected to be exclusively evangelical in character, requiring all leaders and speakers to sign up to their statement of doctrine, with the main focus of their work being the evangelisation of non-Christians. SCM, meanwhile, retained its ecumenical and open nature, and emphasised debate and social action in its work. For much of the twentieth century, these differences often caused confrontation and conflict between groups on campus.

SCM was also engaged in confrontation on other fronts. Members' emphasis on social justice led them to 'challenge the powers' with increasingly direct action. In the sixties and seventies, the movement was openly Marxist, emphasising political activism and famously creating an intentional community near Bristol as its new headquarters. Meanwhile, however, the national network dwindled. Christian Unions became the dominant expression of Christianity on university campuses; today, they have more members than any other student society in Britain.

Today's student community is postmodern, pluralist and diverse.

The Modern Campus Context

But this history of Christian division is just a small part of the whole picture of religious belief for modern students. Today's student community is postmodern, pluralist and diverse. Outside of the minority who are active members of religious groups, students, like young people in general, tend towards an individualistic, detached approach. Increasing work commitments mean that they often don't have the time to commit to organised activities – but many wouldn't have the inclination even if they did have the time. Fewer students than ever before seem to be committed to causes of any kind, whether religious, social or political – and they're often not interested in having strong opinions about other people's beliefs either. In 2004,



writer and student worker Howard Ingham explored responses to Christian Unions' evangelisation on campus. He found that most students simply couldn't care less: 'Ten years ago, you'd try and hand a copy of a Gospel to someone and they'd likely snarl at you for pushing your beliefs onto them. Now, everyone's fine with it – if it makes you happy' (Howard Ingham, 'The unimportance of being earnest', www.johnheronproject.com).

Are these the children of Thatcher's world, only interested in themselves? Are they, as politicians might want us to believe, apathetic and disaffected? I think there's a third explanation, which has been explored by theologian Gordon Lynch in his book *After Religion: Generation X and the Search for Meaning* (DLT, 2002). Lynch identifies two characteristic attitudes in young people: a postmodern distrust of metanarratives (the big overarching stories, like organised religions, which try to explain everything); but also a continuing personal search for spiritual meaning – which may be located in friends, community, alternative spiritualities, clubbing, films, pop culture or elsewhere. It's individualistic but it's not apathetic and it's not necessarily selfish. Lynch's more recent work (featured in the Spring 2006 issue of *movement*) is exploring how emerging forms of spirituality – from pagan eco-activism to radical Christian communities – can provide a more open framework for this exploration of meaning.

This open-minded approach and respect for the individual is not just characteristic of secular, 'unaffiliated' students. It's increasingly common even amongst those who still choose to affiliate themselves to some kind of religious organisation. Many students today are quite comfortable being part of both a Christian Union and an SCM group, acknowledging that the organisations have different strengths without seeing any need for conflict. While there are local tensions, the old rivalries are not the defining issue they used to be. And the openness extends beyond faith communities – we at SCM have found that secular campaigning organisations are increasingly happy to work together with faith groups on social justice issues. In the past, both sides might have been more distrustful of one another, more defensive about their own ideological positions.

The postmodern distrust of institutions means that the students who lead SCM today are instinctively ecumenical, having grown up in a context where the old denominational boundaries are irrelevant. There are hopeful signs that the institutional churches are recognising this too. Last summer, an article in the *Methodist Recorder* discussed the decline of the Methodist church's own student ministry, saying that the future lay in an SCM-style ecumenical approach. A Methodist chaplain commented: 'The vast majority of student societies in HE are post-denominational and have been for a long time. In my experience, the emphasis among Christian students is not based upon denominational adherence as such but upon theological position.' Beyond simple ecumenism, SCM groups are forming inter-faith links too, exploring their common ground with members of other traditions but also celebrating diversity.

Grounds For Optimism

As a movement, SCM has responded to this changing context in all kinds of ways, and has grown to a healthy size again after the losses of the seventies. Our emphasis these days is on the movement's inclusive and welcoming nature, and the value of the space it provides for open-minded debate. We're making changes to our structure that increase involvement and grassroots decision-making. As students increasingly don't have the time to run their own formal groups, we're relating to them more through chaplaincies – which are more and more likely to be ecumenical, or even inter-faith, in nature. At a national level, we're strengthening links with other faith and inter-faith groups. There are promising moves being made towards an inter-faith network for groups working in higher education.

Are these children of Thatcher's world, only interested in themselves? Are they apathetic and disaffected?

While we may not have the confrontational spirit of the Marxist SCMer of the past, students are still committed to putting their faith into action; we played an active role in the MakePovertyHistory coalition and are currently taking action as part of the Student StopAIDS Campaign. And the magazine I edit, *movement*, has a remit to expose our members to radical and challenging ideas in theology, politics and culture. It's the only place where most students can find such an open-minded approach to religious, social and political issues.

