



Down to Us

Sofia is the magazine of the Sea of Faith Network (UK), Registered Charity No. 1113177, a network of individuals and local groups 'exploring and promoting religious faith as a human creation'. The magazine comes out in January, March, May, July, September and November.

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**Oliver Essame, Gospel Hill Cottage, Chapel Lane,
Whitfield, Brackley NN13 5TF
oliver@essame.org.uk**

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CONTRIBUTIONS

Contributions to the magazine are most welcome. Please submit unpublished articles that have not been submitted elsewhere, or if previously published, please state where and when. Proposals can be discussed with the editor. Books for review, reviews and articles (which may be edited for publication) should be sent the Editor:

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

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

LETTERS

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

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

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PORTHOLES

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

Portholes Editor:

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

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Giotto: *Nativity, one of the few in which the mother is lying down.*

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which 'explores and promotes religious faith as a human
creation'. Registered Charity No. 1113177.

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

sfia is against fundamentalism and for humanity with its
questing imagination and enabling dreams.

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

sfia is for Kindness and Poetry for Everybody's Enjoyment
along the way, to KEEP faith with life and Earth's humanity in
the making.

Down to Us

This seemed a suitable title for our immediately post-Christmas issue.

It will be a short editorial because this issue includes the talk I gave to the Oxford SoF Group with the title 'Down to Us', which they asked to see in print.

When I was young, if someone wanted to tell me, 'It's your responsibility,' they would say, 'It's up to you.' Later I heard people saying, 'It's *down* to you' also meaning 'it's your responsibility'. At first I thought this was London demotic but now I hear it everywhere and indeed, quite by chance, I open my paper today and see an advert about climate change saying: 'Almost half of the UK's carbon dioxide emissions which cause climate change are actually **down to us.**' (Incidentally, this can act as a trailer for the next July SoF Annual Conference, at which the speakers will be ecologist Jonathan Porritt, Stephanie Dowrick from Australia and Tim Jackson, Professor of Sustainable Development at the University of Surrey, and whose title will be *The Good Life?*) Today, to mean responsibility, people may say *either* 'it's up to you' or 'it's down to you', which can give rise to fascinating linguistic discussions.

This resonates with the many myths of descent and re-ascent, one of which is the Christ epic. In it there is the movement *down* and then *up* of Christ, the movement of one who was 'in the form of God' 'emptying himself' down to Earth, *assuming* humanity even in its lowest form, even in its most painful mortality – death on a cross – and then this humanity, represented by Christ, being *highly exalted*.

We can read this non-supernaturally as the God whom *we* invented, *we* set in heaven, coming back down to Earth, emptying himself back down into humanity, and then this humanity aspiring back up to the ideals we set in God. There is no supernatural being up there to bail us out. The point is that both the *down* to us and the *up* to us mean *it's our* responsibility.

In the opening article of this issue Kit Widdows considers how it might ease the problems in the so-called Holy Land, if the three stories of those involved, the Jewish, the Muslim and the Christian, were acknowledged to be *human creations* rather than divine revelations – that is, *up to us, down to us*. Next, we have a new science writer, Amanda Nicholson, from University College London, writing about the brain and religious experience, a field called 'neurotheology'.

There is just room to say I'd like once again to thank last year's Chair, Alison McRobb, for continuing to be an assiduous proof reader of the magazine, as well as a valuable resort to discuss wider issues. Finally, as requested, we print on page 9 the tune of 'The Larger View' sung at last year's Conference, by kind permission of the arranger, David Dawson.

INVITATION TO READERS

1. Can you compose two new verses for 'The Larger View' tune on page 9? Content should be singable, 'sofish', poetic – no pompous generalities or sanctimonious wool please! If suitable contributions come in, the Editor will propose the one she likes best to the Trustees, and if they agree, we will sing it at the next AGM.
2. In his Open Liturgy 2 (on page 21) William Imray suggests others we might want to commemorate, including George Eliot and Aung San Suu Kyi of Myanmar (Burma). *Sofia* would like to start building up a new Calendar. Please send in your nominations for inspiring people from history to go in it, with a brief biography, say 375 words. Please suggest a day on which the person could be celebrated, which could be their birthday, death day or the day on which they did some notable deed or published a notable work.

Please send your contributions to both the above to the Editor.

SoF and our World

Though the nature of God has been debated over the millennia, Kit Widdows argues, far more important for the world we live in is how people *use* their concepts of God.

SoF has on offer a revolutionary and deeply practical religious insight. We aver, not merely academically, but passionately, with love and anger, that religion is a human construct. We do not say 'merely' human, as if apologising for the genius of humanity. Nor do we suggest that the great religious myths are anything other than the most important creations of the very best that our minds and hearts can make. We do, however, declare that these myths are *ours*, not dropped, unchangeable by us, from somewhere outside. Even then, we give due value to the sense of 'other' with which we ourselves invest our myths; the sense of 'other' is a part of our own myth-creation. Is this insight just a last gasp of the religious dodo as we enter the brave new world of secular humanism (so busy creating its own oft-unexamined myths)? I would say, 'No! This is humanity's bright hope!'

Our liberating insight is that the myths don't own us; we own them.

If we look at our world today, where are we hurting most? Wars and rumours of wars must immediately spring to mind. So does the scandal of global poverty, unfair trade, unpayable debt and wickedly unfair distribution of wealth. So also do our concerns for a planet being consumed and changed, perhaps irrevocably, because of human inability to transcend our many self-identities.

In each one of these cases, at the heart of the problems are human myths, always religious in character, and more often than not, overtly religious as well. These myths clash, and people feel helpless to change them. They seem to have come from outside. Our liberating insight is that the myths don't own us; we own them. They are ours and we can manage them. I am going to take the most obvious case; that of war, but this insight can be applied equally to the others.

Perhaps the most dangerous war in the world today is the war going on in the Holy Land (I use the term deliberately, as you will see). Indeed, other conflicts (Iraq, Afghanistan and the 'global war on terror') are closely related to this first-mentioned war. The war has religious myth at its roots, whatever the politicians say. I am now going to summarise these myths, with apologies for the caricature nature of this exercise; in reality myths are too big to do this to!

For many Jews, and more particularly for Israeli Jews, the defining myth is of a God who chose a people and made them certain promises (Genesis 12:1-3), including the promise of land. God rescued them from slavery in Egypt and led them into this Promised Land, and there made a covenant with them. The covenant was (and is) a bargain with two sides – in order for God's promise to continue to hold, his Law must be kept. This Law includes many high moral precepts that still are the greatest that humanity desires to aspire to. It also includes rules and sanctions that come from a warlike and beleaguered stage in the history of Israel that can now seem immoral or simply irrelevant. At the heart of this story of covenant and promise stands the 'Holy Land'. Possession of it is not merely the owning of a home-land; it is the visible and concrete sign that the Covenant still holds, and God has not rejected his people.

In fairness it must be added that for many Jews, their story also tells of duty to welcome others into their land and to treat them as equals as the Law demands and their deep desire is for a settled peace where all can dwell together in harmony.

For many Muslims, Palestinians and those beyond, the defining myth is of a full and final revelation from God transmitted through the Prophet, who was aware of God's revelations to Jews and to Christians, and took them into account as he shared this final revelation with all who would submit to it. Those who do submit are those through whom God works his will for the world.

This will is that the whole world should enjoy his peace in the light of his revelation. Where a land has been Holy, but is now in the zone of war, it seems that God's will has been thwarted. Repossession of the land is not merely the reclaiming of homes; it is the necessary response to fulfil one's absolute duty to God.

In fairness it must be added that for many Muslims, their story tells of a special respect for the other 'peoples of the book' and their deep desire is for a peace where all can dwell together in harmony.

For many Christians, especially Christians of the West involved politically in this conflict, it is not so much their defining myth that is called into play (the story of freedom and new life won through death and resurrection). Rather there are sub-plots that are evoked. Having retained the Jewish scriptures, for some the promises made in these

Politicians and the Media also don't really understand myths (they are deeply locked in their own).

still hold good and apply to those whom they now call 'God's ancient people'. For others the promises indeed hold good, but now apply to God's 'true Israel', redefined as the Church (or that part of the church to which they belong). For a few, but a powerful few, the defining myth tells a story that culminates in the last great battle precisely here in the 'Holy Land' and they must work God's will in evoking such a battle.

