

*sfia*

No. 78 July 2006



*I AM. AM I?*

*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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*sfia* is the magazine of  
the Sea of Faith Network (UK)  
which explores religion as a human creation for better or worse.

*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.

# I AM. AM I?

The title of this issue is 'I AM. AM I?' When God speaks to Moses from the Burning Bush and Moses asks his name, 'I AM' is what God calls himself (Ex. 3:14).

This issue opens with an article by Stephen Mitchell about God's existence, in which he attacks what he regards as the weasel word 'non-theism'. In the second article, Anthony Freeman asks in what way humans can say 'I am'. He gives a brief history of the self and summarises the state of the question today with its dispute between 'bundlers' and 'egoists'. He first gave this as a talk in March to the London SoF Conference 'Is There a Me?' Thus the issue title 'I AM. AM I?' refers both to God and to human beings (and, of course, the two are related; human beings would not speak of a God whose name is 'I AM' unless they had reflected on what it means to say 'I AM'.)

Scholars have questioned what the divine name means. The Jerusalem Bible note says that it is 'clearly part of the Hebrew verb "to be" in an archaic form.' It could be 'I am' or 'I will be', or even causative: 'I cause to be', that is, 'I create'.

Stephen Mitchell's article questions David Boulton's book *The Trouble with God* and Lloyd Geering's *Christianity without God*. As he says, Boulton uses the word 'non-theism' to mean that God does not exist independently of human beings, and this is what is commonly called 'atheist'. Like others in SoF, Boulton thinks that God is a human creation. Mitchell goes on to say, 'Whatever David is talking about, it is not the god Christians call God. Their God is from everlasting to everlasting, unbegotten and uncreated.' Undeniably, this has been the orthodox Christian view, which Boulton and many other Sofers do not share.

But when Mitchell expands on the Christian view of God, his description of 'traditional, orthodox Christian theology', seems to include only half of it. Pascal wrote of his 'night of fire' on November 23<sup>rd</sup> 1654: 'The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, not of philosophers and scholars... The God of Jesus Christ.' Mitchell seems to prefer the 'God of philosophers and scholars'. 'God,' he says 'is beingness itself, existence itself, reality itself, life

itself.' I remembered the scene when Paul preached to the men of Athens in the Areopagus, saying that the 'unknown god', whose shrine he had seen on the way, was in fact the 'God of Jesus Christ' (Acts 17:23ff.). I imagined Mitchell as one of those men of Athens saying, 'I think I'll stick with the unknown god, thanks; it feels safer somehow.' Surely – beginning with Paul's speech in the heart of Athens – the theological work of the first centuries which forged Christian orthodoxy, was to *unite* the Greek 'god of philosophers' with the God of Jesus Christ, whom Jesus usually addressed as 'Father'.

Mitchell says some have accused him of trimming 'as an Anglican vicar striving to save my stipend and keep in with my bishop'. This accusation will not stand. In its half and halfness, Mitchell's article has easily enough to spell trouble for himself if he had the misfortune to meet a basher bishop.

For Mitchell, as for most Sofers, the Bible stories are 'simply stories'. 'We agreed that the characters in the stories (including the character of God) had changed, but we agreed that they were characters in a story.' This is what he sees as the positive side of 'non-realism', an approach to 'texts' which gave us a common language with other religious radicals and academic disciplines. (On the top deck of the 24 you could hear a post-modernist mutter: 'A bus ticket is a text'.)

Mitchell picks his way through the quagmire of debates about 'non-realism', pointing out how slippery and squelchy the term proved to be, and what confusion it caused. As Ruth Scott says in her article on Conflict in this issue: 'It is extraordinary how people can use the same term and mean something utterly different by it.'

Then we find that fascinatingly, although Mitchell thinks that the God in the Bible stories is *not real* in the ordinary sense of not real, i.e. he is a

character in a story, a fiction, we made him up, this is not true of Mitchell's 'God of philosophers and scholars'. When he says that 'God is beingness itself, existence itself, reality itself, life itself', this clearly smacks of 'a philosophy that had its roots in Platonism.' He *ontologises* abstractions (or *personifies* them if he is thinking of God as conscious and personal, which he does not make clear). His list of abstract nouns – ideas – exist as God. So for Mitchell, the God of the Bible is *fiction*, a human creation, but the God of philosophers and scholars is not.

Others will hold that *both* Gods are fictions. Here I think it helps to consider those abstract nouns as *verbs* (and perhaps a Somerset dialect is more helpful for the first in the list). Beings *be*; existing things *exist*; living things *live*. I was thinking about phrases we use for weather: 'It is raining', 'it is thundering'. If we ask 'what does "it" mean: who or what is raining or thundering?', an earlier culture might reply: 'God is raining, God is thundering'. (Incidentally Chac, the Mayan Rain God, was a benevolent, welcome figure, whereas although we now need it so badly, in England we tend to think of rain as a kind of grumbling.) But for most speakers of modern English the 'it' in the phrase 'it is raining' does not mean anything much. In fact we tend to omit it and say 's raining'. If anything, *rain* is raining, i.e. rain is what it does. Being is what beings do. If we don't want to say 'God is raining', 'God is thundering', why should we want to say 'God is being'?

'Beingness', 'Existence', 'Life' are abstractions; we certainly can't meet them walking down the street. When we personify (or ontologise) these abstractions, we are again making up stories, this time using poetic tropes like personification, metaphor and allegory. At the beginning of his 'Mask of Anarchy', Shelley does meet a personified abstraction, 'Murder', walking down the street. In using personification and allegory Shelley points out in the poem's first verse that these are 'the visions of poesy':

I met Murder on the way –  
He had a mask like Castlereagh –  
Very smooth he looked, yet grim;  
Seven blood-hounds followed him.

Likewise, we can personify or ontologise abstractions and call them God. We can have a God who is Being, a God who is Life, a God who is Love (there is no particular reason why these should all be

*the same* God – in some religions they are not.) We can also have a God who is War, a God who is Death...

These Gods are creations of the human poetic genius, fictions, ways of exploring ourselves and our world. Their poetic force derives from the fact that *human beings* on Earth really do exist, live, love, fight, die. Poetry is one of humanity's defining features. Divine fictions are not supernatural; they are human with a long history and contain valuable insights, wisdom perhaps.

At the end of his article on the human self, Freeman considers the current debates between 'bundlers' who think an enduring self is an illusion because we are just a 'bundle of sensations', and 'egoists' who 'do believe there exists an enduring self, or ego, of some kind'. The name God calls himself in the story of the Burning Bush is I AM. If humans create gods in our own image in order to explore ourselves, perhaps creating a god called I AM is a moment of historical self-awareness when the human being says I AM and claims an enduring self. Even if we drop the supernatural, it seems a pity to give up that hard-won insight about ourselves. Elsewhere (not in the current article), Freeman speaks of consciousness as an 'emerging property' and then of 'God' as an 'emerging property' in human consciousness, both individual and collective consciousness. If we construe the Burning Bush 'archaic form of the Hebrew verb "to be" as future tense, God's name is 'I will be'.

Mitchell ends his article with a plea: 'The SoF network's statement of intent leaves open the question of God. While some in the network may wish to close it, I believe the network's future lies in leaving it open.' While it will be clear from the above that *Sofia* editor's position is that all gods are creations of the human imagination and poetic genius, I nevertheless agree with Mitchell that SoF and the pages of *Sofia* should be open to all intrepid explorers who are willing to engage in robust debate. However, when SoF explores religion, it must be religion for better or worse. In such a dangerous world we must be prepared to say sometimes: 'I think that belief is silly or I think that belief is harmful.' As many who believe that God exists and many who don't would agree, the criterion is not killing, not wounding, not torturing, not starving, not stunting, not brain-washing, not destroying our habitat: the criterion is *humanity*.

# The Trouble with SoF

Stephen Mitchell attacks the term ‘non-theism’.

The thinking behind this article began with the publication of two books in 2002. Both of them have proved to be influential within the Sea of Faith network. The first was David Boulton’s *The Trouble with God*. It’s a popular book, read far beyond the confines of the Sea of Faith Network. It has just been reprinted in a new international edition by John Hunt’s O Books this year.

The first part of the book begins with a very witty, intelligent and moving, autobiographical account of a child growing up amongst Plymouth Brethren, later to become an influential journalist, broadcaster and Quaker. He entitles it *My Story*. The second part of the book, *God’s Story begins*: ‘Until relatively recently it would not have occurred to any believer that God had a life story, (page 76).

My Christian senses begin to smell trouble. Surely God doesn’t have a life like other creatures that have lives. God is life, life itself. My concerns are confirmed in the next chapter *The Making of God*:

The god we call God was born in the biblical land of Canaan in the late Bronze or early Iron Age. He was not created out of nothing (page 83).

Now whatever it is David is talking about, it is not the god Christians call God. Their God is from everlasting to everlasting, unbegotten and uncreated. I want to swap the titles of the first two parts of David’s book. (I know he couldn’t do it himself. He’s far too humble!) But from a Christian perspective, it’s the first part of the book that should be entitled *God’s Story*, the life of the incarnate, eternal God in David. That is where the Christian God is revealed. The second part should more properly be called *David’s Story*, his account of the myth of God.

## ‘Non-theism’ has come simply to mean ‘without God’.

Lloyd Geering’s book *Christianity without God* reprinted by Polebridge Press also proved a popular book. I know because I sent copies to many network members. Each time I packaged the book the title bugged me. Christianity, if it is about anything, is about God, the Kingdom of God and Jesus’ witness to God. A Christianity without God, may grab the headlines, but it cuts no ice with the Christian church. It’s simply a non-starter.

Lloyd, however, is well aware of what he is doing. He is, after all, an Emeritus Professor of Victoria University, a former professor of Old Testament studies and a principal of a theological college. His book begins:

Could Christianity continue to exist without belief in God? At first it appears absurd even to pose the question... Before we can adequately answer that question we must pose two other questions: What do we mean by Christianity? and what do we mean by God? (page 1)



Green Man, All Saints Church, Gazeley, Suffolk

The book is comprehensive and subtle, but once again it becomes clear that Lloyd is arguing against a God that orthodox Christian theologies would never recognise – against what is sometimes technically called theism. Lloyd makes this clear in the last chapter of the book, *Why Christianity must become non-theistic*.