In all of this, we're staying true to an important insight: *praxis* – what we do together as a community – is ultimately more important than orthodoxy – what we believe. I've come across this insight in all kinds of places, from emerging church and alternative worship communities to people working in inter-faith relations. It gives me hope that students and young people will really be able to develop progressive forms of spirituality and religious community that can continue to be relevant in the twenty-first century.

Liam Purcell is SCM Co-ordinator and editor of *movement* magazine.

movement, SCM's termly magazine, is available to non-student subscribers. The spring 2006 issue on the theme of 'post Christianity' covered many topics that are touched on in this article and may be of interest to *Sofia* readers. If you'd like to become a Friend, subscribe to *movement* or just find out more about SCM, please contact: Student Christian Movement, Unit 308F The Big Peg, 120 Vyse Street, The Jewellery Quarter, Birmingham B18 6NF. 0121 200 3355. Email: scm@movement.org.uk Web: www.movement.org.uk

In an Austrian Church

I walked into a church one day
 And found it full of mirrors
 Giving back the light.
 The sight was marvellous,
 And many came to gaze
 At such a work, in a dark place.

Some did not want to stay, soon
 Crossed it off their list, and so moved on.
 For me, I waited there, till I could see.
 And then I found it was too much:
 So many images, whichever way I looked,
 So many styles, such range of ornament
 Or plain severity, endless variety

Of subtle difference, and every one
 Imperfect, marred or flawed
 Yet saying: Come, this is the Way.
 Demanding, begging, promising
 Each in the name
 Of the true Light.

There in the murk
 I was hard put to it –
 Where I had come for light,
 The light of day, that shines on all –
 To see beyond the shades of shades,
 Endless reflections fading into dust
 Within that nightmare-mirrored hall.

Then one who came in after me
 Approached and looked, and so I knew myself
 One of their company.
 Lord, we were made for light,
 To show your light to one another.
 Light of life
 Enlighten us.

W.S. Beattie

W.S. Beattie is a retired librarian and member for forty years of the Norwich United Reformed Church, where he was a magazine editor and sang in choirs, before moving to Stortford.

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Non What?

There was a time when the pages of the SoF Magazine were littered with the word 'non-realism'. No one liked the word and no one would think of resurrecting it. But it had one merit. It was a philosophical term that resonated across a broad range of academic disciplines. It recognised that issues affecting our whole understanding of the world were affecting our understanding of faith. There was a common agenda to be addressed. Nowadays the pages of *Sofia* are sprayed with the term 'nontheism'. John Hondros uses it several times to describe his programme for a different form of Christianity (*Deification in the Orthodox Tradition – Sofia 75 p.7*).

David Boulton's *Godless Quakers* (*Sofia 75 p.5*), in less than a couple of pages, uses the term a dozen times. It's a non-word which has to be bolstered with terms like 'non-supernaturalist' and 'non-metaphysical'. The result is two-fold. It produces an idea of God which bears little resemblance to the God of any of the world's major faiths and it produces contradictory ideas such as 'the nontheists' radical re-envisioning of God' and the affirmation of deification 'in a non-theistic context'. All this isolates our discussions from the common agenda of the wider world and the faith communities.

Sea of Faith is most engaging when honest atheism and deep-rooted, radical theism find common ground and common cause. 'Non-theism' robs the network of its vitality.

Stephen Mitchell
 Gazeley



Wordsworth

As a moderately literate member of SoF and reader of *Sofia*, I would dearly like to know something about the contributors of articles and reviews. Many are completely unknown to me. A couple of lines on background and particular expertise would be helpful.

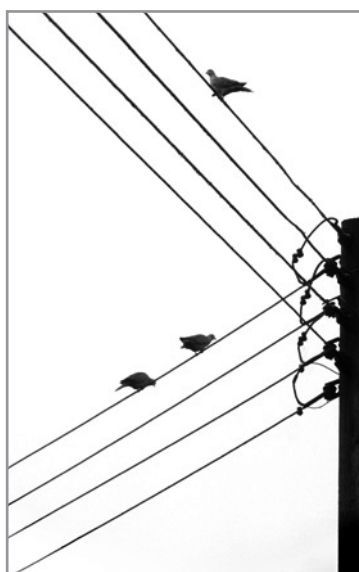
I expect you have already been inundated – by Wordsworth scholars in particular – with comments about the misquotation! *The Ode: Intimations of Immortality etc.*, stanza 5 ends with the couplet:

At length the Man perceives it die away,
And fade into the LIGHT of common day.

The correct quotation on the front cover would, in any event, add to the picture's drama; after all there is precious little growth in such a wintry scene.

Peace
Hilda Barclay
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[The phrase 'the growth of common day' is from Wordsworth's poem 'Home at Grasmere', line 1001. See *Mayday Notes* page 22. Ed.]



Silence

Dear Friend

The editorial to *Sofia* 75 contains a serious misconception that Quaker worship is all about silence and thinking. It is more providing an opportunity for listening and feeling. Friends seek to centre down and reach a stillness in which the racing mind loses its control and we reach out to one another as a corporate and gathered group. Reducing this to an opportunity to develop private thinking misses the point altogether.