In fairness it must be added that for many Christians, their story tells of love for the other and a deep desire for peace where all can dwell together in harmony.

In the face of these stories, the secular world is helpless. Sociologists and anthropologists can study, record and evaluate the myths, but they are hampered by a pseudo-scientific need for 'objectivity'. They stand outside, and myths can't really be understood from outside.

Politicians and the Media also don't really understand myths (they are deeply locked in their own) and so they offer 'solutions' that run contrary to the strongest feelings of the belligerents. This is



Jerusalem

doomed to failure. Many of the religious leaders are as firmly locked inside these key myths as the secular world is locked out. We need to recognise first that an essentially religious conflict is only amenable to a religious solution. Once this is clear, then it is a question of method; what sort of religious solution?

We have an example in South Africa where two men (two, not one) decided to try 'Love your enemy' with all the rigorous insight into what 'love' means as a theological concept. It is my contention that SoF has the necessary religious insight.

It is not a case of going to Jew or Muslim, or, for that matter, Christian, and saying, 'Your myths are human creations; rejoice in that and take control of them instead of letting them control you.' This would be several bridges too far! It is rather a case of studying the myths (together with them) and seeking the commonalities and picking up on the sub-plots that make for peace and increasing the stress to be laid on them as the stories are told. It is a matter of *owning* the stories, and telling them again in ways that open them up to a better life.

Many SoF members have contacts with Muslims and Jews, and many are in groups that think about theology. We also have the regional groups. These are places where such matters can not only be discussed, but also offered more widely. We can write the odd letter to the local paper, and why not the nationals? Some of us get an occasional airing on local radio, we could use it for this. And all done gently. We are in the business of winning hearts and minds, and at the end of the day we can't tell people what they should think or believe, we can only encourage them to make the ideas their own.



I am aware that something similar was tried in what resulted in the 'Alexandria accord', but what I am suggesting is that we do it *here*, and do it again, and again, regularly offering our own particular insights and trying to get them heard more and more by the Media and by our own politicians. As things stand at present, this is very much a matter for British and US policy as well as for others. We need a 'sea change' in thinking, a change away from 'road-maps' and political 'solutions' and towards ways forward that understand and respect the religious insights of all in the region and beyond.

While I have tried to make out a case in some detail for our involvement in this particular issue, I wouldn't want to lose sight of the others that I posted up earlier. You will be able to add still more.

As regards global justice, we have already seen a retelling of our myths in the Jubilee campaign and its successors. Active Christians in those campaigns (and they figure very largely) have brought hitherto largely-unquoted bits of Leviticus and Deuteronomy to the fore, thereby subtly changing the way we think about what was an obscure part of the Old Testament. There are, however, other myths still at work here that need a SoF make-over. There is, to take one example, a strong Christian lobby, especially in the most powerful parts of the West, that tells a story whereby God rewards his faithful with the gifts of this world, and these goods become an earnest of their standing in 'eternity'.

As regards the climate, Christian (and other) stories are too often told in such a way that the planet merely becomes the stage, even a backdrop, for human activity, with no sense of

interdependence. And there are still far too many myths that talk of 'the world' as bad, corrupt and irrelevant to the spirit.

I think there is a job to do in all these areas. Fortunately, there are lots of allies, but in today's society many of them have not had a chance to discover the religious tools that they need. 'Religion' to them is part of the problem, and they do not realise that 'bad' religion can only be withstood at the religious level. SoF can help; indeed is uniquely placed on the religious map to offer the most appropriate help. Naïve? Silly? Yes, quite probably. We have nothing to lose by trying, however, and I must admit a fondness for the naïve and silly – they have been known to change the world.

Kit Widdows is Master of St Thomas the Martyr Church, Newcastle-upon-Tyne and a SoF Trustee.

JOIN SoF Network

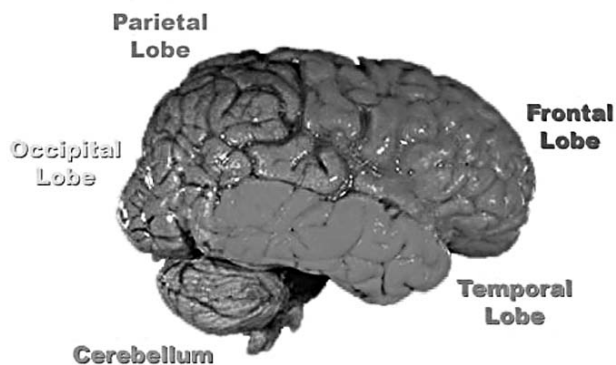
Are you dismayed by the growth of fundamentalism and its attendant violence in many religions, including the Christian, Muslim and Jewish religions? At the same time do you think that religious stories and traditions are an important part of our human treasury which we do not want to lose?

If you think religions are human creations and that this view is important in a dangerous world, why not join SoF (Sea of Faith) Network of individuals and local groups? As well as Sofia magazine, you will receive the internal newsletter Portholes, be able to join a local discussion group and attend the annual SoF Conference and other events.

Membership of the Network is £30 (£20 concessions; magazine only: £15) a year. Send a cheque (made out to Sea of Faith) to: **Stephen Mitchell, All Saints Vicarage, The Street, Gazeley, Newmarket CB8 8RB**

Neurotheology: Help, Hindrance or Irrelevance?

Is there a God spot in the brain? Can magnetic fields induce religious experience? Are spiritual experiences due to activity in the temporal lobe? Amanda Nicholson looks at research questions in neurotheology.



Neurotheology is the study of the neural basis of spirituality and aims to identify the brain activity or structures accompanying religious, spiritual or mystical experiences (RSMs). It has developed as a separate research area in recent decades, powered by technological advances in brain scanning. It focuses on the short-term correlates of spiritual sensations, emotions and experiences rather than beliefs or cognition. This article aims to synthesise the research questions behind this work, assess whether the results are reliable and whether they contribute to the exploration of religious faith as a human creation.

Methods used in neurotheology

The ability to monitor brain activity is crucial to the research effort. Older studies have looked at electrical activity in different areas of the brain (using EEGs – electroencephalograms) but scanning is now predominant. Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) measures change in cerebral blood flow and so locates cerebral activity because the blood flow in that area increases. PET (positron emission tomography) and SPECT (single photon emission computed tomography) use radioactive tracers and can examine specific neurotransmitters, but their time-resolution is less accurate as tracers remain lodged in the area for some time. Three main study designs have been used to investigate RSMs.

Imaging of spiritual experiences

Subjects are asked to achieve a spiritual plateau or experience, such as meditation or prayer, and their brain is pictured using fMRI scan or PET scans to identify changes associated with that experience.

Inducing / changing spiritual experiences

In other studies, attempts have been made to induce a spiritual experience by external factors. Michael Persinger uses magnetic field over temporal lobes to induce spiritual sensations. The more controversial use of psychoactive drugs to induce spiritual experience is another example of this design.

Studying the effect of pathology

or disease is a technique widely used in neuroscience to give clues about normal function. If a change in symptoms or behaviour is related to damage or disease in one area of the brain, this is thought to indicate that area is involved in normal function. Temporal lobe epilepsy is the major pathology studied in relation to religious experiences but near death experiences (e.g. a tunnel, bright lights, euphoria) have yet to be accounted for and also fall into this category.