To avoid ambiguity, then, let us reformulate the original question to read: ‘Can Christianity exist without **theism**?’ and hereafter so understand the phrase ‘Christianity without God’ (page 132, author’s emphasis).

Lloyd gives us the definition of God proposed by theism earlier in the book, in Chapter Four.

In **theism** God is taken to be the name of the supernatural personal being believed to have created the world and to continue to have an oversight (providence) of its affairs, intervening in them from time to time with miraculous events (page 53).

Later we are given another definition of God as ‘an objective, supernatural being’. Many Christians, it is true, would find nothing wrong in these definitions and that’s part of the trouble – as Lloyd is well aware. But, like it or not, whether we are Christian or not, traditional, orthodox Christian theologies would have little time for such a definition. God is not the being who did something. God is not a being at all. God is not ‘an’ anything, certainly not an objective anything. God is. God is beingness itself, existence itself, reality itself, life itself. God, traditionally, does not intervene but is, at all times, incarnate and present everywhere. Strictly speaking, God is not therefore supernatural.

Now many may not find this traditional, orthodox Christian theology of God useful or even meaningful. What is it that is present at all times and in all places? They may ask how this God relates to the God of the bible. These arguments are for another day. All I want to

note here is that the God being demolished in these two books is not the God recognised by traditional, orthodox Christian theologies.

Several years before the publication of these two books, the arguments in Sea of Faith circles concerned the term 'non-realism'. Even though it was used in the invitation sent to those who attended the first conference in Loughborough, it became a very unpopular term amongst some members.

I certainly have no wish to re-introduce the term but to look at what happened to it. In the beginning 'non-realist' did not mean 'not real'. Why invent such a cumbersome expression when we already have the word 'unreal'? No, non-realism was used to describe a whole series of changes that were affecting the way we understood the world around us. The changes were a move away from a philosophy which had its roots in Platonism. It was a move away from ideas of a hierarchy of being with degrees of reality, at the top of which could be put a Supreme Being. It was a move away from belief in an ideal world of which our world was a poor copy. And because these changes were affecting the way we understood the world, they were affecting our understanding of faith. The way we understand history, meaning and the self were all undergoing profound change. We were beginning to understand them in a 'non-realist' way. And, as religion is bound up with an understanding of history, meaning and self, so of course, our understanding of faith was changing too. A non-realist understanding of God was not God understood to be unreal but God understood through these profound changes in human thought.

The remarkable and exciting discovery for some of us was that a non-realist understanding of God bore some resemblance to God as traditionally understood in some Christian philosophies. Here was a way of combating some of the perversions of fundamentalist faith. But not everyone shared this hope and not everyone was convinced by the 'non-realist' understanding of our world. As people lost interest in the arguments, 'non-realist' drifted into a posh way of saying 'unreal'.

In articles in the Sea of Faith magazine, discussion now centres around the word 'non-theism'. And just as

## Probing Space

Yahweh enjoyed the Big Bang.

'That will keep them guessing,'

he said.

And vanished into a black hole

Anne Beresford

'non-realism' came to be used, not in its technical philosophical sense, but simply as a way of saying 'unreal', so now 'non-theism' has lost any historical meaning it once had and become an excuse for using the word atheism. The subtleties of Lloyd Geering's argument have gone and 'non-theism' has come simply to mean 'without God'.

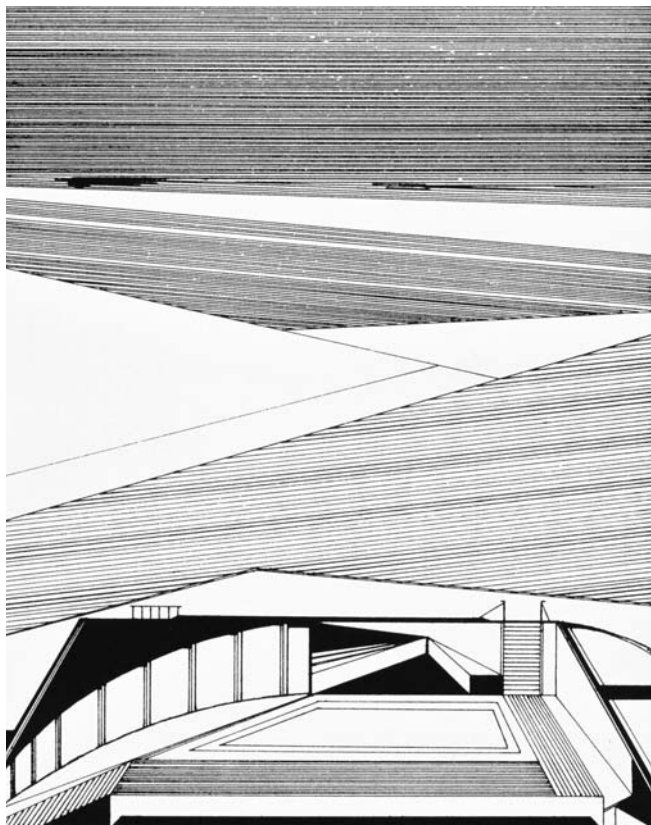
So the argument is dumbed down. Religious faith is a human creation. Therefore, God is a human creation. This, it is then said, leaves us with two strategies. The first is to carry on using the word God as a projection of our most cherished values. The second is to be rid of God altogether.

## The church will not be changed unless there are people willing to stick with it and find common starting points for dialogue.

But neither of these strategies is going to have any impact on the hierarchies of the faith communities. Neither of these is going to persuade the churches away from a realist, platonic philosophy. They are water off a duck's back. The stumbling block is the statement God is a human creation. It is simply met with a blank stare. A humanly created god just isn't God. 'Your God is a fiction. Our God is real' is the response. Nor are these strategies going to be found very attractive to those outside the faith communities. Again the statement that God is a human creation is met with astonishment. So, if God is a human creation, then God is no more real than the character in a book. Why not come clean and call it atheism?

If Sea of Faith continues to have any ambitions of reforming the faith communities or recreating faith outside them, it is unlikely to make much headway with these strategies. Outside the faith communities, people think we are dishonest atheists. Inside the churches, people think we just have no idea how people of faith use the word God.

Sea of Faith is in danger of losing much of the common ground that it once had not only with the major world faiths but with most academic communities. It is in danger of having very little to say to them. Whereas once, radicals within the faith communities and radicals within the Sea of Faith network shared many common concerns about the way we understood the world, now the language of Sea of Faith is in danger of going unrecognised within those communities. Once Sea of Faith shared a common concern with the arguments within other academic disciplines. Within science and sociology, within departments of psychology and philosophy, many of the same issues about truth and meaning, self and certainty were being discussed. Now our discussion, lapsing as it is into an argument between believers and atheists, is in



'Curving' by Christopher Truman

danger of generating little interest even within religious studies departments.

Another area of common agreement that we are in danger of losing is our approach to the stories of faith. Radicals in the faith communities and radicals within Sea of Faith were both agreed in reading the stories of faith as stories. We may have disagreed about God but we agreed that these were simply stories. We agreed that these stories had developed and changed over time, some were useful and inspiring today, other less so. But we agreed that they were stories. We agreed that the characters in the stories (including the character of God) had changed, but we agreed that they were characters in a story. We had common cause against those who insisted in reading the stories literally. We had common cause in finding a use for these stories today. But now, many in Sea of Faith, take these stories to be a literally true account of the history of God. In their anxiety to tell us of a God born in the Bronze age and dying in second Axial age, they are in danger of losing interest in the rich literature of faith.

Also in danger of being lost is concern for the difficulties facing the faith communities today. Never mind the theology, never mind the philosophy, many of the faith communities struggle with the problems facing institutions as diverse as schools, hospitals, theatres, concert halls, post offices and pubs. Sea of Faith once shared a common concern for things that enriched community and built up cultural life. If we felt much religious life was on the way out, we were anxious to find something to take its place. We worried about the common public expression of values and the celebration of life.

Perhaps even more worrying is the danger of having nothing to say publicly. Hans Küng wrote, many years ago now, that there would be no world peace without religious peace. Sea of Faith once had a vision of helping to broker that peace. Seeing faiths, not as competing claims to truth, but as varied expressions of the good, the just and beautiful, there was hope of securing some common ground. But changing our focus from 'non-realism' to unreal and 'non-theism' to atheism turns us into yet another competing claim to truth.

Recently there have been a number of cases, highlighted in the press, of people being forbidden to wear the symbols of their faith. At the same time, outrage has been expressed by what some faith communities see as the ridiculing of their God in cartoons. There has been no public response to this from our network.

If Sea of Faith is going to make a reforming impact on the faith communities then it must begin with their most sophisticated and radical concepts of God. For myself, I begin with such expressions as 'that in which we live and move and have our being', and that which is ever-present. Some tell me this is the Anglican vicar striving to saving his stipend and keep in with my bishop. As if.

It's the priest who's learnt the first principle of politics – the art of the possible. In the last fifty years, a number of courageous individuals – some from this network – have gone head to head with the church. Most of them have fallen at the first fence and are now out of the race. (Sorry – I live near Newmarket now!) The church will not be changed unless there are people willing to stick with it and find common starting points for dialogue. The church will not be changed unless radical concepts find some roots in orthodoxy. Of course radical concepts of God quickly collapse into mystery, nothingness and being. And as we have been well taught, a religion of being is *substantially* different from a religion of God. But to begin from a common starting point does offer some hope of meaningful dialogue and change.

Those who are not convinced, have no time for ecclesiastical politics, patience for discussion with the faith communities, or even believe they are worth saving, need to think how they will prevent dwindling faith communities becoming more aggressively fundamentalist. They need to think how that can be achieved without creating an intolerant society where public expressions of faith are banned by law.

This is not about labels but about strategies. The network's statement of intent leaves open the question of God. While some in the network may wish to close it, I believe the network's future lies in leaving it open.

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Stephen Mitchell is a member of the Steering Committee. His book, *God in the Bath*, is published by O Books in October.

# The Once and Future Self

Anthony Freeman gave this as a talk at the March 2006 SoF London Conference on 'Is there a Me?'