Yours sincerely,
Norman Richardson
Julia@jnrich.go-plus.net

David Boulton has always struck me as a gentle tolerant man, as indeed most Quakers are. So I was surprised to see him terminate his article on *Godless Quakers* (*Sofia* 75) with the words: '...help create a world where supernaturalism, superstition, magic and metaphysics can be properly and effectively challenged?'

If by 'challenge' David means 'investigate critically but with an open mind' I am with him all the way. But I suspect he means 'reject' because he includes 'superstition' among the things he wants to challenge, a pejorative word we apply to anybody else's belief or habit which we find ridiculous.

Yet many of these 'superstitions' are pieces of folk wisdom based on past experience. Am I superstitious if I avoid walking under a ladder, or justifiably unwilling to risk having a paint pot fall on my head? What has been called 'supernatural' are mostly aspects of nature that do not fit into the materialist paradigm, but which are mostly known and understood by tribal people. One of these is 'magic': the ability to affect one's own and other people's health and well-being and other aspects of reality by the concentrated power of thought and will. Modern medicine recognises it and calls it the 'placebo effect'. Are

the thought waves that produce these effects any more 'metaphysical' – i.e. 'beyond physics' – than the wireless waves that bring the news to our radios and images to our television screens?

The world is beautiful and much more complex than the image of it created by the contemporary physical sciences. We impoverish our experience of it if we automatically disbelieve any phenomena for which the physical sciences have not yet got an explanation.

Frederic Lamond
lamond@net4you.at

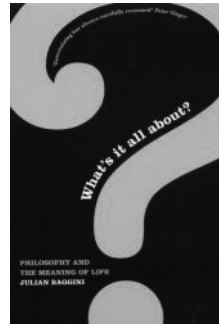
Intolerant?

Rob Wheeler reviews

What's it all about? Philosophy and the Meaning of Life,

by Julian Baggini

Granta Books (London). 2005. 224 pages. Pbk. £7.99.
ISBN: 1862077800



reviews



Julian Baggini

(see www.sofn.org.uk/london for full details).

A topic like *The Meaning of Life* does seem to suggest that some kind of deep mystery is going to be unveiled and Baggini is anxious to disabuse us right from the outset. If there were a big secret then it is likely it would have got around by now and, he might have added, that since the advent of the internet it would probably have been in everyone's inbox. It's not that kind of a question. What's it all about? is a place-holder for a number of other questions: Why are we here? What is the purpose of life? Is it enough just to be happy? Is my life serving some greater purpose? Are we here to help ourselves or others? etc. Furthermore '...the question is not one that can be solved by discovery of new evidence. It is rather to be solved by thinking about the issues on which the evidence remains silent'.

The answer that the book gives is 'deflationary'. By this the author means that '...it reduces the mythical, single and mysterious question of 'the meaning of life' to a series of smaller and utterly unmysterious questions about various meanings in life.' That said, the message of the book is far from being a series of simple platitudes consonant with everyone's intuitions. There are some serious and worthwhile insights offered here.

Baggini begins by considering the idea that we can discover the meaning of our lives by determining our origins. For instance if we are made by God, that must guarantee our meaning while if we are the simply the result of the impersonal DNA in our genes mindlessly reproducing themselves, that seems to trivialise our lives and rob them of meaning. He draws an interesting parallel here between our own predicament and that of the monster created by Dr Frankenstein. The monster comes across the journal of his creator and discovers exactly why he exists but that does not enlighten or console him. The creator may have a purpose in mind for my life but it only

becomes my meaning if I own it and commit myself to it intentionally.

Baggini then goes on to consider how our mortality affects the meaning of our life. It is often supposed that if there is no afterlife then our present life is rendered worthless. Baggini asks that if our present life is meaningless how extending it infinitely can render it meaningful? On the other hand if it can be meaningful now it does not require immortality to render it more so. Indeed the very fact that certain experiences are fleeting and time-bound can be essential to their value to us.

All questions about meaning and purpose follow a chain of why/because. The questions children ask are often of this interminable kind. Each answer is never accepted and leads to yet another question in an infinite chain. In practice there is an end to the chain when we arrive at something that is said to have intrinsic value or is an end in itself. Baggini argues that when we seek the meaning of our lives then we are looking for something here and now that has value for us.

He examines six values that are commonly held to offer purpose and meaning in our lives. These are helping others altruistically; the notion of serving the human species as a whole; enjoying each day as if it were our last; losing your ego by surrendering to a wider reality; seeking personal success and simply pursuing happiness. All are rejected as insufficient to give our lives meaning but all are affirmed as containing an ingredient of the good life.

If you have ever lain in bed in those dark, lonely tea-times of the soul and asked yourself 'Why are we here?' and 'What's it all about?' then this is the book for you!