Models and hypotheses

The two current views of about the origin of spiritual experiences are dominated by the temporal lobe model and d'Aquili and Newberg's¹ model of meditative states. The temporal lobe model, advocated largely by Persinger, suggests that mystical experiences are the result of spontaneous electrical discharge of the temporal lobe and that these exist on a continuum ranging from minor 'temporal lobe transients', causing for example peaceful periods, feeling of unreality, sense of guidance, to temporal lobe epilepsy (TLE) leading to hearing voices, seeing visions or a sense of divine guidance.² He suggests that these temporal lobe signs predispose to or reinforce religious belief. Less orthodox parts of his work involve inducing experiences – particularly that of a 'sensed presence' – by magnetic fields over the temporal lobes via a 'God helmet'.³

D'Aquili and Newberg focus on induced (rather than spontaneous) meditative states and describe a complex model involving activation of the prefrontal lobe and then reduction in activity in the posterior superior parietal lobe – so-called deafferentation. This parietal lobe area is responsible for the distinction between self and the world and they propose that deafferentation in this area results in a state of 'absolute unitary being'. Newberg also suggests a spectrum of experiences – which he terms the 'unitary continuum'. Mild unitary absorption may arise in response

to music, art or nature. He speculates how mystical experiences might have promoted religious belief in early human societies.⁴

Methodological limitations

The empirical work to investigate these models is riddled with methodological problems.

1. Some of the imaging studies are not controlled, i.e. they do not look at brain activity associated with non-spiritual experiences, so they cannot conclude that the activation is specific. For example, people reading a newspaper may have the same changes. More recently work looking at prayer in Carmelite nuns showed that different areas of the brain are involved.⁵ No one specific area is therefore associated with meditative experiences.

inducing experiences – particularly that of a ‘sensed presence’ – by magnetic fields over the temporal lobes via a ‘God helmet’.

2. The studies are often on very small numbers of subjects so that the possibility of any differences occurring by chance cannot be discounted.

3. All spiritual experiences rely on self-report and it is impossible to know whether the study is really comparing the same experience in different individuals. Persinger’s work showing that the experience of temporal lobe transients is related to mystical religious experiences and personality types has been criticised because the two questionnaires used to assess the dimensions are similar, so that correlations between them are not unexpected!⁶

4. Despite recent advances, neuro-imaging is still a very crude measure of brain function. Increased blood flow to an area could result from activation of inhibitory or activation neurons, with different functional implications.

5. The assumption that normal function can be inferred from pathology is also debatable. A link between temporal lobe epilepsy and religious belief and behaviour between fits has been suggested anecdotally for some time but the evidence base is weak and debated. Opponents argue that the changes are not specific to temporal lobe epilepsy but are seen in other forms of epilepsy.⁷

What we do know

The work has shown that mystical experiences are related to specific areas of brain activity, e.g. epileptic seizures in the temporal lobe certainly lead to religious experiences in some sufferers. We can also be confident that mystical-type experiences can be induced by drugs and perhaps magnetic fields. However a variety of brain areas have been

implicated in similar experiences, so that one specific pathway has not been identified. We are a very long way from knowing the neural pathways involved – but progress is possible. Newberg has recently outlined an updated model with detailed neurotransmitters named⁸ and it may be possible to test this model. The more important question is whether this is a useful field of endeavour.

Relevance

The weakness of this body of work in the wider investigation of religious faith is that it looks at *mechanisms* and does not really contribute to the investigation of *causes*. The imaging studies in particular do not tell us anything about whether these experiences have any basis in objective reality. The identified areas of the brain would be activated whether the experience was internally or externally generated. The induction of experiences by magnetic fields or drugs tells us a little more – that experiences can be induced by material means – but that does not mean all such experiences have a purely material origin. Similarly, because some experiences are due to disease process within the brain, it does not follow all such experiences are caused this way.

This work focuses on religious or spiritual experiences and extrapolates to belief in two stages, both of which are unproven. First, extreme experiences such as meditation, mystical prayer or a sense of the other are put in a continuum with the everyday spiritual experiences of many religious people. Secondly, such religious experiences are suggested as a stimulus to or reinforcer of belief. This progression from mysticism to spiritual experiences to religious belief is only theoretical at present.

The imaging studies of the brain do not tell us anything about whether these experiences have any basis in objective reality.

Personally, I am sceptical that experiences such as absolute unitary being are an important factor in maintaining or causing religious belief in most people. They would seem to be the exception rather than the norm. However, if true, this link between RSMs and belief could contribute to what Paul Bloom described as the religion-as-opiate theory⁹ of the evolutionary origins of religious belief, with sensations of oneness or perception of a greater reality reducing anxiety and sense. Thus the brain structure or activity underpinning these experiences, if we can identify them, may account, in part at least, for the appearance of religious belief in humans. The nature of evidence in all evolutionary psychology is controversial, with theories difficult to test empirically and as H. Allen Orr succinctly stated ‘it’s far from obvious that explaining unprovable beliefs with unprovable theories constitutes progress.’¹⁰

Summary

There are real scientific challenges to be overcome in neurotheology not least the major problems in accurate measurement both of experience and of brain activity. Progress has been made and much more is possible but the study designs need to be more rigorous. Understanding the neural pathways involved in religious sensation may help but this will remain somewhat irrelevant – unless the association between experiences and belief can be better understood.

- 1 Newberg A, Lee BY. 'The neuroscientific study of religious and spiritual phenomena: or why God doesn't use statistics'. *Zygon* 2005; 40; 469-489.
- 2 Ben Hidalgo's literature review on 'The neuropsychology of religious experience'.
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- 3 Persinger MA. 'Religious and mystical experience as artifacts of temporal lobe function: a general hypothesis'. *Percept Mot Skills*; 1983; 57; 1255-62.
- 4 St Pierre LS, Persinger MA. 'Experimental facilitation of the sensed presence of the magnetic fields, not by suggestibility: re-analyses of 19 experiments'. *Int J Neuroscience* 2006; 116; 1079-96.
- 5 Newberg A, D'Aquili E, Rause V. *Why God won't go away. Brain science and the biology of belief*. New York : Ballantine 2001.
- 6 Beauregard M, Paquette V. 'Neural correlates of a mystical experience in Carmelite nuns'. *Neuroscience Letters*. 2006; 405: 186-189. Comments on Persinger by Tavis Allison.
<http://www.skepticfiles.org/skeptic/persinger.htm>
- 7 Devinsky O, Najjar S. 'Evidence against the existence of a temporal lobe epilepsy personality syndrome'. *Neurology*

1999;53(5 Suppl 2):S13-25; Blumer D. 'Evidence supporting the temporal lobe epilepsy personality syndrome'. *Neurology*. 1999;53(5 Suppl 2):S9-12; Rodin E, Schmaltz S. 'The Bear-Fedio personality inventory and temporal lobe epilepsy'. *Neurology*. 1984 May;34(5):591-6, Hermann, Bruce P.; Whitman, Steven. 'Behavioral and personality correlates of epilepsy: A review, methodological critique, and conceptual model'. *Psychological Bulletin*. 1984 95(3):451-497.

- 8 Newberg A, Iversen, J. 'The neural basis of the complex task of meditation: neurotransmitter and neurochemical considerations'. *Medical Hypotheses*. 2003; 61; 282-291.
- 9 Bloom P. 'Is God an accident?' *The Atlantic Monthly* 2005; 296; 105-112.
- 10 Orr HA. 'The God Project'. *The New Yorker*. 2006, April 3, 80-83

Useful Websites

Wikipedia has useful introduction

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neurotheology>

Google directory lists many useful sources

http://www.google.com/Top/Science/Social_Sciences/Psychology/Psychology_and_Religion/Neurotheology/

Less orthodox websites: Website by Todd Murphy who works with Persinger. You can purchase a god helmet.
<http://www.shaktitechnology.com/index.htm>

Amanda Nicholson is a Clinical Research Fellow in the Department of Epidemiology and Public Health at University College London.

The Larger View

STENKA RAZIN

Traditional Russian Melody arranged by David Dawson

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HYMN WORDS

In their ancient isolation
Races framed their moral codes,
And the peoples of each nation
Trod their solitary roads.
Now the distances are shrinking;
Travel, and the printed page,
All earth's many lands are linking
Spreading knowledge of each age.

Now new times demand new measures,
And new ways we must explore;
Let each faith bring its own treasures
To enrich the common store.
Then no more will creeds divide us –
Though we love our own the best –
For the larger view will guide us
As we join in common quest.

John Andrew Storey
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Down to Us: The Christ Epic as the Making of Humanity

Dinah Livingstone looks at some familiar New Testament texts to consider how they inspire a humanist agenda.