## Introduction

Last month our imposing mediaeval church (Holy Cross, Crediton, Devon) was packed for the funeral of Julie, a 20-year-old who had died quite unexpectedly of an epileptic fit, and whose father had died equally suddenly of a heart attack only four years before. The two deaths were being discussed as I queued at the local supermarket check-out, and the assistant – a perfectly straightforward woman, I'd guess in her thirties – astonished me by saying, in a quite matter-of-fact way, 'Ah well, at least she's up there now with her dad.'

Fortunately I did not have to reply. But the incident brought home to me in a very bleak way the gulf that has opened up between philosophers and psychologists – who blithely speak of the self as not existing, or a narrative fiction, or a series of momentary and disconnected entities – and the great mass of people, who still think of themselves and their fellows in much the same way as the fifteenth-century builders of the parish church.

Nobel laureate Francis Crick, who in 1994 published a book called *The Astonishing Hypothesis*, would not have been surprised by what I heard. According to his book's much-quoted opening paragraph:

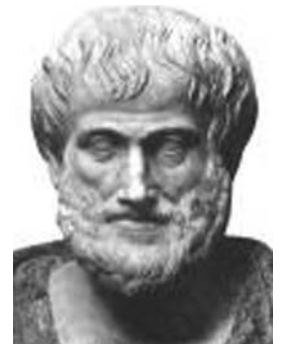
The Astonishing Hypothesis is that 'You,' your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behaviour of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules. As Lewis Carroll's Alice might have phrased it: 'You're nothing but a pack of neurons.' This hypothesis is so alien to the ideas of most people alive today that it can truly be called astonishing.

Many people reacted by saying it was not the slightest bit astonishing. In a scientific age it is just what we should expect. Crick disagreed. Interviewed for my journal, he insisted that many people who claim to be materialists, and deny they believe in life after bodily death, do in fact carry on thinking in the old ways. Such crypto-dualists in the scientific community would indeed find his hypothesis astonishing, he declared, when it was set out in all its starkness. To see why, we need to trace the history of the self.

## A Brief History of the Self

### *Bible and Plato*

Francis Crick's book was subtitled 'The scientific search for the soul', a word that carries religious overtones lacking from the term 'self', but surprisingly the soul is barely a biblical concept at all. In the Hebrew understanding of human nature, a living person was a live physical body, animated by an impersonal breath of life, and a dead person was a dead physical body, lacking the breath of life and destined to decay – 'dust to dust' as the Bible graphically puts it (Gen. 3:19) – with the possibility of post-mortem resurrection developing as the centuries went by. It was the ancient Greeks, following Plato, who by contrast saw the essential human being as a non-physical soul. For them a living person was an embodied soul, and a dead person was a disembodied soul.



Aristotle

The Christian Church (and eventually the whole of European and Western culture) was heir to both these incompatible approaches. For a thousand years and more the biblical resurrection of the body and Plato's teaching on the immortality of the soul were somehow held together. Then came a more satisfying account, with the rediscovery of Aristotle, and the consequent rewriting of Christian doctrine by Thomas Aquinas.

### *Aristotle and Aquinas*

For Aristotle, the soul was not a non-physical self, whose association with the body was a temporary and unfortunate necessity. It was the functional structure or 'form' of the body, which enabled an organism to function purposefully. Unlike the Platonic soul, this soul was not immortal; it came into being with the physical organism, and it also perished with it. And this applied to plants and animals as well as to humans.

Thomas Aquinas accepted Aristotle's definition of the soul as the form of a living organism, but he saw a crucial difference between the souls of humans and those of plants and animals. Humans could think, and so far as Aquinas could tell (this was his crucial advance on Aristotle), thinking involved no necessary bodily process or change. This opened up the possibility that human souls were immortal. First, if



the rational soul in humans could do things not directly related to bodily changes, it was not entirely implausible to think of that soul as continuing in existence even after its body had died and decayed. Furthermore, according to Aquinas's way of thinking, if the human rational soul really could survive bodily death, it cannot have come into being with its body, simply as part of the natural process. In other words, Thomas had been led to posit an immortal human soul, such as the Christian faith, rooted in Platonism, demanded; and he had achieved this while remaining totally loyal to Aristotle.

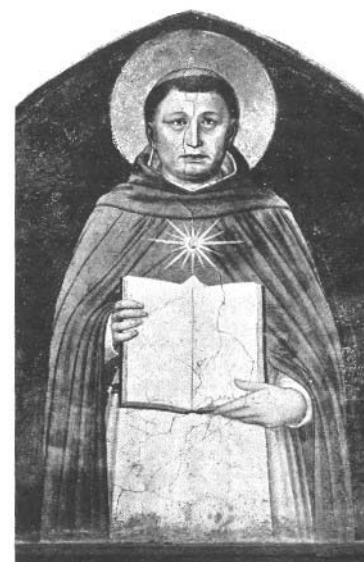
Aquinas had managed to have his cake and eat it. More than that, he found it had icing on it. This rational soul was first and foremost the life-principle of a human body, not some free-floating spirit, so positing its existence in isolation from the body did feel awkward, the thinking process notwithstanding. This problem, however, enabled Aquinas to resolve the contradiction, which still existed in Christian teaching on the afterlife, between the Bible's demand for bodily resurrection and the Platonic soul that neither needed nor wanted such a body.

Thomas deduced that the rational soul must be able to maintain some kind of existence after the death of its body, but it was a very unsatisfactory state for the soul. It still needed a body in order to receive information, act, communicate with others, and so on. In short, what the soul needed was to have its body again, to restore the whole person. Here at last was a practical purpose, lacking in the Platonist version of Christianity, for the resurrection of the body. It would be the occasion for the reuniting of the body and soul of those who had died, ready to face eternity as complete selves.

### *René Descartes*

We now move on from the thirteenth to the seventeenth century. Brilliant as Aquinas's synthesis had been it was not perfect. The doubt remained: Was this view really compatible with Aristotle's notion of the soul as the 'form' of the body? Could such a soul really function – even temporarily – cut off from the bodily senses? The answer given by René Descartes marks the watershed between the later Middle Ages and the Enlightenment. Quite simply Descartes dispensed with Aristotle. It had been a mistake, he said, to suppose that the rational soul (that is, the thinking mind) and the physical body were bound together by any kind of necessity. There was a close working relationship between them, certainly, but each existed quite independently of the other. In particular, it was the mind and not the body that constituted the self, the human subject. The 'I' of whom Descartes famously wrote, 'I think, therefore I am,' was his mind alone.

This sharp distinction between the non-physical mental realm and the physical world of which everything else was made enabled science to keep apart from the bloody religious conflicts of the times by claiming it was concerned only with the physical world. But the same division that allowed science to flourish without interference from religion also had a less happy result. It established the idea that consciousness, or subjective experience – because it relates to the mind – is not a proper subject for scientific inquiry.



*Thomas Aquinas*

It also gave rise to the Mind-Body Problem. Descartes had moved decisively away from Aristotle's view that the mind was dependent for all its knowledge on the bodily senses. It 'does not need any place or depend on any material thing,' he insisted. But there was one difficulty. It might be possible in theory for humans to function as pure minds, without bodies, but in practice none of us ever does. Our minds and our bodies are interdependent. Descartes knew this, and it bothered him. In a rare holistic moment he admitted 'I am not just lodged in my body, like a pilot in a ship, but . . . so intermingled with it that I seem to compose with it one whole.' Yet he still maintained that mind and body were quite different kinds of stuff, while never being able to explain how they might interact.

## **Aquinas had managed to have his cake and eat it.**

Despite the interaction problem, Cartesian dualism reigned supreme for 300 years until the mid-twentieth century when Gilbert Ryle, then Oxford University's towering philosophical figure, undertook what he himself called a 'hatchet' job on Descartes' 'dogma of the Ghost in the Machine'. 'It is,' he wrote, 'entirely false, and false not in detail but in principle. It is not merely an assemblage of particular mistakes. It is one big mistake'

## *The Self in Current Research*

Ryle had given a trumpet call to the academic world. For the first time since the Enlightenment the scientific study of consciousness was philosophically respectable, and with it a wholesale reassessment of the self. If the essential 'me' is not a ghostly agent presiding over my body, what is it? There are broadly speaking two aspects to self-awareness. One is our sense of personal identity here and now, sometimes called the minimal or core self. The other is our sense of identity over time, which gives rise to the narrative or autobiographical self. We need to consider each of these.

### *The Minimal Self*

Having let go the notion that each of us is essentially a non-physical soul or mind, philosophers and scientists have had to go back to basics and ask, What is it in our experience that gives rise to a sense of self in the first place? One obvious element contributing to even minimal self-awareness is a sense of ownership of one's own body and one's own thoughts. This ties in with what philosophers call the immunity principle in relation to the first-person pronoun: when somebody says, 'I think X', they might be wrong about X, but they cannot be wrong as to who it is thinking X.

A second and related element of self-awareness is a sense of agency. When my arm goes up I know it is me who raised it, even if it was a spontaneous rather than a premeditated action. Or, if my arm goes up because someone else takes hold of it and moves it, while I remain passive, then I am aware of the difference, and my lack of agency in that case.

There do exist distressing clinical conditions in which this basic sense of ownership or of agency is impaired, but these unusual cases are the exceptions that prove the rule. They also enable psychologists and neurophysiologists to explore the abnormalities in brain function correlated with the loss of a normal sense of ownership of one's own mind and body. This information then helps us understand the processes by which self-awareness is normally established. The case for our being at least minimal selves, on the evidence of ownership and agency, is quite strong.

One outcome of research into self awareness has been a realisation that perception and cognition are processes involving the whole body, not just the brain. Not so long ago, the computational model of mind – brain as hardware, mind as software – was all the rage (recall the chess-playing computer that beat grandmaster Gary Kasparov a decade ago). Now that has changed. Self-awareness is increasingly treated as a feature of an entire organism, with the self not only embodied in an organism, but also embedded in its environment. Even the Artificial Intelligence community has switched emphasis from chess-playing

computers to self-aware robots that interact with – and learn from – their environment.

A notable feature of recent developments is the view that thought and movement are intimately connected, with an organism learning about itself and its environment by a two-way process. For instance, even at a non-conscious level, the brain will initiate a movement of the foot, and simultaneously note the sensory feedback to be expected from such a movement. When the feedback arrives, a good match with the prediction confirms ownership of the action and accuracy of current knowledge. Any mismatch leads to a rapid adjustment of the next movement (as when we recover from tripping down an unnoticed step). Mismatches also lead to a revision of the current state of knowledge of self and environment, and in extreme cases imply a lack of agency or ownership.