Rob Wheeler is a member of SoF, who is organising the forthcoming London conference *Is There a Me?* He has recently uploaded an article about SoF network onto wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sea_of_Faith

For details of the Conference on March 25th see SoF website: www.sofn.org.uk/london
Or write to: SoF, 61 Fordington Road, London N6 4TH
Or telephone: 0208 422 1591

Margaret Ogden reviews

The Thoughtful Guide to Science and Religion: Using Science, Experience and Religion to Discover your own Destiny

by Michael Meredith

O Books (Winchester). 2005. 202 pages. Pbk. £10.99.
ISBN: 1905047169

This interesting book devotes a first short section to a consideration of SCIENCE, the next to EXPERIENCE and the final section to RELIGION. The introduction states that the book relates his personal journey in search of answers to the mystery of human destiny. I found the book clearly written and I particularly valued the chapters summarising a broad range of World Scriptures, the chapter on Meditative Prayer, and those exploring Mind and Consciousness.

The section on SCIENCE includes outlines (albeit sometimes sceptical) of 'The Big Bang'; Darwinian Evolution of Species by Natural Selection; DNA coding; and Survival of the Fittest. The author's early working experience was as an apprentice for the Ministry of Aviation and he reflects that the 'assembly of thermionic valves had, to some extent, copied the process of evolution. For evolution is a process where seemingly random chance produces order out of chaos.' ...'I concluded that survival of the fittest may well be part of the micro process of evolution, but the more dominant macro process was associated with order and co-operation!' Later in the book he writes of Evolution as a 'superb working hypothesis' that 'could turn out to be another flat earth theory'. My own Zoology degree studied the complexity of Evolution. I am now convinced that our human capacity for spiritual awareness has also evolved.

The second section headed EXPERIENCE concerns our Brains, our Memory and Consciousness, including Awareness of Self; with a Chapter entitled 'The Land of the People' where he narrates certain life experiences in his own childhood and adult beginnings of wisdom.

In the Chapter headed 'The Land of Religion' there is an excellent outline of *Lectio Divina*, a method of meditative reading of Scriptures which the author has applied to such different sacred texts as the 600 BC Buddhist *Dhammapada* and *Bodhisattva*; the Iranian c. 500 BC Zoroastrian *Avesta*; the Hindu 400 BC *Upanishads*; the 300 BC *Bhagavad-Gita*; the 600 AD Muslim Qur-an and the Bible. He has certainly travelled widely in his searches for 'Truth'. The final chapter concludes 'that we are not after all just mindless grains of sand, rocking back and forth at the

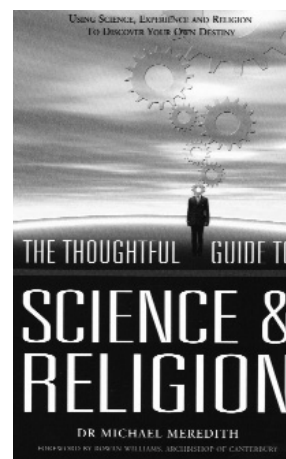
bottom of a restless sea ... but unique conscious

individuals who

have the opportunity to allow God's compassionate love to flow through us and into the world.'

Readers may find that Dr. Meredith's thoughtful Guide will not only stimulate reflective reading of other texts, and their own lives, but also inspire them to spend more time on meditation, shutting out mundane thoughts and permitting deeper insights to emerge, though these insights may not coincide with Dr. Meredith's Realist conclusions.

My own evolutionary viewpoint is that our capacity for Spirituality evolved to aid early Primate groups to survive, and was only later codified within varied World Religions. I reflect that we have been endowed by Evolution with the capacities to make a positive difference in the lives of our neighbours and neighbourhoods. This book may encourage us to explore our own spiritual understandings of life, and develop our own capacities for shaping our destinies via regular reflection about our circumstances and acting on the wisest choices ahead. It is a responsibility for us all to build up our personal 'Thoughtful Guides', adjusting these as the years pass by. Perhaps it will be those who most disagree with the author's conclusions who will be most stimulated to build up well considered alternatives? Read this book if you dare! It will challenge you to accept the author's tightly structured reasoning or it could stimulate you to construct alternative signposts for living.



reviews

Margaret Ogden studied zoology at University College London. She is a retired teacher and member of SoF Steering Committee.

Alison McRobb reviews

Train Doors Slamming

by John Pearson

Writersworld. 2005. 267 pages. Pbk. £8.50. ISBN: 1 904181 465

'You want to hug it,' said one reader of this novel. Well for the first couple of chapters I wanted to strangle it. By the end, however, there was certainly much more evidence of huggability, and not only because of the appeal of the main character or the inclusion of likeable children and dogs. Born in 1943, with a father absent in the RAF for another four years, I identified with a lot of the saga. Unlike the heroine's father, mine didn't win the VC, but did survive to receive a gold watch for 45 years with British Railways, in the years when train doors slammed.

The problem at the beginning of the book is in grasping who's who and what decade we're in, as the author introduces the octogenarian Mary on her 'old-fashioned' train journey the length of Britain. Her present and all her pasts are entwined with the histories of her family and friends, as she uses the day to read in their entirety her father's wartime diaries. On another level the real-time passengers on her train interact with her throughout. Some brisk editing would have helped here, particularly as the first diary entries do not appear in bold italic (as they later do). The layout would also have been helped by wider margins: the reader is assaulted by too many words. Mysteries are all unravelled eventually, but it is irritating to read 'After the accident . . .' and have to wait so many pages to discover what accident was so serious as to blind her faithful Reg.