As an introduction to this talk, which I gave recently to the Oxford SoF Group, I played the cheerful Entry Song to the Nicaraguan Peasant Mass. It begins:

You are the God of the poor,
the down-to-earth, human God,
God who sweats in the street,
God with a sun-burnt face.

The song is, of course, an echo of Matthew 25: 'I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me... As you did it to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me' (25:35). That is, Christ is to be found today in our fellow human beings.

In Luke (4:18) when Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee, he goes into the synagogue and quotes the prophet Isaiah, speaking about the messianic age:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
he has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free.

The time has come, he says, the *kairos*, the right time. The time is *now*. He goes on to say he must proclaim the 'good news of the kingdom to other cities as well' (Lk 4:43).

In Luke, the Sermon on the Mount is the Sermon on the Plain and in fact the texts are *plainer* (6:20):

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom
of God
Blessed are you who are hungry now for you will be filled.

Matthew's version adds (5: 6,9):

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice, for
they shall be filled.

And:

Blessed are the peace makers.

Jesus preaches a kingdom or 'reign' of justice and peace, which is good news for the poor and hungry. It has been inaugurated by him but is not yet complete. It is both *now* and *not yet*. It seems he thought this reign was going to come quite soon. But of course people on Earth are still poor and hungry and we are still waiting for the reign of justice and peace. Jesus thought a supernatural God would guarantee the coming of this reign. If we do not believe in a supernatural God, we have no guarantee, but we can still have this vision of a happy humanity, a global just society in which everyone has a decent life, to inspire us and to struggle for. It is a humanist vision.

Now we turn briefly to Paul's Letters and the curious thing is that Paul isn't very interested in Jesus' actual daily life or what he said. He assumes that Jesus preached kindness, that we should be kind to one another and lead a new life. For example, we have the reference in Acts 20 when he 'remembers the words of the Lord Jesus that it is more blessed to give than to receive.' But what really interests Paul is Jesus as the Christ. He concentrates on his incarnation and his passion, death, resurrection and final coming, which will be the making of humanity. Writing some twenty years or so after Jesus' death, rather than an historian, Paul is a theologian (and perhaps a poet – at least, his Christ is the creation of what Blake called the human 'poetic genius').

Like Jesus himself, Paul seems to have expected Jesus to return and the kingdom to come soon – especially in one of the earliest Letters, 1 Thessalonians, written, according to the Jerusalem Bible editors, between AD 50 and 51 – that is, by the general consensus of scholars, a good while before the four Gospels in the form that we have them now were written. In this hope both Paul and Jesus were mistaken.

Paul is interested not so much in Jesus' daily life as in what he, Jesus, as the Christ, represents in the cosmic scheme of things. The Christ is both Jesus the person and the eponymous hero of his people, the new Adam, representative of humanity in all its potential. Christ's life becomes an epic story, a poem or drama of humanity's – and the whole Earth's – struggle for liberation.

At the beginning of Colossians, (dated by the Jerusalem Bible editors some ten or so years later than Thessalonians in 61-3),¹ the author writes or quotes a marvellous Christ poem (1:15). I'll just give part of it:

He is the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn of all creation...
and in him all things hold together.
He is the head of the body, the church;
he is the beginning, the first born from the dead,
so that he might come to have the first place in everything.
For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.

Christ is the 'firstborn' of the new humanity, its head as a social body, and in this new humanity 'all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell'.

In Philippians, (dated 56-7 by the Jerusalem Bible), Paul gives another poem, which may have been an early Christian hymn (2:5). It focuses on the *shape* of this drama: incarnation, death – passion or descent to the lowest depths –, and resurrection.² Christ Jesus:

who though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death –
even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth.

Here we have the movement *down* and then *up* of Christ, the movement of one who was 'in the form of God' 'emptying himself' down to Earth, *assuming* humanity even in its lowest form, even in its most painful mortality – death on a cross – and then this humanity, represented by Christ, being *highly exalted*. As Athanasius put it a few centuries later, 'God became man, so that man might become God'.

The curious thing is that Paul isn't very interested in Jesus' actual daily life or what he said.

In this hymn Paul is thinking of Christ's close parallel with the first Adam, who *did* 'regard equality with God as something to be exploited'. Christ is the new Adam, who 'recapitulates' humanity, he is the Word with which humanity's story is rewritten.

Humanists can read this as the God whom we invented, *we* set in heaven, coming back down to Earth, emptying himself back down into humanity, and then this humanity aspiring back up to the ideals *we* set in God. We make the Word and the Word makes us.

Or as it is put in II Corinthians: 'In Christ there is a new creation' (5:19)... 'for you know the generosity of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich' (8:9).

Or in another poem, Ephesians this time(4:7):

When he ascended on high,
he led captivity captive
and gave gifts to humanity.
When it says 'He ascended',
what does it mean but that he had also descended
to the lowest parts of the earth?
He who went down
is the same one who went up
far above the heavens
so that he might fill all things.

So the movement is down and then up as 'a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth' (Eph 1:9).

For 'he has put all things under his feet and made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all' (Eph 1:23). 'So that he might create in himself one new humanity... in one body' (Eph 2:15).

Paul is constantly urging Christians in the new young churches to behave well, and especially, to behave well to one another. But his main theological interest is not private spirituality. In the whole emphasis on 'spirituality' today, the private individual is in the foreground – possibly because people worry that corporate religions tend to become gangs and then they start killing each other. Perhaps they just don't like being bossed about by reactionary or sanctimonious clergy, or suffer from not being able to find a group with which they can agree. However, when it comes to belonging to the human race, rather than a particular congregation, we are members willy nilly. 'Privatisation' can be a false innocence, and immoderate individualism is at best self-defeating, since much human potential cannot be fulfilled in isolation, and at worst dangerous if it means just looking after number 1 and not caring about anyone else, or as Blake puts it: 'planting thy family alone, destroying all the world beside'.

For Paul the new humanity is *collective*. Or to put it another way, the new humanity is Christ's *social* body: 'We who are many are one body because we all share the same loaf' (I Cor 10:16). 'For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ' (I Cor 12:12).

The project to create a humane humanity is 'the building up of the body of Christ, until all of us come... to maturity, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ' (Eph 4:12). The project is not yet complete. Paul can say: 'I fill up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ, for the sake of his body, the church' (Col 1:24). Here too we have the tension between the *now* and the *not yet*. But in Christ, the new humanity, 'the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him' (Col 2:9).

We human beings wrote the Christ epic as an imaginary project of human possibility. And in creating the epic we can create ourselves, when we try to become what we imagine. In it humanity does not achieve sameness but equality of status: 'there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free, but Christ is all in all' (Col 3:11). There is equality of status but not sameness: collective humanity is an articulated body with different members – hands and feet, ear and eye. For 'If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing where would the sense of smell be? If all were a single member, where would the body be?' (I Cor 12: 17)

So the Christ epic is a story of Christ the individual hero descending to the lowest depths, reassuming them and then ascending, having gained a victory. The epic has a collective dimension: it is the myth of a people – in this case humanity – the body of Christ, coming to embody the

divine wisdom (I Cor 1: 24). It also has a cosmic dimension – he is the cosmic Christ. Humanity and nature are not in opposition. Humanity is part of nature, the *speaking* part of it. Earth herself, ‘the whole creation’, will give birth to the new humanity: ‘for the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God... the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation but we ourselves who have the first fruits of the Spirit groan inwardly...’ (Rom. 8:19).

In creating the epic we can create ourselves, when we try to become what we imagine.

As another way of representing its wholeness, the new humanity is described as a couple – male and female. The Church is Christ’s bride (2 Cor 11:2; Eph 5:23). As well as in Paul’s letters, we find this image in the later Book of Revelation (which the Jerusalem Bible dates around AD 95)

I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride for her husband. (21:2):

Now is the time of the marriage of the Christ the Lamb.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying: See the dwelling of God is among humans. He will dwell with them. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

God comes down to Earth. He will dwell with us. *We* set God in heaven. He is a creation of the human poetic genius, and in this story he comes back down into humanity, and human society – the city, the *polis* – finally comes to embody the abstract qualities of justice, goodness, love and so on, that we set as ideals in God. The dynamic of the Christ epic is towards humanism. ‘They got married and lived happily ever after’ is a fairy-tale ending, but of course, while life continues on *Earth*, a wedding is not an ending but the beginning of a new story and possible new lives...