One bold proposal is that even thinking is best understood as a kind of action, and that we know our thoughts to be our own by the same kind of prediction and feedback matching as we use to recognise our own acts. If this is so, the symptoms of schizophrenic patients, who wrongly attribute their own thoughts or inner speech to other minds, might result from a failure in the matching process that would normally confirm ownership.

Such theories have developed out of biological studies of the way organisms, including humans beings, function. With the aid of computerised scanners, which allow functional brain imaging of mental and physical tasks, neuroscientists can monitor and compare the brain processes associated with different thoughts and actions. It was this ability that led Francis Crick to claim that our sense of personal identity is in fact no more than the behaviour of a vast assembly of nerve cells. But others make the counter claim that identifying the neural correlates of consciousness (even if it can be done) does not justify the conclusion that self-awareness is nothing more than a biological process.

### *The Narrative Self*

I said just now that evidence for our being minimal selves is quite strong. But this falls a long way short of traditional, intuitively strong, belief in an enduring personal identity, that each of us carries right through this life and possibly even beyond it. Being confident that I myself exist here, now, at this moment, only makes more urgent the further question: how does this momentary 'me' relate to all the previous and future momentary 'me's'?



René Descartes

The answers fall into two categories, bundle theories and ego theories. The first are named after David Hume's observation, back in the eighteenth century, that when he inspected his own experience he only ever found a bundle of sensations, and never an independent entity having the experience. For bundlers the self is an illusion; their task is to explain how and why we invent it. Ego theorists, on the other hand, do believe there exists an enduring self, or ego, of some kind. Their task is to show how the self is instantiated in the body, and in particular how it relates to the structures of the brain (unless they are Platonist or Cartesian dualists, when their task is to solve the old interaction problem).

## Gilbert Ryle undertook what he himself called a 'hatchet job' on Descartes' dogma of the Ghost in the Machine.

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The autobiographical self, whether real or imagined, is dependent on memory. Most of us think of our memory as a filing-cabinet-cum-picture-library of past events, from which we draw items stored over the years. Such a view is at best oversimplified and may be totally false. There is increasing evidence that memory is a creative process. Neuroscientist Michael Gazzaniga, for example, drawing on work with split-brain patients, has shown that the left hemisphere will construct fictional accounts – in other words create false memories – to interpret elements of experience and integrate them into a consistent and continuous narrative.

Philosopher Daniel Dennett, who once studied under Gilbert Ryle, goes further; he proposes that our entire conscious experience is a narrative: 'Our tales are spun,' he says, 'but for the most part we don't spin them; they spin us.' He has even used the notion to coin a definition of the self: it is a 'centre of narrative gravity'. Just as physicists simplify their calculations by imagining the entire mass of a complex object focused at a single point in space – the fictional centre of gravity – so each human organism simplifies the task of survival by imagining its complex of ever-shuffling perceptions and cognitions focused in a single stream of narrative – the fictional self, with its fictional stream of consciousness.

Dennett's is a bundle theory that says the enduring self is an illusion. Yet Gazzaniga, despite having written a book chapter titled 'The fictional self', is in fact an ego theorist. In a JCS interview he declared that 'The self is not a fiction. It is that which the interpreter creates.' He went on to admit that 'our personal narrative is a bit fictional', but as a neuroscientist he does believe that the neurons he studies encode

something real. And Francis Crick, with his prize-winning research on DNA, would also not have denied that something enduring can be encoded biologically. He opposed dualism, but not necessarily all egoist theories.

## Still the Best Show in Town

It is time to pull the threads together. *The soul*, defined in a Catholic catechism quoted by Francis Crick as 'a living being without a body, having reason and freewill' would be accepted by very few scientists and philosophers working in consciousness studies (and would have caused even Thomas Aquinas to raise his eyebrows). The *minimal self*, an organism's personal identity at a moment of time, would be accepted by many as existing and explicable as a function of physiology. The *narrative self*, our human sense of identity over time, is accepted as a fact of experience, but often regarded as more or less fictional or illusory.

At the practical level we all assume continuity in our lives, otherwise we could neither claim our own past nor plan our own future. And the whole of society, with its systems of contracts and property rights, rewards and punishments, rights and responsibilities, rests on the presumption that each of us is basically the same person yesterday, today, and next year. If we did not at least act as if selves existed over time, the inconvenience would be great. As someone said of freewill, it may not be true, but it's still the best show in town. We all conspire to say the same of autobiographical selves.

As to my friend Julie and her dad, with whom we began, I am content that they live on in the hearts and minds of those who knew and loved them, and that the value of their lives as lived are diminished not one whit by their having died. But I have no claim to insider knowledge, and if others are able and desiring to believe in a self that transcends bodily existence, I personally have no wish to deny them that belief, though I do not seek it for myself (whatever my 'self' may turn out to be – or not be).

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A fully referenced copy of this article, with bibliography, can be obtained from the editor or the author.

# Contemplating Conflict

Ruth Scott takes a fresh look at conflict.

One morning, my nine year old diabetic son was in kamikaze mode. The simple process of him getting up and dressed, testing his blood sugar, having his insulin injection, eating breakfast, and sorting out his school bag so we were ready to leave the house by 8.30, became a battle of wills. Initially my requests were quietly spoken, but the more uncooperative he was, the louder my voice became until, after an hour trying unsuccessfully to get him ready, I lost it completely. Not only was I conscious suddenly of my potential for violence, I really wanted to hurt him for giving me such a hard time. I banged my fists on the walls, shrieked like a banshee and scared the wits out of both of us. To avoid the violence which in that irrational moment I felt moved to commit, I put Tian in one room and locked myself in another until I'd calmed down enough to reconnect with him safely and get him into school. Then I went off to my first meeting of the day – on conflict resolution!

That very basic experience brought into sharp relief my increasing unease about the concept of 'conflict resolution'. While I support the drive to deal creatively with the conflicts of our day, the objective of 'resolution' is one I think we should be cautious about because it appears to embrace two assumptions that need questioning. In exploring this subject I will be using examples ranging from the personal to the international. While there is a vast difference in the complexity and shape of these conflicts the dynamics at work are common to all.

## The positive potential of conflict

The first questionable assumption of the term 'conflict resolution' is that by definition all conflict is bad and needs to be resolved. This denies the positive part conflict plays in the development of human understanding and maturity. My seventeen year old daughter's move from adolescence into adulthood is characterised by conflict as her world view is constantly challenged by the perceptions of others whose experience differs from her own. She could cut herself off completely from this discomfort, retreating into a small world shared only by those whose view of life is compatible with hers. I'm conscious of the attraction to her of this safe life, but whenever she retreats into it she is unhappy because she knows she's only living a half-life at best, and she needs something more. When she goes out and explores, she experiences herself expanding as a human being, but that growth isn't easy: Brought into conflict with the perceptions and experiences of others, her own worldview proves at times to be like a snakeskin that has become too small for her and must be shed, leaving her feeling exposed as she wrestles to create another layer of meaning.

The potential for developing new understanding lies precisely at the point of conflict where differing perceptions clash. It's often because particular explanations no

longer seem to sit easily with reality that we seek new ways of seeing and being. We may be well aware of how destructive the clash between differing creeds and cultures can be, but when individuals or communities are open to the questions raised by conflicting perceptions, the potential for creativity is immense. This dynamic, whether it is worked out at a very personal level or in the arena of international relations is powerfully captured in the story of Jacob's 'dark night of the soul' at the Ford of Jabbok (Gen.32:24-30). Here he wrestles with one who appears to be his enemy, and yet who through the conflict he comes to see as being of God and a source of blessing. Through this painful experience his understanding is deepened and he embraces a new identity symbolised in the receiving of a new name.



## Recognising the irresolvable

The second assumption is that all conflicts are resolvable. The evidence of history is that this is not the case, at least in the short term. Why should we expect it to be? The factors that lead to destructive conflict are often generations in the making and always complex in nature. Rather like finding the right sequence of numbers on a combination lock in order to open it, the complexities of a conflict have to be made clear and set in the right order if a way forward is to be opened up. One wrong move, and the whole process can be jammed. While I don't hold to the image of a jealous God 'visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation,' (Exodus 20.5) it is often the case that the conflicts of one generation cannot be resolved in the lifetime of that generation. When we set up unrealistic expectations of resolution that do not materialise, those caught up in the conflict soon feel betrayed and become embittered, and the very end we seek is deferred further. It is disempowering to confront people with a goal that realistically is not achievable. A natural reaction to an impossible challenge is to disengage from the process.

At the heart of Christianity we have the image of Christ on the cross. He is the one who literally and metaphorically gets to grips with the nails of inhumanity,

surrendering himself to death, and in so doing enabling the possibility of new life, but between Good Friday and Easter Day is Holy Saturday, that crucial day in the Church calendar highlighting symbolically the fact that deep-seated change takes time.

If we recognise the creative potential of conflict, and the fact that some conflicts may not be resolvable in any one lifetime, it might be far more honest and helpful to speak in terms of conflict *transformation*. If conflict resolution is impossible in the short-term, what may enable conflict transformation?

## Distance learning

While standing on Westminster Bridge, a friend was suddenly called upon to stop a suicidal man from jumping off it. As the drama unfolded my friend asked bystanders to run and get the help of the river police at the far end of the bridge. 'Oh no,' they replied, 'we're only watching.'

Contrary to the opinion of these people, the position of bystander is never neutral. Choosing not to act in such situations may influence the course of events just as much as taking action. In the case of observed violence what we do or do not do aligns us with either the perpetrator or the victim, whether we like it or not. What is more disturbing is the idea that bystanders are more likely to take the side of the perpetrator than that of the victim. Why? Because the perpetrator asks us to do nothing, while the victim asks us to care. To care may require us to take potentially life-threatening risks, to go against our natural desire for safety and security, or to act in a manner that runs counter to our character. It is so much easier to do nothing: To keep at a safe distance. In this context a safe distance is a selfish distance, a protection against both external dangers and internal conscience. At such a distance it is easier to dehumanise those whose faces we cannot see clearly, and thus to either ignore their pain or inflict pain upon them.

## The first questionable assumption of the term 'conflict resolution' is that by definition all conflict is bad and needs to be resolved.