Pearson is at his best when straight-forwardly narrating the story. There is a lot of sensitivity here and thought-provoking observation. For one thing, the era when so many children had a mildly paedophile Uncle Jack, who got no farther than embarrassing games and suggestive comments, at least seemed safer than today, when jail sentences do little to deter Uncle Jacks of all tastes, and internet links provide them with a fraternity. Yet the days when most babies born out of wedlock were swiftly removed to a 'better future' are not really so long ago either.

That's the 'feminine' aspect of the novel. The war diaries and the macho Biggles bits will no doubt appeal to another set of readers. They certainly seem to be well researched, though their very detail sometimes tends to overbalance the story. The same may be said of the descriptive passages – perhaps the



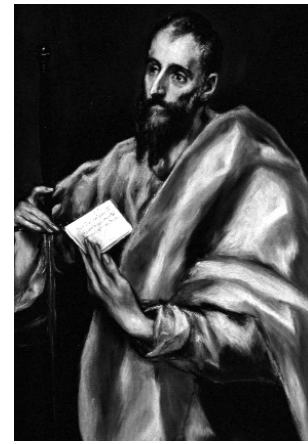
reviews

flavour of many of the locations could have been conveyed more economically. The author revels in countryside and architecture, but from time to time there is too much of the guidebook here, and this distracts attention from the characters.

Now the intriguing question: is this a Sea of Faith novel? It isn't expressly 'theological'. Where theology creeps in there are some inaccuracies: 'Let us now praise famous men', for example, is not in Ecclesiastes, and the 'no memorial' passage is capable of negative as well as positive interpretation. Again some interesting questions are suggested, however. Was Pearson's Mary, so reasonably resistant to religion in the forms she encounters it, typical of the many young women deprived of love, protection and progeny by the world wars? We hear more often a male response to padre and church parade, recorded in war diaries and poetry, but perhaps less of any female ambivalence towards the God of love so confidently invoked in parish church and chapel for those left behind. It's likely, as Pearson suggests, that non-realist, and atheistic, opinions were quite widely held but kept very quiet. It's less likely that a younger Mary would have defined religion as 'a human creation', but for present-day Mary it's not impossible. Along with her precious luggage she might even have been carrying a 2002 edition of this magazine.

Alison McRobb teaches philosophy and Hinduism, and chairs SoF Steering Committee

Cicely Herbert sees *Paul* at the National Theatre and a revival of *Nathan the Wise* at the Hampstead Theatre



reviews

Nobody with even a casual interest in cultural life in Britain today can have failed to notice that amongst the barrage of increasingly bizarre 'lifestyle' programmes in the media there has been an (albeit small) explosion of interest in matters that touch on world religions. At the time of writing, Radio 4 is featuring a series of short talks by David Starkey entitled 'Who Killed Religion?' in which Dr Starkey argues: 'Five major figures distorted, even betrayed, the Christian faith as envisaged by Jesus.' Three of the subjects up for investigation have been St Paul, the Emperor Constantine and Martin Luther. St Paul is also the subject of a new play *Paul* by Howard Brenton produced at the National Theatre, in which the aptly named Adam Godley plays the hero.

Paul is an interesting and in many ways, a difficult play and it is to the credit of the NT management that they have had the courage to produce a piece which requires of its audience more than usual concentration and commitment. I must confess here that had I not read the published script before seeing the play, I might well have lost my way in it. As it was, very often I had little idea of where, exactly, the action was taking place, nor of what date between AD 36 and AD 65 the story had reached.

Things were not helped by the fact that the play was staged on a permanent open-plan set, dressed with different-sized rocks and pebbles, neatly graded according to size. I spent more time than I should have done during the performance wondering whether the stones laid out at my feet had been purchased at a builder's yard or collected from a Suffolk beach. To make matters more confusing the cast of 11 actors doubled many parts throughout the evening.

However there are intriguing ideas in this dramatised exploration of one of the great Christian myths, that of the resurrection of Christ from the dead. In one pivotal scene, the character of James suggests that Christ may not have died on the cross at all, but that he had been removed, alive, by his followers after a centurion on guard at the scene of the crucifixion deserted his post. Here Brenton seems to be exploring how myths come to be created.

The central moment in the play is Paul's recitation from his Epistle to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 13), probably one of the best-loved passages in the New Testament and I must own to a feeling of disappointment that the speaking of it did not make my hair stand on end: (always my personal gauge as to how powerfully words or music have been communicated). Such a pivotal moment required more imaginative commitment and intensity from the

otherwise excellent actor. Live performances have their ups and downs and I saw the play three months into its run, but the friend who had

accompanied me to the theatre departed at the interval, leaving me alone to ponder on the production's missed opportunity. *Paul* is a rich play, but difficult to grasp at a single evening's viewing, and is not therefore, in my opinion, a wholly successful theatrical venture.