There are many other myths of descent and re-ascent. To give just one example, Orpheus (whose father was said to be the Sun god Apollo) loses his wife, his female companion. He goes down into the underworld to bring her back, but *fails*. This failure then adds a new dimension to his singing. He has visited the underworld and come back with knowledge but without his wife. Though he remains unhappy, his art is perfected by his sense of *loss*³. But that’s another story...

In the Christ epic the collective dimension is in the foreground. But we can also read the descent and re-ascent myth as the image of an individual psychic process. In order to be whole, the human individual has to *go down*, perhaps into the unconscious, and confront our own demons, release what was repressed and has become harmful and then *reassume it*. Or we can read it as an image of the poetic process, ‘a raid on the inarticulate’. For a poem

to have power it has to come not just from the head but also from deep feelings and psychic forces that may even previously have been partly unconscious or preverbal – for example, rhythm is pre-verbal before you are born – but which are articulated in the poem, just as in the Christ epic humanity, even in its lowest depths is *recapitulated*, *rearticulated* in Christ the Word. The Christ epic is the poem, the *poiesis* (= making) of humanity.

The way Jesus is portrayed as speaking and behaving in the synoptic gospels, the epic figure of Christ in the Pauline epistles and the visionary new Jerusalem in Revelation, are very different in style and treatment, are different ‘takes’ on the same story. But all three can be read as inspiring the same humanist agenda. All three speak of human fulfilment, which is not just individual but social. In the gospels Jesus proclaims the ‘reign of God’, which is a reign of justice and peace on Earth. It is good news for the poor, and the oppressed will go free. The Pauline epistles speak of a plan for the fullness of time, in which humanity will reach maturity, ‘the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ’. In both, something is happening *now* and *not yet*. In Revelation Christ’s bride, the holy city – the just society – arrives on Earth and the marriage of the Lamb takes place. God comes to dwell with us on Earth and it will be a time of happiness.

The dynamic of the Christ epic is towards humanism.

Another thing to stress is that in all three cases this liberation is not *from* the body but of the body, both individual and social. It takes place on Earth and has an effect on all material things. Good news for the poor is about not being hungry or thirsty or homeless any more. Justice for the oppressed is physical freedom and the chance of a decent life. Justice is concerned with *habeas corpus*.

That is why the symbolic drama of the Eucharist involves *bodily* eating and drinking: ‘The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? ...We who are many are one body, because we all share the same loaf’ (I Cor 10:16). Here too humanity’s maturity, a global just society, means *habeas corpus*.

When Revelation speaks of the marriage of the Lamb Christ, and the holy city, New Jerusalem, his bride, they are united *bodily*, and the wedding takes place on Earth. At the marriage of the Lamb a voice comes from the throne saying: ‘I am Alpha and Omega’. I was looking again at the picture I put on the back cover of *Sofia* 80 (reprinted smaller in black and white here), one of Blake’s illustrations to *Paradise Lost*: ‘Satan Envyng the Endearments of Adam and Eve in Eden.’ For in *Paradise Lost* Adam and Eve make love in Eden – the Fall is not about sex. I noticed that the couple in the picture formed an A and their surrounding bower an O: Alpha and Omega. Christ of course is the New Adam and his wedding is the ultimate Alpha and Omega. There is a lovely story of a friend going to call on Blake in his Lambeth home and finding him sitting in his summer house with his wife Catherine, both naked, playing Adam and Eve.

Of course, as humanists we have no divine guarantee that this happy time will come, but it is a vision of human wholeness and the story can inspire us to go on struggling for it, even though it has taken so long, and even if we succeed in making things better, there will always be more left to do – we will never come to a full stop when everything is perfect.

The Christ epic has resonated through many struggles for social change. I can only give a few examples here. Together with Wat Tyler, the hedge priest John Ball was one of the leaders of the Peasants' Revolt in 1381. He argued that 'things cannot go well in England, nor ever shall, till everything be made common' and that peasants were 'men formed in the likeness of their lords and should not be kept under like beasts'. In his *Letter to the Men of Essex* he quotes the contemporary poem *Piers Plowman*. The peasants were revolting against the Poll Tax. They stormed through the Gates of London and attacked the Lord Chancellor who had imposed it. The poem *Piers Plowman* has a dramatic account of Christ's harrowing of hell, where he descends on Good Friday and challenges Lucifer at the Gates of Hell:

Thou art Doctor of Death, drink that thou madest.
I that am Lord of Life, love is my drink
and for that drink today I died upon earth.

Incidentally, just over six centuries later, in the 1990 Poll Tax riots, which brought Thatcher down that same year, T-shirts and placards could be seen saying: AVENGE WAT TYLER!

During the English Revolution, on April 1st 1649 at about Easter time, Gerrard Winstanley led the Diggers, a group of poor and hungry people, to dig up and plant some land on St George's Hill in Surrey. He writes:

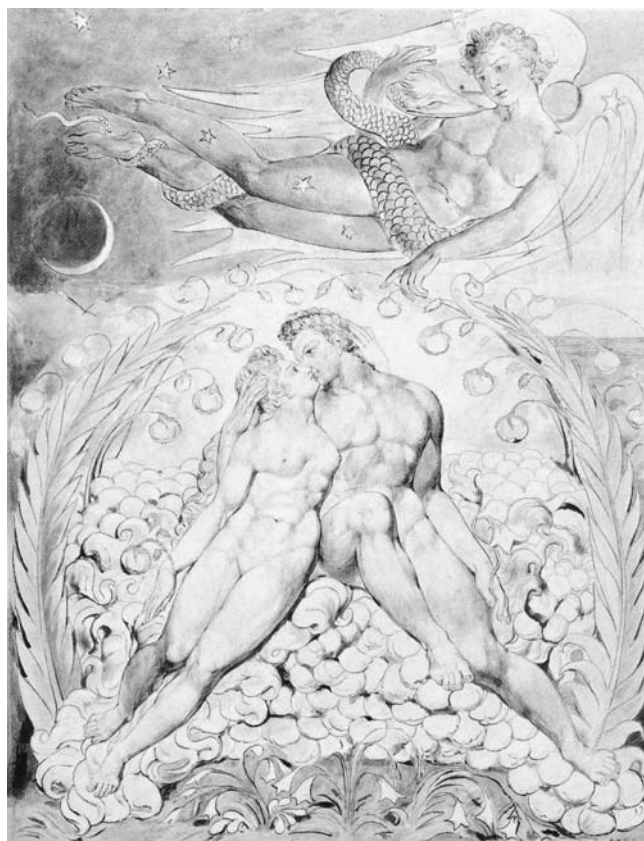
The work we are going about is this, to dig up George's Hill and the waste ground thereabouts, and to sow corn; and to eat our bread together by the sweat of our brows. And the First Reason is this, that we may work together in righteousness and lay the foundation of making the Earth a Common Treasury for all both rich and poor.

The Earth a Common Store-house of Livelihood to all Mankind, friend and foe, without exception

He describes this work as 'Christ rising again in the sons and daughters.' As well as a political it was a theological action, and Winstanley's theology is not about salvation or liberation of one particular group; it is universalist:

For the Earth with all her fruits of Corn, Cattle and such like, was made to be a Common Store-house of Livelihood to all Mankind, *friend and foe, without exception.*

The seventeenth century English Revolution and the twentieth century Nicaraguan Revolution were the two most *theological* revolutions in the last four hundred years.



Satan Envyng the Endearments of Adam and Eve in Eden

At the beginning I quoted the Entry Song of the Nicaraguan *Peasant Mass* and here is part of its Creed, which echoes Winstanley's idea of the Diggers' action as 'Christ rising again in the sons and daughters':

I trust in you, comrade,
human Christ, Christ the worker,
death you've overcome.
Your fearful suffering
formed the new humanity
born for freedom.
You are rising now
each time we raise an arm
to defend the people
from profiteering dominion,
because you're living on the farm,
in the factory and in school,
your struggle goes on
and you're rising again.