Listening to ex-loyalist and republican paramilitaries in Northern Ireland I became conscious that each was able to hold their position justifying violence against the other because they grew up in entirely separate communities and only met in the head-on collision of conflict where there was no distance at all, and creating a 'good distance' could only be done by stepping back a bit – an act that in the emotion of the moment could all too easily be interpreted as a humiliating, and therefore unacceptable,



Belfast graffiti

retreat. For conflict to be transformed we need to find the right distance. This might be defined as being close enough to be in touch with and touched by another's humanity precisely because we have stepped back far enough to make room for it. Just to reach this psychological place may itself take years.

## Facilitation

Those caught up in conflict cannot always either disengage their 'locked horns' or bridge the gulf between them without the help of facilitators. Acknowledging that it is a sign of strength, not weakness, to seek the help of others, goes a long way to enabling conflict to be transformed. It's worth noting in this context that claiming God is on our side can sabotage the possibility of conflict transformation: for those with such a belief, the purpose of meeting the other becomes conversion not conversation. This lack of openness to the story of the other destabilises the safe space that needs to be created for the conflict to become the means by which we move to a deeper understanding as opposed to the expression of our ignorance and prejudice.

## Safe space

In that lovely story of the woman caught in adultery, and Jesus responding to the desire of her accusers to stone her, with the words, 'Let him who is without sin cast the first stone,' his words are coupled with the action of writing in the sand in silence. There has been lots of debate about the significance of this act, but from a storytelling point of view it injects a pause into the narrative and creates a space in the story sufficient for the heated irrational emotions expressed to calm. What is a destructive space becomes one where the potential exists for healing all round. This is the kind of 'holding' space necessary for conflict transformation. People in conflict need safe space if they are to deal with the issues. Such space is mutual rather than neutral. The latter does not exist, but there are places of meeting where all parties feel they can be on equal terms. A safe space is also one where those in conflict are all given the space to tell their stories without

interruption. The purpose of questions asked by listeners is to understand, not undermine the storyteller, even though we may not agree with the choices they've made.

Recently I was with a group of people from all sides of the conflict in Northern Ireland, the victims of bombs and those who had planted them. In the sharing of stories the victims could see how the perpetrators had themselves often been victims of that conflict and, as a result, become caught up in the cycles of revenge and violence. In this type of dialogue, the use of language has to be carefully watched. It is extraordinary how people can use the same term and mean something utterly different by it. For example, a man might seek for his own sake to forgive the person who shot dead his father in order to relinquish the burden of hate and grief that prevents him from re-engaging with life. He needs to free himself from the destructive relationship that he has been forced into with the murderer. For his family, however, this forgiveness may be seen to give permission for the murderer to have an identity beyond being that of the perpetrator of a particular crime, and that may feel like a betrayal of the father. The issue of forgiveness then becomes a source of conflict in the family because neither side recognises they are using the same word differently.

## It is extraordinary how people can use the same term and mean something utterly different by it.

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Each person has to take responsibility for the consequences of their actions, and it may be language that highlights their lack of understanding. For example, in telling his story, a bomber may say that it was nothing personal, meaning that he did not pick out those particular people to bomb, but the impact of his action is clearly utterly personal to the person who, as a result, lost a child or a limb or their sight. The presence of facilitators can enable boundaries to be kept, and stories to be heard and understood by both listener and teller. All this needs to happen within a confidential space. In our own time privacy has received something of a bad press. Perhaps that's not surprising since with 24 hour news channels the pressure to be constantly coming up with something newsworthy means that journalists will hound people in conflict, rather than giving them the space and time they need to process what has happened. Polarised views always make for more dramatic news stories so the polar extremes are often given air time that the numbers of their adherents do not warrant, thus fuelling a battlefield mentality.

Certain healing processes need the safety of confidentiality and sufficient time to unfold. People will not open up if they fear exposure, particularly if part of that process is about coming to terms with the pain they have

inflicted on others, alongside their own pain. Developing awareness is impossible under the public spotlight because our natural instinct in the glare of publicity is to batten down the hatches and repel all boarders.

## Understanding

The purpose of creating a good distance and a safe space is to facilitate deepening awareness and understanding. Without this conflict cannot be transformed. What we don't understand, and often unconsciously reject in ourselves, we tend to see as the problem of those with whom we are in conflict. In his book, *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, Amos Oz captures perfectly the impact of a lack of understanding when he writes:

The Europe that abused, humiliated and oppressed the Arabs by means of imperialism, colonialism, exploitation and repression is the same Europe that oppressed and persecuted the Jews... But when the Arabs look at us they see not a bunch of half-hysterical survivors but a new offshoot of Europe, with its colonialism, technical sophistication and exploitation, that has cleverly returned to the Middle East – in Zionist guise this time – to exploit, evict and oppress all over again. Whereas when we look at them we do not see fellow victims either, brothers in adversity, but somehow we see pogrom-making Cossacks, bloodthirsty anti-Semites, Nazis in disguise, as though our European persecutors have reappeared here in the Land of Israel, put kefiyehs on their heads and grown moustaches, but are still our old murderers interested only in slitting Jews' throats for fun.

On the cross, the Jesus of Luke's gospel cries out, 'Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.' (Luke 23:34) His words recognise that at the root of destructive conflict lies ignorance – of both self and the other. We might then define forgiveness as the process by which we move towards understanding and away from destructive cycles of violence and revenge, seeking in the face of inhumanity, real or projected, to maintain our own humanity. Defined in this way, forgiveness becomes the key to conflict transformation.

The climate of today's Church is not one characterised by an attitude of forgiveness. We have become seduced by the politics of power, caught up in polemical point scoring where the end sought is not understanding, but undermining the position of the other. Ignorance is often confused with truth and the 'God who makes all things new,' with idols of our own making. We have much to learn from those of all faiths and none who, experiencing extreme violence and trauma, seek to discover the creative potential of conflict instead of being destroyed by it.

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Ruth Scott is an Anglican priest, writer and broadcaster. Her second book, *Slipstreams for Healing Souls*, is published this month by SPCK. In her spare time she eats fire.

# As Large as Alone

Anne Ashworth writes about the self and the sea as a universal symbol of the Oneness of things.

If you walk seawards along the north side of The Square in St Anne's-on-Sea, tread slowly. Set in the pavement are slabs with words on them. Gradually the words build into a poem, describing three children visiting the seaside. The point of the poem is that what each child finds there reflects her particular personality. One, for instance, has found:

a smooth round stone,  
as small as the world  
and as large as alone.

The final slab tells us

Whatever we lose  
like a you or a me  
it's always ourselves  
we find in the sea.

At once we know what the child with the pebble felt. She had been told that 'it's a small world', but was aware of herself alone in a huge space. The human condition. And in the nature of human beings, 'it's always ourselves we find' in whatever company or situation life places us. The finding may be a positive or a negative experience, a fulfilment or an exposure of weakness.

But what is the significance of the sea? As an ancient archetype, the sea represents the unconscious, which may at critical moments or times of rare clarity open to reveal something of our 'selves' to ourselves. The sea is also a universal symbol of the Oneness of things, of eternity, of God. Whatever our beliefs or unbelief, when forced to confront the ultimate questions of life and death and the nature of the universe we find it difficult to avoid the question of our own personal significance in the totality of things.

Which brings us to those chilling lines about losing 'a you or a me'. Most of us are desperate to hold on to our identity, yet identity changes through life. As childhood, youth, experience and ageing add to what we are, at the same time – and especially in later years – comes the experience of being stripped. In so far as what we are is constructed by interaction with people around us, we lose parts of our identity as we, for instance, leave behind student friends, change jobs, remove, divorce, are bereaved or disabled. To many older people, lacking the scope for new relationships and fresh endeavours, such strippings seem unmitigated. It can happen to the young too, if so stunted by lack of education, poverty or substance abuse that they have no confidence in their own identity and are unable to believe in their own potential.



For these people, old or young, there remains 'the sea'. Ready to be no more than a drop finding the ocean, some seek oblivion through suicide or drugs. Others may find a faith in God, or in the interconnectedness of all things, the Oneness proclaimed by the ancient mystics which now seems confirmed by modern physics. Jenny Joseph has a poem called *The Inland Sea*, in which that sea is a symbol of a lifelong journey towards ultimate wisdom. Are we, perhaps, not only programmed to find ourselves in 'the sea', but equally to find 'the sea' in ourselves? Though humans hold passionately to their personal individuality, there is also apparently a widespread inclination towards merging. And not only in desolation. Even at supreme moments of joy in love, the urge is to become one with the beloved.

I am a temporary aggregation of molecules, which when I die will be released for recycling. Increasingly, I find this a pleasing thought. For as the years continue to advance one can view death with equanimity (if not the process of dying, which remains to be feared). As things, people and our own capacities are stripped away, we may realise that one no longer actually needs what is irrevocably lost, and moreover that at the end one no longer needs even a self. I shall be ready to be lost in the sea. It will be enough to be part of the whole, leaving strewn about that pebbly beach such influences as one may have unconsciously exerted, glad that one's material particles will be reused.

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Anne Ashworth has been an active member of SoF from its inception. It was through SoF that she left the URC and joined the other SoF: Society of Friends. She is a poet and (non-professional) editor.

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**Theism and Nontheism in SoF**

David Boulton (*Letters, Sofia 77*) concludes, 'And if the word 'nontheism' grates, what better alternative can readers propose?' My preference would be for the word 'naturalism' or, failing that, the more clumsy term 'non-supernaturalism'. There is an additional problem with the words 'theism' and 'nontheism'. A distinction needs to be made between theistic and nontheistic gods. Theistic gods are those with whom a personal relationship can be forged, be it by the individual person or by a group. The rest of the gods, the impersonal gods, are the nontheistic gods.

Note that by adopting this distinction, Stephen Mitchell's objections to the word 'nontheism' (*Letters, Sofia 76*) can be side-stepped: '...it produces contradictory ideas such as 'the nontheists' radical re-envisioning of God' and the affirmation of deification 'in a non-theistic context'.

Firstly, to comment on Stephen's former objection, a theistic God can be seen as the amalgamation of a number of nontheistic gods. This union can, however, be dissolved. Secondly, to answer Stephen's more interesting latter objection, if we were to deify an area of our ultimate concern, say the planet Earth, by envisioning it as Mother Earth and naming her as 'Gaia', we would then have deified the planet in a 'non-theistic context'.