An excellent revival of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's 1779 play *Nathan the Wise* (*Nathan der Weise*) played to packed houses at the Hampstead Theatre last autumn, the subject matter deftly hitting some relevant targets. Since the writer, Lessing, was himself Jewish, the overall view of the conflict between Christianity, Judaism and Islam is, perhaps understandably biased in favour of the benign Jewish hero – superbly played by Michael Pennington.

According to the informative programme notes provided by Edward Kemp, Lessing once famously said that if God offered him the choice between the truth or the quest for truth, he would choose the latter because 'when we believe we have the truth we tend to do terrible things to other humans.' Lessing believed passionately that religious differences need not divide humanity, and he set out to demonstrate this in his enjoyable story set in the time of the Third Crusade. The three main characters are Nathan the Jew, the Sultan Saladin, and a Templar. In Lessing's retelling of a tale from Boccaccio, the *Story of the Three Rings*, 'the possibility is held out that one day a judge might come who can tell us which of three rings is the true one.' Meanwhile Nathan asks, 'Must Jews and Christians be only Jews and Christians first and humans after?' and suggests that no one religion has monopoly of wisdom: instead we should strive for 'gentleness, tolerance, charity and humanity.' Still, today, no bad aim for us all to work towards.

Cicely Herbert is one of the trio who founded and continue to run Poems on the Underground.

Howard Brenton's *Paul* is published by Nick Hern Books (www.nickhernbooks.co.uk). Also available from the National Theatre Bookshop. (£8.99).

William Oxley reviews

Viva la Vida

by Peter Abbs

Salt (Cambridge). 2005. 93 pages. Pbk. £8.99. ISBN: 1844710890

These are intelligent, wide-ranging and, at times, passionate poems. Above all they are refreshingly serious poems: poems that are not only serious about language and craft but about truth; serious-toned poems but never solemn. Abbs was brought up, it seems, in a strictly religious atmosphere against which he emotionally turned. He was wounded by the oppressiveness of that upbringing so much that his God became an *aporia* [difficulty, doubt] – a word he actually uses. Nevertheless, he would like to reclaim a clear religious belief for himself and, I feel, that that is what much of his poetry – its subliminal impulse – is about.

Normally, I don't pay much attention to the ordering into sections of a book of poems. In an age of intellectuals obsessed with technology and taxonomy, I find it tells us little about the poetry that we could not discover by reading the poems in any order. However, in Abbs' case they seem more significant than usual. So I give them: *Child of Pisces*, *Ancestor Worship*, *Viva la Vida*, *Ecce Homo: On Nietzsche's Madness and Ars Poetica*.

Probably the poems on Nietzsche's madness are the most surprising; but a moment's reflection shows their relevance. For a child born under the astrological Sign of the Fish, whose faith (Christian) was lost, then the road to nihilism was inevitable. Yet, as one gets more fully into the poems of the various sections, for a poet like Peter Abbs – so drawn for example to Rilke, that most religious of modern European poets – the nihilism he went towards could only be like that of Nietzsche. As that great philosophical religious Teilhard de Chardin said, 'Nietzsche is one of the very few critics of Christianity worth examining'. Nietzsche was a poet, a visionary of innumerable insights, and a prophet of the way the modern world would go. He is probably the most exhilarating and puzzling mind since the Renaissance. So it is no surprise at all that Abbs was drawn to him and to composing a poetic response to the philosopher: especially as Nietzsche's loss of faith led to madness: something to which *aporia* can so easily lead.

The poems oscillate agreeably between the personal and the impersonal. At one moment the poet quoting St Augustine writes, 'So where does love reside? Not in our times, / Rank with hyperbole and lies. / Not in the pragmatic politics of a loveless age.' but answers 'But in the sea-blue glance / Of your eyes, in the *claritas* of their gaze'. More strongly in 'The Naming of Love' he writes of his wife or partner, 'Praise only what you know' and goes on to praise her:

I praise your eyes tonight:
Cleansed by tears, they flare like candlelight.
Theirs is the beatitude of all that's vulnerable – yet
utterly precise.
I praise the dark delta of your thighs – older than time
It weeps its pleasure. Under my touch the new words
come.



reviews

In the section called 'Ancestor Worship' we are in poetry of a different vein. In poems like 'Saint Augustine's Quill', 'The Search of Rumi', 'After the Burning of Books', 'The Genius of Turner' and another half-dozen poems he is imaginatively 'ventriloquising for the truth' through the mouths of others, as Coleridge would have put it. In one or two of the poems in the same section he translates effectively, as with the poem 'Last Things' subtitled 'After Rilke': a poem based closely upon the most famous of *The Duino Elegies*. A poem only marred by a typo spelling 'disdains' as 'distains.'

To revert briefly to the fascinating section on Nietzsche's madness. The German philosopher's quarrel was not only with Christianity but, it seems to me, with Hellenic civilization:

If on the road you should meet Socrates –
And fail to kill him,

Then avoid his ironic eyes,
His enticing invitations,

Teasing *aporias*...