When the Mass was sung in St Aloysius Somers Town in London on April 6th 1986 (Low Sunday), by the composer, Carlos Mejía Godoy and his group, Los de Palacagüina with parts repeated in English, the right-wing Catholic paper, *The Universe*, had a shock-horror headline: COMRADE CHRIST!!

In writing this Mass, Carlos Mejía was inspired by liberation theology, which was also one of the inspirations of the Sandinista Revolution, that overthrew the Nicaraguan dictator Somoza in 1979. One such liberation theologian is the Jesuit Jon Sobrino. He happened to be abroad and so survived in November 1989 when the whole of his community at the University of San Salvador was

murdered by the Atlacatl Battalion, trained in the US in the notorious School of the Americas.

Sobrinho has written monumental works on Christology and a great deal about the 'kingdom' or 'reign' of God. He says: 'It is the reality of Latin America today and of the Third World in general that calls for a reign of God... The major fact in Latin America is the massive, unjust poverty that threatens whole populations with death. At the same time the most novel fact is the hope of a just life, of liberation.' He calls the poor and suffering 'the crucified people'.

It is among them that Christ is to be found on Earth today. He says: 'It is the crucified people who make Christ's passion present today, those who fill up in their bodies what is lacking in Christ's sufferings. The crucified people are Christ's crucified body in history.'

Like Jesus, they are crucified by the 'sin of the world', the 'structural sin' of the poverty and death inflicted on them by the powers that rule the world. In their hope and their struggle for life they are 'rising again.' Sobrinho says: 'We have to announce God's kingdom in the presence of the anti-kingdom ruled by idols and in opposition to them.' Idols are 'false gods that demand and feed on death' and the idol mentioned by name in the Sermon on the Mount is Mammon, worshipped today by an aggressive global capitalism.

For Sobrinho and his fellow liberation theologians this is the gospel. His whole concern is with bringing the kingdom and its justice down to Earth. God the Father acts as a sort of principle, an ideal, 'the God of life' that must be realised on Earth: *gloria dei vivens homo*: the glory of God is the human being alive. Sobrinho seems much more interested in Jesus than in the Father and Jesus is to be found today in the crucified people.

Sobrinho denounces the 'idols of death', which operate even 'within the western Christian church... and those who claim to be defenders of this culture and Christian principles.' In fact, the Catholic Church in Latin America and elsewhere sometimes looks like two opposing churches with two opposing Gods. There is the God of the conquistadors who persecuted and exterminated many of the indigenous people, the God of the rich and powerful who rule today; and then the God of the poor. The first line

of the *Peasant Mass*, with which we began, was: 'You are the God of the poor'. And of course now there is the growing power of the Evangelical New Christian Right in the USA

and the God that told Bush to invade Iraq.

As a Jesuit, Sobrinho remains a Catholic theologian, who does not think God is a purely human creation. However, he does speak of 'God who has become history.' And his agenda and that of his fellow liberation theologians is a completely *humanist* one: a decent life for everybody on Earth. The Doctors of Death still need to be challenged at the Gates of Hell.



The Harrowing of Hell

For those of us who

have discarded the supernatural elements in the Christ Epic, it still remains a powerful story with cosmic mythic dimensions. If we believe in life before death, we can still be inspired by Christ:

I that am Lord of Life, love is my drink
and for that drink today I died upon Earth.

The Epic can inspire us to seek, together with those both in and out of the churches, a humanist outcome, *habeas corpus* in the full sense for all, justice and peace at last on Earth.

- 1 There is of course some scholarly dispute about the date and authorship of Colossians (and of Ephesians), which does not concern us here. I think it is generally agreed that both these Letters were written by 95 at the latest. The Jerusalem Bible scholars discuss the debate but finally plump for Paul.
- 2 Incidentally, when Paul says he wants to 'know Christ and the power of his resurrection' (Phil.3:10), it is interesting that in his account of the resurrection appearances in 1 Corinthians 15 he regards Christ's appearance to him on the road to Damascus (some time after the Ascension) as the *same kind* of appearance as the resurrection appearances in the gospels to Mary Magdalene and the apostles.
- 3 This makes him very attractive to women and in one version of his death he is torn to pieces by them like a pop star.

Dinah Livingstone is not a theologian or a biblical scholar. Her publications include *Presence* (poetry, 2003), *The Poetry of Earth* (prose, 2000) and among her translations: *Nicaraguan Peasant Mass* (CD and booklet available from NSC, Red Rose Centre, 129 Seven Sisters Road, London N7 7QG), *Poets of the Nicaraguan Revolution* (1993) and *Companions of Jesus: The Murder and Martyrdom of the Salvadorean Jesuits* by Jon Sobrinho (CIIR, 1990).

Please send your letters to:

Sofia Letters Editor

Ken Smith,

Bridleways,

Haling Grove,

South Croydon CR2 6DQ

revkevin19@hotmail.co.uk

The Larger View, the Common Quest.

Dear Editor,

Ref. page 16 of *Sofia* 80 of this month, it seems that perhaps neither Hershey Julian nor Alison McRobb knows that John Andrew Story's hymn is No 126 in the Unitarian hymnbook, *Hymns for Living*. The tune is given the name STENKA RAZIN, but as I was not present I do not know whether this was the 'Old Russian Melody' on the Conference song-sheet.

With best wishes,
Bruce Nightingale

Thanks for that, Bruce. Yes that was the tune we sang at Leicester, though it seems to have a complicated history. Originally it was a Russian folk tune, inspired by a 17th century Cossack revolutionary of the same name. It also appears in other more mainstream Christian hymn collections, but maybe John Storey specially chose it because of its revolutionary associations. Fascinating. Ken Smith (Letters Editor)

We are really needed

Dear Sir,

The 'horror' expressed by David Williams at the 'vitriolic attacks' by the editor on Israel prompted me to look once more at the offending Mayday Notes (*Sofia* 79), only to find no such thing. The quote, from a leading Israeli newspaper, was no more than an eminently reasonable expression of concern over the appalling military destruction wrought by a country attempting to blank out the effects of its wholly disproportionate action. In a letter which reads more like a piece of tendentious propaganda, Williams makes a factually inaccurate assertion of 'how the war began'. It has now become clear that Olmert, on his visit to Washington, colluded with Bush to find an excuse to crush Hizbollah – regardless of anything 'Yo boy, Blair' might have to say. The US had already been supplying Israel with bunker-busting bombs since at least the previous October so that Bush could keep 'all his options open' for an attack on Iran – part of a wider, unpublished, policy of bombing states 'back to the Stone Age'. A safe pair of hands?

Apart from this, what the letter of David Williams really shows is the need for a movement like the Sea of Faith, in particular the challenge made both by the

editor and Don Cupitt to 'come back into this world'. The events in Lebanon showed just how difficult it is to discover 'the country of Humanity', given the human capacity not only for paranoia and violence but also fantasy.

Our fantasies make it difficult to see reality; to see 'Them' as anything like 'Us'. This was expressed with admirable clarity by the distinguished Israeli novelist, Amos Oz: 'When the Arabs look at us they see... 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...'

What we see in the Middle East are two 'victims' locked in an asymmetric grievance, fuelled by the most outrageous religious fantasies and fanaticism: the devout Jew stands by his tank reading his Torah whilst shelling villagers of whom he knows nothing but contempt and the dedicated Muslim emblazons his rockets with Koranic texts to shell settlers for whom he has only hatred. Religious allegiance reinforces the denial of common humanity and ensures its practitioners live in parallel worlds. Jews from Brooklyn and Barnet go to Israel to live out their fantasies whilst monomaniacal Muslims from Birmingham and Finsbury follow in an eschatological jihad to Tel Aviv (so much for the myth of multiculturalism); what begins as the 'legal fiction' of an eruv in a London suburb (*pace* Anthony Rudolf's letter) ends with a twenty foot high concrete wall in the West Bank with Palestinians just wanting their homes and olive groves back.