**David Miller**  
**Melbourne, Australia**



*Gaia Earth Goddess*

I very much share David Boulton's quandary of how exactly Softies describe themselves. Like him, I do not think of myself as an atheist or humanist – though perhaps that is what we are. The trouble with a word like 'nontheism' is that one immediately puts oneself on the back foot, trying to articulate a description against what one is not, as opposed to what one believes. The word that I now find most comfortable with is 'post-theist'. Though, of course, these days everything is 'post' something so it's not really very original. But it does have its merits. At a recent work review my manager noted my erratic CV – which moved from monastery cloister to parochial priest to building company administrator. She asked if I was now an atheist; I promptly replied, No, I was a post-theist. As she didn't have a clue what that was it opened the door to an interesting exploration. And, for me at least, that's what life and the SoF is all about.

**Yours,**  
**Dominic Kirkham.**  
**94 Clarendon Road, Manchester M34 5SE**

Perhaps I am getting old but I find myself getting increasingly tired of 'ologies' and 'isms.' If the young could tell me that they too are moving on beyond labels I would feel much better. The boys at the school where for many years I was teacher, pastor, and chaplain (guardian of St Martin's torn cloak), often confessed themselves confused as to whether their much loved chaplain was in fact an atheist. But when the question was asked and after the ensuing, always fascinating discussion, they left my company both less confused and more enlightened – or was it vice versa?

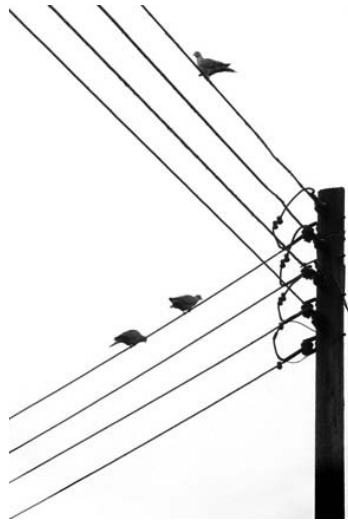
I recently took the funeral of a lovely man whose family described him as an 'ex-Methodist.' In my tribute on behalf his family, with inspiration and 'nerve' I praised him for this and suggested that being 'ex' was a very good thing and that we could take him as a model for someone who is never content simply to be where they are, but always moving on to being more fully human. Whilst we have important insights to contribute to the global debate, SoF needs to be aware of the danger of labelling ourselves too precisely, however safe that might make us personally feel.

**Ken Smith (Portholes Editor)**  
**Croydon**



## Outward

The Sea of Faith Network could be more determined to take its ideas into difficult and possibly dangerous places. In particular I name three – the mass of non-church believers, the fundamentalist corners of orthodox religion and the cause of environmental sustainability.



To the non-church believers because it is fruitful territory in which to find those who although having no place to go nevertheless see religion as important. To fundamentalism, because God as a human creation will act as a counter to dogmatic belief and a powerful antidote to the conflict which such belief generates. To environmentalism because our emphasis that this earth is all we have will give strength to its message. Environmentalism fits easily with a non-supernatural view of religion and concern for the planet after we have left it.

These activities will also be of benefit to the Network. It will encourage SoF to move away from the largely academic analysis of faith and life and immerse itself in everyday affairs. Interaction with these groups will require us to rethink our place, purpose and attitude towards these causes in particular and hence the world in general. Finally it will assist the process of recruitment.

I am under no illusion of the challenge which the above presents. It will take us out of our largely 'armchair' attitude to the world and its problems, but with the cost of attempting to sow SoF ideas where they may not be welcome. We would face powerful vested interests together with the reluctance of many to abandon the comforts of supernatural religion. Nevertheless, I believe the present state of world affairs and the importance of what we have to say require this step to be taken.

John Gamlin  
freeston@ukf.net

## Dichotomy

*For Eva Hoffmann*

Perhaps it is the darkness  
the division of the soul  
or the confusion of aloneness  
in a place teeming with life

Some say it is weakness  
to see two sides of everything  
but still I take the middle way

In your face – tranquillity  
in your presence  
ordinary day to day activities  
become illuminated

Shopping with you in a  
supermarket  
supper on the balcony, candles lit  
to keep away mosquitoes,  
moments which have become  
important in my mind  
struggling to reach an  
understanding

To be a participant  
in a world of human horror  
and a perfection beyond words  
is almost a miracle

Anne Beresford

Anne Beresford lives in Suffolk. *Her Collected Poems 1967-2006* will be published September by Katabasis.

# Mayday Notes



## A Fitting Reward

How closely the suicide bomber's feat of bombing matches his hoped-for reward of virgins in Paradise. Neither the bomb victims nor the virgins have any say in the matter. Like having or 'banging' virgins, the bombing is seen as an act of super-potency (the hero magically acquires the potency of his weapon), in which the others involved are completely depersonalised. For the super-potent hero the act of bombing leads to death just as the sexual act climaxes in the ecstatic 'little death' of orgasm. After the act, the bomb victims and the virgins are 'spent' – the bomb victims are dead or wounded and the virgins are 'despoilt' – they are not virgins any more. When SoF explores religion as a human creation, we must not be afraid to say that some religious beliefs are hideous.

## Olympians Reinstated

An Athens court has ordered that the worship of the gods of ancient Greece should be unbanned, the Guardian reported on 5th May 2006. It is now legal again in Greece to worship Zeus, Hera, Hermes, Athena and the rest of the gods on Mount Olympus. Followers say they are 'defending the genuine traditions, religion and ethos' of the ancients by adhering to a pre-Christian polytheistic culture. In this appealing story, one wonders who is being more realist: the legislators who originally banned the worship of these gods or the worshippers who have reclaimed the right to worship them. Do they really think the gods sit on Mount Olympus? Will they go and see? On a more Sofish view, regarding these gods as creations of the poetic genius, it would indeed be a great shame to lose them. The Greek gods are a priceless part of our common human treasury, belonging not only to Greece but to Europe and further afield.

## A Question of Focus

At our North London SoF group our hospitable convenor Janet Seargeant was talking about how even our noblest feelings could be described entirely in terms of brain activity. In theory we could come up with a comprehensive, second-by-second biological account. But even if we did, that would not be *all there was* to our feelings. Likewise for 'language goes all the way down' or 'everything is rhythm'. It is a question of focus.

## Focus

Some days I go about London  
in a prosodic trance,  
not listening to the meanings  
of what people are saying,  
just to the sounds and rhythms of their speech.  
Oh! what bliss: 's' is a groovy fricative,  
and that builder just called to his mate  
in trochaic tetrameter catalectic,  
might have said:  
'Pass the bucket will you now,'  
but I wasn't paying attention.  
Now comes a true tetrameter,  
the full eight syllables, perhaps it was:  
'Got a tenner on the favourite.'

Later I remember  
today is the Cheltenham Cup.  
Subliminally I must have absorbed  
more than his prosody. Oh! builder,  
in your jaunty yellow hard hat,  
balancing so graceful along that plank,  
who speak the tongue that Shakespeare spake,  
when 'thou thy worldly task hast done'  
(trochaic tetrameter catalectic – *Cymbeline*),  
did you knock off early  
to watch the race in the pub  
with your companions? I never checked  
whether the favourite came in first.  
I hope it did and won you a few quid.

That concentrated focus on prosody  
brings moments of sheer heaven  
but if I did it all the time  
(some people think I do it quite enough),  
without being anywhere aware  
that that's not all that's going on,  
I would be barmy.

Likewise you reductionist postmodernist,  
who say there's nothing but language  
or brain scientist interested only  
in the brain's activities, yes, everything  
can be considered under that one aspect,  
for yes, that's your professional delight  
(oh no, not here we go again:  
that was an iambic pentameter),  
maybe even necessary to do your job –  
you too must have your wits about you  
not to fall off your plank –  
but if either of you seriously avers  
that's ever all there is,  
if the one discounts the mortal body  
or the other ignores love and poetry,  
isn't that blinkered vision also daft?

Stephen Mitchell reviews

## **The Great Questions of Life**

by Don Cupitt

Polebridge Press (Santa Rosa, USA) 2005. £10. 106 pages. Pbk. ISBN 0944344569

This month sees a remarkable publishing event: the publication by SCM of *The Old Creed and the New* by Don Cupitt. It is five years since his work was published in this country.

Meanwhile we are fortunate that Polebridge Press have continued to publish his books including this brilliant little book *The Great Questions of Life*. Don's output is prodigious. Since the 1970s he has written over forty books. This year sees the publication of three. But then that has always been his strategy: to lay down a body of writing, that in the fullness of time, like a rich mineral deposit, will fire the imagination of a generation to come.

Of course, seasoned Cupitt readers will find many familiar themes – but then that is true of the 48 Preludes and Fugues of Bach's *Well Tempered Clavier*. It was Schumann that said that the 48 should be the pianist's daily bread. Those seeking to create a credible faith for today will find this book an equally rich source of meditation. They will discover new themes and new twists to old ones.

For the newcomer to Cupitt, this is an excellent introduction. It's important for them to begin at Chapter One. For them, I would always suggest reading the introductions last. That's where the latest book is placed in the context of the others. It's where one discovers little nuggets of personal biography. It's where some of the writer's thinking behind the book is uncovered. But it's often more difficult. Hegel, existentialism and *L'Ancien Régime* may not immediately grab the lay person's attention.

So plunge straight in to Chapter One, into the world of Homer – Homer Simpson, Ned Flanders and the Springfield of Middle America and Cupitt's personal creed. It has also been part of Cupitt's strategy to work out a faith and philosophy for our age and to leave the context of that faith open. Interestingly, in this first chapter, he lists several of the vocabularies in which this faith could take root: in ordinary language, as *Philosophy's Own Religion*, as a 'kingdom' form of Christianity, as a form of Japanese Buddhism. Cupitt is not hopeful of such a faith finding root in Christian vocabulary and there is a passionate account of his struggle against the 'neo-conservative power-men'.

But why has Don returned to the Great Questions? Because for some twenty-three centuries, religion and philosophy have turned a cycle through the highest degree of institutionalisation and objectification only to return to its origins in everyday human life and language.

The great disciplinary institutions have lost much of their old power, and the old supernatural world is gone.