It is not clear how much the poet endorses this Nietzschean view of Socratic thinking, but as the Greek philosophers – principally Plato-Socrates – were the first of the human race to endeavour to *prove* the existence of God, seeing the concept as inextricably linked with 'the good', I cannot see we would be better off killing Socrates. Says Abbs-Nietzsche, 'if he [Socrates] should pester you, be brave / And simply dance'. The Dionysian Solution dear to Nietzsche's heart it would seem.

I could ramble on at greater length about this fascinating and thoughtful collection, but do not wish to spoil the pleasure of the many especial 'discoveries' inherent in it. Suffice it for me to recommend it warmly.

William Oxley has published over 20 poetry collections. His autobiography *No Accounting for Paradise* (1999) and his *New and Selected Poems* (2001) are published by Rockingham Press.

Mayday Notes

Wordsworth

A reader writes (page 16) that I must have been inundated with comments on the misquotation from Wordsworth on the front cover of *Sofia* number 75, whose title was 'The Growth of Common Day'. She rightly points out that Stanza 5 of his *Ode on Intimations of Immortality...* ends with the couplet:

At length the Man perceives it die away,
And fade into the LIGHT of common day.

However the quotation, 'the growth of common day', was not from that poem but from *Home at Grasmere*:

... Paradise and groves
Elysian, fortunate islands, fields like those of old
In the deep ocean, wherefore should they be
A History, or but a dream, when minds
Once wedded to this outward frame of things
In love, find these the growth of common day?

A longer extract from the poem is reprinted opposite. I love this passage with its praise of ordinary life on Earth and I chose it as an issue title rather than the better known phrase 'the light of common day' from the *Immortality Ode*, because in *Home at Grasmere* the reference to 'common day' is entirely positive, whereas 'fade into the light of common day' has a elegiac ring to it. Like *Tintern Abbey*, the *Immortality Ode* is one of Wordsworth's 'gain from loss poems'. He laments the loss of his childhood vision: 'The things which I have seen I now can see no more.' For 'There hath passed away a glory from the earth.' But he has gained something:

Thanks to the human heart by which we live,
Thanks to its tenderness, its joys and fears,
To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

I chose the phrase 'the growth of common day' as a suitable title for an issue with a front cover picture of the Winter Solstice, after which the daylight begins to grow again. The back cover illustration was a drawing of Guantánamo prison with a quotation from the Advent liturgy. As I commented in the magazine, I was struck that the Magnificat Antiphon for the 21st, December, the Winter Solstice, is a prayer to the sun: 'O Rising One, splendour of eternal light and sun of justice...' and also that, though no stranger to cruel punishments herself, when the Catholic Church prays in her liturgy for prisoners, she prays for them to *get out*: 'Come and release from prison the captive sitting in darkness and the shadow of death.' The liturgy sees justice as bringing to light.



I was also thinking of 'the growth of common day' with regard to the two leading articles, each of which took a naturalistic (i.e. non-supernatural) view, one of the Quakers and the other of the Orthodox Church.

I have reprinted a longer passage from *Home at Grasmere* opposite, not just as an elucidation, but because it is worth reading in connection with Don Cupitt's article in this current issue. In his most recent book, *The Way to Happiness*, Cupitt speaks of his 'affinity with the young Wordsworth, whose poetry I have been reading for some years.' I thought the passage quoted was particularly relevant.

In this issue, too, Dominic Kirkham writes about theologians turning in the 1970s to a theology of nature. As usual, the poets got there first! This is true of Wordsworth and nature and I thought of another example when reading in Don Cupitt's article: 'Western thought must now return into its own origins, and confront again the question of Being, as it was confronted by the first Western philosophers.' When 'old Parmenides the blind' wrote about Being, he wrote a poem.¹

Jesus Christ in Court

'Italian lawyer Severo Bruno does not usually have such important clients but yesterday he found himself representing Jesus Christ in court in a small town north of Rome,' *The Guardian* reported on January 28th. Atheist Luigi Cascioli, 72, has filed a criminal lawsuit against his old school friend Father Enrico Righi, the parish priest in Bagnoregio, who wrote in his parish magazine that Jesus existed. Cascioli says that for 2,000 years the Catholic Church has been deceiving people by perpetuating the myth that Christ was a real person. If the case is allowed to continue, the court will appoint experts to review the historical data, with the gospels as part of evidence submitted. As the court is not many miles from the Vatican, Cascioli joked, 'It will take a miracle to win!'

1 See, for example, *By Being, It Is. The Thesis of Parmenides* by Nestor-Luis Cordero, translated by Dinah Livingstone (Parmenides Publishing, Las Vegas 2004).