What the War in Lebanon clearly showed was that in the face of religious conviction and political ruthlessness, the concept of humanity is utterly hollow. Over millennia we have changed not one iota. What we witnessed in Lebanon was the same primeval savagery that prompted Alexander to sack Tyre and Agamemnon to burn Troy. The same killer primate still stalks the land. Nothing has changed except the technological sophistication of the savagery. After Lebanon we see convincingly how belief and moral discourse simply serve to excuse the inexcusable. Yet the fiction of faith lives on. And so does reality – against theological niceties the one remaining truth: '*homo homini lupus.*' Now think again about that challenge to 'learn to love life and live well.'

Dominic Kirkham
94 Clarendon Road,
Manchester M34 5SE

Message to Berlin: Bush and War

Dear Editor.

I'd be interested to reprint the article you translated by Ernesto Cardenal (from the November edition of your magazine) in our newsletter. Is that okay with you, and should I seek also the permission of the author?

Best wishes,
Greg Spearritt
(Sea of Faith in Australia)
sof@a1.com.au

We said yes, of course and the article has now been reprinted in the Australian SoFiA December Bulletin. with an acknowledgement to its previous publication in our Sofia. Letters Editor.

Dear Editor

No doubt Ernesto Cardenal intended his message to PEN ('Bush is the new Hitler', *Sofia* 80) to bolster up those of us who oppose Bush's policies. Unfortunately, overstating your case often has the opposite effect, and ends up discrediting the very position you wanted to support. I've seen those lists of how many times the US has invaded other countries, or how many countries they have invaded; they pump up the numbers by counting military patrols in US territories that were not yet states, removal of US citizens during local civil wars, provision of food aid, joint international peacekeeping, and even the Berlin airlift. They are so obviously tendentious that they do more harm than good.

Similarly, putting Bush on a par with Stalin's Gulags or the Nazi Gestapo shows either ignorance of, or disregard for the nature and scale of the crimes committed under those two regimes. There is ample cause for warning Americans that Bush has started down the road that Hitler travelled; to suggest that he has already travelled as far as Hitler is simply hysterical.

When Bush came up with his 'axis of evil' phrase, we scoffed at him for resorting to demonisation and cutting off rational argument. It doesn't help for Cardenal to do the same. There has to be a way for us to express our outrage against Bush without stooping to Bush's rhetorical level. *Sofia* is meant to be about seeking wisdom; unfortunately, this piece is more rhetoric than reason.

Patti Whaley and Rob Wheeler
40 Tanners Street
Faversham, Kent

Silent in Church

Dear Editor

I could not agree more with Paul Overend's concern for silent space in Church. Even as someone perhaps ever in Simone Weil's limbo of 'hesitation,' I have found participating for an hour every week, after Vespers, in a totally silent group meditating in a semicircle upon the iconic puzzle of the Blessed Sacrament an entirely invigorating experience. Perhaps a perpendicular Gothic Rosary Chapel is ideal for such an experience except to say the growing sense of group power and liberation that builds from, and within the group over an hour always feels unique. Perhaps the C of E could institute a similar silent meditation ritual, for me ever a 'learning experience.' One contemplates the self, en route. Is one good enough?

Yours sincerely
Christopher Truman
39 Marsden St
London NW53HE
TRUMAN433@aol.com

Youthwise

Dear Editor,

I doubt that the SoF's reductionist 'religionless Christianity' and Christian Humanism will ever appeal to young people in their teens, 20s and 30s. The Christian label just doesn't mean anything to that age group if they don't believe in Original Sin and the Redemption through Jesus Christ.

There are many more positive religious movements for spiritually inclined young people. They range from full blown Evangelical Christianity through Buddhism and Hinduism to the Nature-worshipping pantheism of neo-Pagan movements like Asatru, Druid orders and Wicca. Those who need a guru will prefer the warm mysticism of Sai Baba or other Hindu sages to the cerebral Don Cupitt, but neo-Pagans trust only their own direct emotional experiences of the divine immanent in so many facets of life.

Frederic Lamond,
Moosweg 3,
A9241 Wernberg,
Austria



Anthony Freeman reviews

The Old Creed and the New

by Don Cupitt

SCM Press (London). 2006. 150 pages. £18.99. ISBN 0334040531.

This is vintage Cupitt. All the familiar themes are here from his earlier classic books: the Truth is not 'out there'; we create and redeem our own world; human life is 'outsideless'. And right at the centre are the two great ultimates: God and death. Never mind the death OF God, now we are to treat death AS God.

This conclusion follows from the themes already stated. Life 'after' death is excluded by the outsideless nature of life: 'We cannot meaningfully claim that a new post-mortem life will begin *after* we die, because we have no timescale to which that 'after' relates' (p. 59). And since there is no fully-objective Truth of things, it is up to us what is true about God, about life, about death: 'We can go into death kicking and screaming, or we can experience death as blissout. It is rational to prefer blissout' (p. 103).

But I'm getting ahead of myself. In this book, as its title suggests, Cupitt contrasts his new radical faith with the 'old creed', whose orthodoxy he has abandoned. The New Creed sets out in five numbered articles a statement 'that will show just where religious thought now is' (see box):

The New Creed (N)

- N1 True religion is your own voice, if you can but find it.
- N2 True religion is, in every sense, to own one's own life.
- N3 True religion is pure solar affirmation of life, in full acknowledgement of its utter gratuitousness, its contingency, its transience, and even its nothingness.
- N4 True religion is productive value-realising action in the public world.
- N5 Faith is not a matter of holding on to anything; faith is simply a letting-go. It laughs at anxiety; it floats free.

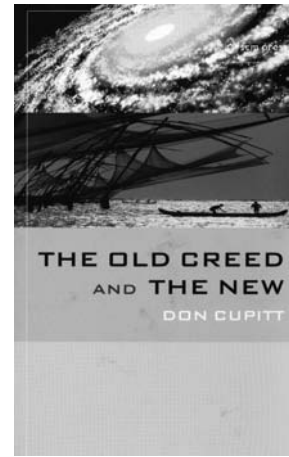
When N, which deliberately avoids any of the distinctively Christian vocabulary, is alongside the old Apostles' Creed (O), then, says Cupitt, 'they invite the immediate plain-man's snort of incredulity. How on earth did we get from O to N?' (p. 5). The book is a sustained answer to that question.

What makes the volume a page-turner is the unresolved tension between the author's desire for free-floating 'solar' living and the obstinate fact of his still being rooted in the Church of England. One minute he assures us that he no longer needs (as in the 1980s) to have his radical views legitimised by the Church, because he no longer holds or desires a bishop's permission to officiate. Indeed, he has deliberately stopped calling himself a Christian, in order to be free from the requirement 'to prove my own entitlement to carry a particular brand'. That seems pretty cut and dried.

Yet in the next breath he is saying, 'I now say only that I 'practise Christianity', a phrase that seems to be unobjectionable' (p. 12). What on earth does that mean? Unobjectionable to whom? I can hear Richard Dawkins objecting a great deal! Anyway, is not the fine distinction between 'being a Christian' and 'practising Christianity' a piece of nonsensical philosophical hair-splitting? Maybe the

former relates to the old philosophy of substances and things, whereas Don prefers the more fluid language of processes and verbs. Or perhaps the root is theological. Don's formative years were spent at the more Catholic end of the Church of England, and for Catholics to 'be a Christian' means to be baptised; living a 'Christian' life is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for the label. Whatever the origin of Don's distinction, I don't see its convincing most of his readers. What I do see in it is evidence of his unwillingness to disown either his Christian past or his Christian allegiance.

Just as he is ambivalent about his relation to Christianity, so he is when it comes to the New Age and



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religion-as-spirituality movements. Towards the end of the book Cupitt asks himself whether he has unwittingly been constructing a philosophical rationale for eclectic, pick-and-mix, fringe religion: 'You will understand my sudden dismay at the thought' (p. 112, emphasis added). Yes indeed! But will all readers of *Sofia* share this dismay?