Above us now, as John Lennon excellently put it, there is 'only sky'. We are innocent and emptied – and we are therefore able to meet the great questions of life, the founding questions of philosophy, with a clarity and head-on directness that have been impossible for over two millennia.

We are now in the same sort of position as people were in early-Greece, from the time up to those pre-Socratic philosophers – yes, did you see the joke coming? – from the time of Homer.

As with the Life books, in the appendix, Cupitt lists and classifies all the great questions of life, citing them in the form that we are most likely to have heard people use and invites us all to fill in any glaring omissions. It's startlingly simple and novel. How do you explore the meaning of life? By looking at the way the word life is used. How do you discover the great questions of life? By looking at the questions people actually ask. The questions – well, of course, they are mostly the ones we might expect – Why are we here? Is there a God? Is death the end? Is that it? The answers, given in the last seven chapters are refreshingly frank. And I'm not going to give away the answers here! You can order it through Sea of Faith!

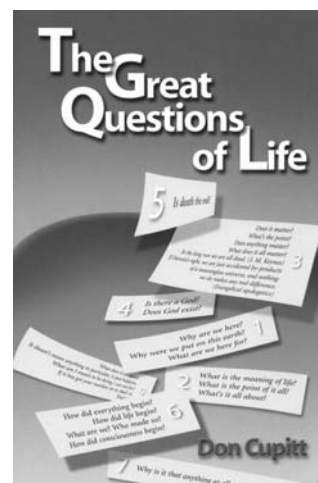
Some of the answers I know will frustrate readers of this magazine. Other will tease and provoke us into answering them ourselves. For fuzzy, irritating, and badly worded though they may often seem, the popular great questions are important to us. In many ways a person's spiritual biography remains the story of how she personally appropriates the great questions, and how lifelong reflection on them gradually changes her and shows her 'who she really is'.

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Stephen Mitchell is a member of SoF Steering Committee. His book, *God in the Bath*, is published by O Books in October.

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This book is available through SoF, from All Saints Vicarage, The Street, Gazeley, Newmarket. CB8 8RB. £10 including p & p.



reviews

David Lambourn reviews

## **Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon**

by Daniel C. Dennett

Allen Lane 2006. £18.75. 448 pages ISBN: 0713997893

Well known for *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, Dennett has now extended that interest to religion. The 'natural' in the subtitle should not be read as a synonym for 'human', nor yet for 'social'. Religion has necessarily evolved and is therefore part of nature – one subtext is the ascendancy of biology.

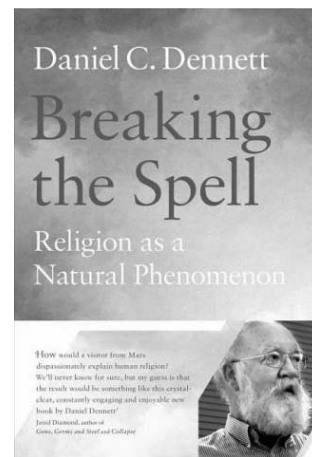
Dennett's aim, a political one, is directed explicitly to the religious in the USA:

It is high time to subject religion... to the most intensive multidisciplinary research... because religion is too important for us to remain ignorant about...it affects not just our social, political and economic conflicts, but the very meaning we find in our lives... for many people nothing matters more than religion and for this very reason, it is imperative that we learn as much as we can about it. That, in a nutshell, is the argument of this book.

We need not be reminded of the power wielded by the religious right during the current Administration. (See *Sofia* 77, May 2006). Dennett opens with a parable: '...an ant in a meadow, laboriously climbing up a blade of grass, higher and higher until it falls, then climbs again, and again, like Sisyphus rolling his rock, always striving to reach the top'. What benefit will the ant achieve for itself? 'Wrong question, as it turns out', says Dennett. A lancet fluke which needs to find its way into the stomach of a sheep or cow, has commandeered the ant's brain. The ant is being caused to climb not for its benefit but rather for the benefit of the fluke and its progeny. An analogy is immediately deployed to describe religions.

Dennett's style is an earnest avuncularity, he proceeds with an elaborate sweet reasonableness, his route is via Richard Dawkins' notion of a meme which, consciously modelled on gene, indicates anything that is capable of replication: words, games, songs, dances, gestures, the skills of hunting, farming etc. These replicants, as Dennett prefers to call them, enable us to consider who benefits from the replication. Dennett is even-handed: religions themselves might turn out to be mutualists enhancing human fitness, or commensals, neutral, neither good nor bad, or they might be parasites, deleterious replicators. If the latter, the *cui bono?* question changes dramatically: it is no longer our fitness which is in question, but rather that of the religion as a replicator.

Dennett sees some religion as better understood by practices rather than by creeds, but when considering belief, also considers belief in belief, where the second



reviews

of these can be left conveniently hazy.

The book has an accomplished style, conversational in tone, sparkling and engaging yet at a leisurely pace, the examples being homely and everyday. It would be a useful text for reading groups of a wide range of interests and abilities. It is rich in some of its reflexivity, just as this reader came up with an objection, that same objection was shortly recognized. Anthropology and economics are adopted as useful allies.

It is also exceptionable on several grounds. Topics introduced are often quickly dropped. 'Science' is not rendered problematic. Logicians will mutter 'assumes the consequent' on many occasions, Occam's razor will reveal a harvest. Religion is narrowly defined as a social system whose participants avow belief in a supernatural agent or agents whose approval is to be sought.

Dennett has at least two uses of Spell in mind. There is the possibility of breaking that spell which religions evince; and there is his main target, that spell of 'the taboo on a no-holds-barred investigation of religion as a natural phenomenon among many'.

I am left with an intriguing puzzle. I am delighted that Dennett is content to be vague, delighted by his copious use of metaphor and the possible programme of research he has derived from it – though not, as yet, carried out. If, as his publisher claims, Dennett has already broken the spell, he has done so simply by encouraging his reader to drop some ways of talking in favour of others – in a thoroughly Rortyeian fashion. So, is *Breaking the Spell* simply another example of the literary genre Predatory Darwinism or has the spell been broken by a thoroughly benign Trojan Horse?

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Penguin are advertising a paperback edition for March 2007.

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David Lambourn Ph.D. is an Open University Lecturer and a former C of E clergyman in the diocese of Southwark. He is the host of the Birmingham SoF group.

## **Fateless**

(book and film) by Imre Kertész and

### **Daniel Barenboim's 2006 Reith Lectures**

Imre Kertész's autobiographical novel, *Fateless*, was published in Hungary in 1975 and Kertész himself has written the screenplay for the film *Fateless* (2005), which tells of the writer's experiences when, as a 14 year old middle class Jewish boy, who had lived a relatively comfortable life with his family in Budapest throughout the early years of the war, he was transported by train, first to Auschwitz, where he spent three days, and then to a labour camp at Buchenwald.

Buchenwald was close to the 'culturally celebrated city of Weimar' and somewhere within the camp, marked with a commemorative plaque and protected from the prisoners by a fence, was 'a nobly spreading tree that Goethe had planted with his own hands.' The camp at Buchenwald contained 'only one crematorium.'

In the film everything is seen as through the eyes of the young boy so that we are often as uninformed about what is happening as the prisoners themselves must have been. Much of what Kertész learned during his struggle to survive was taught to him by a kindly older Hungarian prisoner, whose concern for the young boy gives some relief from the horrors of the film. As a result of his labours Kertész suffered a badly infected knee and was treated in the prison hospital, where he was given comparatively clean bedding and left to rest as he could. I have read the suggestion that this might have been in preparation for some kind of medical experimentation to be undertaken on prisoners.

When the war ended and the German army capitulated, the camp was liberated and Kertész returned with a Russian escort to his homeland, by then under Communist control. The boy was not welcomed with open arms by those who had remained at home, and he felt a nostalgia for the friendships he had formed in the hell of the prison camp. 'In a certain sense, life there had been clearer and simpler.' When asked by a journalist what he felt on being home again, Kertész replied, 'Hatred' and, 'for everyone.'

It is perhaps unsurprising that it was some thirty years before *Fateless* was written and could be published. It takes time before such damaging experiences are fully acknowledged by both perpetrator and victim. Kertész, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, chose to remain in the land of his birth, but for many Jews such a choice was neither possible nor desirable and in 1948 the State of Israel was created.

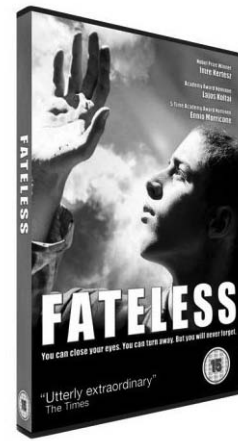
In the 5th of his 2006 Reith Lectures, broadcast by the BBC this May, Daniel Barenboim addressed the subject of the

present Israeli/Palestinian conflict. I would urge anyone who has not heard these talks to get a transcript from the BBC and read what this great musician has to say, in particular about the difference between strength and power, both in music and in life. In this final lecture, addressed to a mainly Jewish audience in Jerusalem, Barenboim points out that it is essential to understand that difference. 'Power has only one kind of strength, which is that of control.' And we are reminded that in music, 'even the most powerful chord has to allow the inner voices to be heard, otherwise it has no tension, only brutal aggressive power.' In music tempo the Italian word *rubato* means 'stolen time' and when playing music, if you take time within a phrase, then you must find the right place to give it back. 'What is difficult in real life is something that is essential in music, that is to be able to start from scratch each time we play something, because what we did this morning is gone, and we must start over as if for the first time but with the knowledge of the last time.'

Barenboim points out that those who play in an orchestra must be constantly aware of everybody else, and this, he believes, is a model for society. It would be easy to dismiss his view as hopelessly idealistic, but when such an aim is linked to the work Barenboim has done with his West Eastern Divan Orchestra, where young Arab and Israeli musicians work, play and above all, listen to each other, then we must be grateful to him for finding a means by which in a 'practical utopia young people can express freely and hear each other,' and where the universal metaphorical language of music can become 'the link that provides a means of understanding how the world could, and should, function.'