From:

Home at Grasmere

Beauty, whose living home is the green earth,
Surpassing the most fair ideal Forms
The craft of delicate spirits hath composed
From earth's materials, waits upon my steps,
Pitches her tents before me where I move,
An hourly Neighbour. Paradise and groves
Elysian, fortunate islands fields like those of old
In the deep ocean, wherefore should they be
A History, or but a dream, when minds
Once wedded to this outward frame of things
In love, find these the growth of common day?
I, long before the blessed hour arrives,
Would sing in solitude the spousal verse
Of this great consummation, would proclaim –
Speaking of nothing more than what we are –

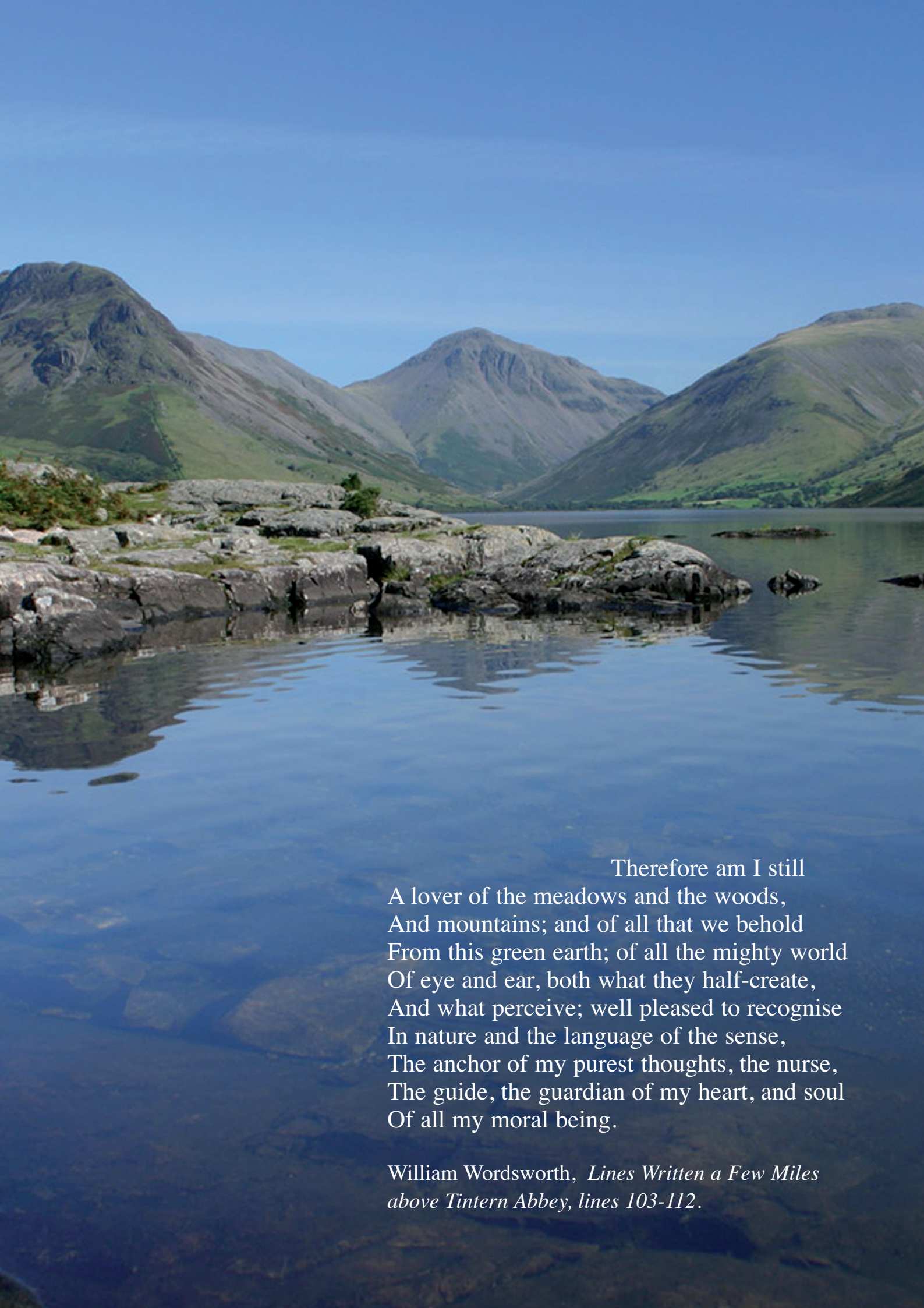
How exquisitely the individual Mind
(And the progressive powers perhaps no less
Of the whole species) to the external world
is fitted; and how exquisitely too –
Theme this but little heard of among men –
The external world is fitted to the mind;
And the creation (by no lower name
Can it be called) which they with blended might
Accomplish: this is my great argument.

William Wordsworth

Home at Grasmere, lines 991-1114, William Wordsworth,
The Major Works, edited by Stephen Gill, Oxford World's
Classics Paperback 2000.



Dove Cottage, Grasmere



Therefore am I still
A lover of the meadows and the woods,
And mountains; and of all that we behold
From this green earth; of all the mighty world
Of eye and ear, both what they half-create,
And what perceive; well pleased to recognise
In nature and the language of the sense,
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being.

William Wordsworth, *Lines Written a Few Miles
above Tintern Abbey, lines 103-112.*