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*Fateless*, novel by Imre Kertész, is newly released in paperback by Vintage at £6.99. The film of the novel, *Fateless*, directed by Lajos Koltai (2005), will be available on DVD from amazon.co.uk on 21st August 2006. Daniel Barenboim's Reith Lectures can be downloaded from the BBC website: [bbc.co.uk/radio4/reith2006/lectures.shtml](http://bbc.co.uk/radio4/reith2006/lectures.shtml)



David Perman reviews

## **Godless for God's Sake – Nontheism in Contemporary Quakerism by 27 Quaker Nontheists**

edited by David Boulton

Dales Historical Monographs(Dent) 2006. £9.50. 146 pages. ISBN 0951157868

## **The Trouble with God**

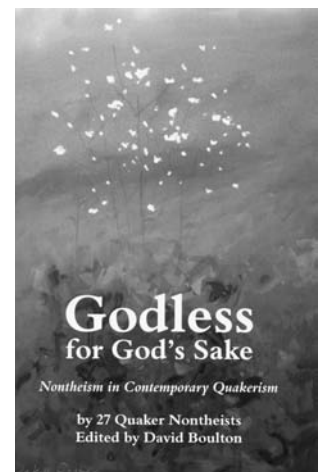
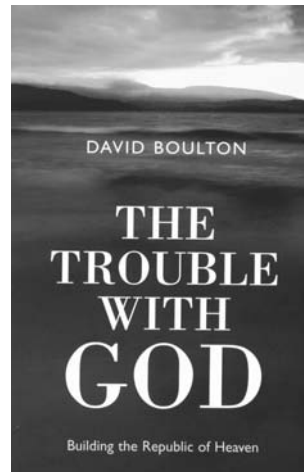
by David Boulton

2nd edition. O Books (Winchester) 2005. £11.99. 256 pages. ISBN 1905047061

The main title of this interesting collection of Quaker essays is derived from words by the 13th century Dominican, Meister Eckhart: 'Man's last and highest parting occurs when, for God's sake, he takes leave of God.' Eckhart was not advocating nontheism, of course, so much as a contemplative emptying of the soul; he famously also said that the Christian should empty himself of things human and 'let God be God in you.' Anyway, it can be argued that taking leave of God is not the same as Godlessness, any more than taking leave of one's family is familylessness or taking leave of one's senses senselessness. It's all a matter of language. The subtitle bristles with similar problems. Some of the essayists emphatically reject the nontheist label in favour of 'atheist' or 'agnostic' and one, James Riemermann, of Minnesota, expresses a wider agnosticism surely representative of a majority of Quakers (and not just Quakers):

'Rarely do I feel led to use the word 'God' to describe anything I experience, though I often relate deeply to what many fellow Quakers describe as God. Part of my reluctance stems from the fact that the word feels so terribly imprecise, and I can almost always find better ways to express myself. It's not a matter of simply replacing the word God with another phrase (the Divine, the Inward Light, the Christ Within, Love, the Ground of Being) but of taking all the language at my command and struggling to express how the world seems to me. Even then I come up short; the words rarely if ever capture the experience, but they come far closer than any timeworn, hand-me-down phrase that is likely to mean a thousand different things to a thousand different people. When the most thoughtful believers speak to me of God, it almost always comes through to me as a heightened awareness of relationship.'

That last point goes to the heart of Quakerism. Never a church but a human society, they have no creed so much as a predisposition to see 'God' in other people ('the light within' or 'that of God in everyone') and in place of liturgies, there is the silence only to be broken by men or women with something relevant to say. Consequently, Quakers have always been closer to nontheism than other Christians. When I was writing a biography of John Scott of Amwell, the eighteenth-century Quaker poet, social reformer and grotto-builder, I came across an entry for 1783 in the visitors' book to his shell grotto: 'R.Morris. atheist.' Not the sort of calling card that could be left with anyone but a Quaker. Scott himself was a theist but one



who like his mentor, Alexander Pope, believed the proper study of mankind is man. Scott's brother, Samuel, on the other hand, was steeped in Wesleyan 'enthusiasm' and in the next century most Quakers followed him into an evangelicalism that was barely distinguishable from that of Wilberforce and Shaftesbury, with the result that after their civil disabilities were removed many English Quakers became Anglicans. In many ways, that was the end of traditional Quakerism, both in Britain and America. Some notable families remained members and there were many who were active in social concerns without counting themselves as 'believers' but, in the twentieth century and even more in this, the Society of Friends has become a destination for spiritual asylum-seekers. As the New England contributor David Rush put it: 'We do know that Quakerism is often a refuge from other religions, and that growth of the Society comes from conviction.'

The value of *Godless for God's Sake* is that it shines a candid light on Quaker spirituality, making articulate what is unsaid and probably cannot be said in the silence of their meetings. It is primarily a book about the dilemma that a significant minority of Quakers face when they perceive that 'convincement' is not the same as 'belief', and may mean indeed a conviction of unbelief or even a conviction of not being convinced of anything. The majority of contributors to this book are Americans and this dilemma is clearly more worrying to those who live in that *de facto* theocracy than those in secular Europe. In America Quakers are expected to be more overtly Christian, or at least religious, than their European counterparts. Many Quaker meetings are structured as meetings for worship and not surprisingly most

contributors to this book prefer to attend or be members of non-structured meetings. But that does not make them all 'nontheists'. As David Rush again puts it, when discussing various British and American surveys of belief:

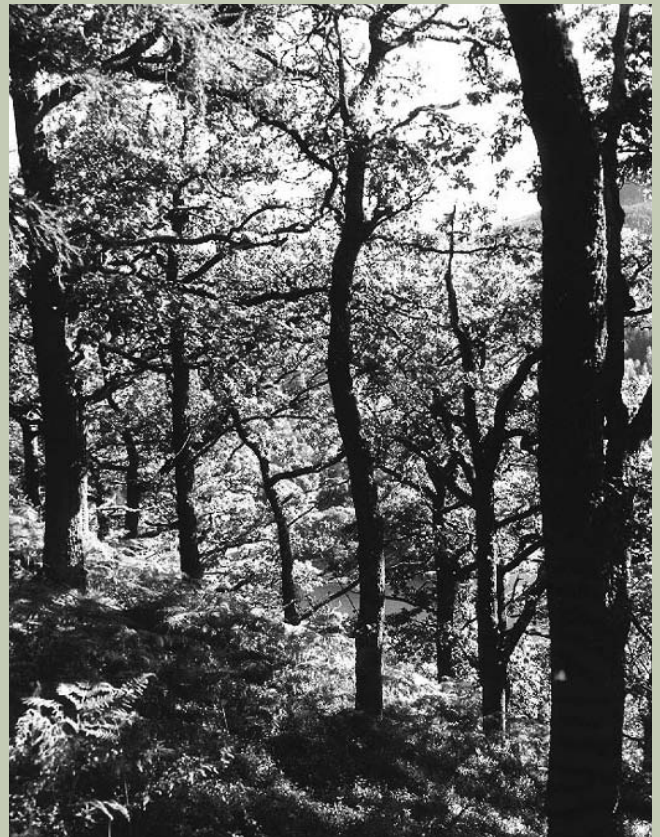
One very important gap in knowledge concerns what Quakers mean when they speak of God, quite apart from the question of belief. This writer senses that the theist/ non-theist divide is far more fluid than we have supposed, and that we will find this divide often to be a false one.

*Godless for God's Sake* does not come to any clear conclusions – nor would one have expected it to. There is an informative, though rather discursive, chapter on the history of nontheism in the Quaker tradition, in which David Boulton examines the pioneering beliefs of Gerrard Winstanley, the 'Digger' and early Quaker, while Os Cresson from Philadelphia celebrates David Duncan and the 19th-century Free Friends of Manchester and also the American radical Henry Joel Cadbury. But most of the contributions are personal statements, 'testimonies' one might call them in another context, stories of the journeys and spiritual or emotional struggles that have brought them to the position they now hold whether that is nontheist, atheist or agnostic, or just plain confused with no honest or immediate form of language in which to express that confusion. This is the strength of the book, indeed the strength of Quakerism today. Were the same contributors to describe their spiritual state in five or ten years time, I suspect the results would be different. These are travel narratives, not descriptions of houses built on a hill.

David Boulton is a contributor to *Godless for God's Sake*, as well as its editor and publisher. It comes hard on the heels of the enlarged second edition of his own contribution to nontheist literature, *The Trouble with God – Building the Republic of Heaven*. It is now published to the plaudits of Tony Benn, former Bishop Richard Holloway and Don Cupitt, who points out how funny Boulton can be. I particularly savoured the argument he and his brother had about Jesus's beard ('Jesus Shaves'). Humour apart, he is a thoughtful, learned and lucid writer who makes his case in three substantial helpings – his own story (from Gospel Hall to Granada TV), a biography of 'God' (from El and Yahweh to the *Götterdämmerung* of modern theology) and finally Boulton's reconstruction of religion as the 'Republic of Heaven' – a phrase he borrows from the novelist Philip Pullman's rejection of anything suggesting transcendental monarchy. As with the book of Quaker essays, the best part of this work is Boulton's own story. Once he is on the final lap, speeding towards the proclamation of a 'hallowed secularism', his humour gets the better of him. The trouble with God, he concludes, is 'she can't be written out of the script – so since she won't go quietly, let us retain her in the capacity of honorary consultant-adviser.'

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David Perman is a member of SoF and author of *Scott of Amwell, Dr. Johnson's Quaker Critic* (Rockingham Press, 2001).



## Trees and Cathedrals

From North Devon John Saban writes: 'Now old and in fragile health, I sometimes walk my dog in neighbouring woodland where I have been reflecting on recurring dreams in which I explore empty dark cathedrals, to find them full only of ... atmosphere.'

## Significance in Shadows

Deep in that forest, hints of incense breathed  
And dappled leafy light like candles seemed  
To pattern tree trunk pillars that were wreathed  
With stained glass tinted ivy, colours gleamed  
On gnarled and gothic tree root stairs that led  
To rustic altars to dead gods like Pan.  
That holiness so potent is it dead  
Or just too inconvenient for Man?  
A numinous still lingers in that wood  
As in those dream cathedrals where I sought  
A Presence there, half seen, half understood,  
Significance in shadows – so I thought.  
Was it just wish fulfilment's old appeal  
Or could that age-old myth be somehow real?

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John Saban is an ex-RAF Wing Commander, ex-Anglican Diocesan Lay Reader, Buddhist (once active in the London Buddhist Society) and Universalist Quaker.



'I am half sick of shadows,' said  
The Lady of Shalott.

Tennyson, *The Lady of Shalott*