The Sea of Faith Network is a broad spectrum of 'godless vicars' at one end and 'tree-huggers' at the other; Don has provided inspiration for both groups and for everyone in between, but he does not willingly identify himself with any of us. In his own words (p. 115): 'I am pursuing something much more radical, namely the coming of a time when the sacred world and the ordinary human life-world simply coincide and we say a wholehearted religious Yes to this mortal life.' Vintage Cupitt – and much to be welcomed.

Anthony Freeman is a priest in the Church of England and a long-standing member of the Sea of Faith Network. He has been editor of the *Journal of Consciousness Studies* since 1994. His books include *God In Us* (2nd ed. Imprint Academic 2001) and *Consciousness: A Guide to the Debates* (ABC-CLIO 2003).

John Challenor reviews

Earthly Powers: Religion and Politics in Europe from the French Revolution to the Great War

by Michael Burleigh

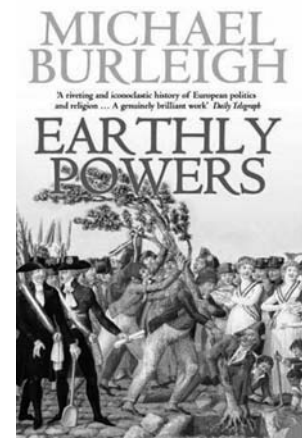
HarperCollins (London). 2005. £20. hbk 530 pages. ISBN: 0007195729

Don Cupitt called his book *The Sea of Faith*, but it is the sub-title – *Christianity in Change* – which gives the clearer picture of the contents. ‘For those caught up in it,’ Don wrote in 1984, ‘a time of religious upheaval is peculiarly hard to understand... we live in such a time.’ Burleigh’s book examines some of this upheaval, and may help us understand our predicament.

Earthly Powers tells the story of the interaction of politics and religion in Europe in the long 19th Century (1789-1914) in a strikingly revisionist way. Most older studies assumed that politics and religion are clearly separate affairs (as the Constitution of the USA formally made them), and that the 19th Century was a time of struggle of left against right, enlightened secular progress against defensive religious tradition. Without directly confronting this, Burleigh undermines much of it with a sustained alternative account, presenting the evidence to show the synergy of politics and religion, and the faith-based nature of the various ostensibly non-religious, civic, secular, ideological, and utopian movements and cults of the time – mostly nationalist and socialist – and their offspring. He also points to the political character of much of Europe’s religion prior to 1789.

Writing in 1856, de Tocqueville observed that the French Revolution ‘seemed to be striving for the regeneration of the human race even more than for the reform of France... it lit a passion... it took on that appearance of a religious revolution that so astonished its contemporaries.. Or rather, it itself became a new kind of religion, an incomplete religion, it is true, without God... but one which, like Islam, flooded the earth with its soldiers, apostles, and martyrs.’ For Burleigh, even the most overtly aggressive anti-religious movement – Bolshevism – had quasi-religious roots in anti-Czarist terrorism, a moral protest against oppression. And when trying to explain how the proletariat could be the saviour class, Marx resorted to the language of Gnosticism!

Burleigh is aware that he is dealing in variables – matters which look different from a changed viewpoint. Nationalism and Socialism both altered the way we imagine God: ‘in changing times, God did not remain the celestial equivalent of a terrestrial absolute monarch’. Burleigh shares common ground with SoF



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here, and he comments, on ‘Dover Beach’, that tides come in as well as go out, perhaps signalling his lack of surprise at the recrudescence of religion now. In general, he writes as a historian, reviewing the evidence. He acknowledges a debt to Maurice Cowling and Edward Norman (usually labelled conservatives), but hints at his own sympathies when he writes that of the faiths he deals with, ‘some, like liberalism are mercifully still with us.’

Is Burleigh’s selection of the evidence fair, and his presentation convincing? Any historian who differs will have a formidable force of academic studies, accessed through footnotes, to contend with. I found the book persuasive. At the least, it raises deeply interesting questions – like, is the separation of politics and religion, state and church, a permanency? It is a fairly recent development, owing a lot to the Peace of Westphalia (1648), which ended a century of cruel and destructive religious wars and normalised the autonomous nation state. As long as we distinguish secular and sacred, we help the convention survive – but readers of Cupitt will have wondered, is nothing sacred – or, is everything sacred? Resurgent Islam rejects the separation. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s secular Turkish state (outside the limits of this work) is strongly contested. And large areas of human life – culture, marriage, education, etc – have always belonged to both politics and religion.

This book ‘leaves encoded’ its messages for the present, but messages there are. If you are puzzled by continuing genocides in a humanitarian world, the political clout of the Religious Right in the USA, the ban on the hijab in French schools, and such problems, there is illumination here.

John Challenor is a member of SoF and former Editor of *Renew* (Catholics for a Changing Church).

Burleigh’s further work covering the 20th Century, *Sacred Causes: Religion and Politics from the European Dictators to Al Qaeda* was published by Harper Press in 2006.

Anthea Boulton reviews

Laughter Class and Other Stories

by Wendy Perriam

Robert Hale (London). 2006. £18.99. ISBN 0709081073

'One of the finest and funniest writers to emerge in England since Kingsley Amis' (*Herald Tribune*). 'One of the most interesting unsung novelists of her generation. She is gifted with devastating powers of observation' (*Sunday Telegraph*). 'She gets to the heart of the matter, and there, lurking below the seriously mundane, we discover the spiritual underpinnings of the universe' (Fay Weldon). How many people realise that these words refer to the work of a fellow SoF member, Wendy Perriam?

Wendy's latest book, *Laughter Class and Other Stories*, fully deserves the kind of critical praise just quoted. As usual, it contains some trademark elements of sex, religion and humour. Above all, though, it seems to me these stories are a heartfelt plea for love, and a warning of the damage and despair that can result from the lack of it.

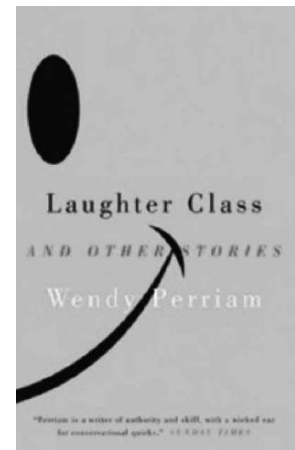
Many of Wendy Perriam's characters have suffered emotional damage caused by the people closest to them, often the parents. We watch with growing horror as neglect or its opposite, smothering control, corrode the characters' lives, destroying happiness and feelings of self worth. A daughter dismisses herself as 'superfluous' after her mother leaves her father to live with another man. A grown son chokes on his food as he remembers the lash of his father's belt. In 'Grapes of Wrath' we read of Eileen: 'Deprived of mother's milk, she had been forced to feed on the world, biting into its tough volcanic crust, gagging on rocks and soil'.

The use of food to mirror states of mind is typical Perriam. Whether as a substitute for love or a means of control, food spills lavishly through these pages, with all its smells, good and bad, its textures and flavours. Food nurtures, woos, reconciles, repels. A character's relationship with food tells us nearly all we need to know. For Laura, a failed dieter, the whole cheeses, French pastries, cartons of ice cream and Butter Crinkle are her children, 'her new friends ready to comfort and sustain her'. For Laura, the need to offer sustenance extends, comically and tragically, to her moving into a garden shed where she is free to continue to feed the tribes of mice she insists on caring for.

Freedom, from control, inhibition, social conventions and norms, is another of Wendy Perriam's concerns. So what if the 'caring' daughter wants her mother safely tucked into her soulless, sheltered accommodation? Mum makes a run for it, hitching a lift to Inverness as she's always dreamed of doing. Though she bears the same name, Rosemary isn't Kenneth's (only) ex-girl friend, she's a dog, but to Kenneth she's a passport to freedom, away from the safe, hated job and the parents who allow no pets, and no music but hymns.

Which brings us to religion. SoFers who know Wendy Perriam's work will be asking where religion fits into this current collection. The answer is, the references are subtle and multi-faceted. When associated with repressive backgrounds, religion here can be guilt-inducing and inhibiting. But in 'Matthew, Mark, Luke and' the saints are the only comfort left to the elderly arthritic woman dying alone in her room: 'Imaginary was an ambiguous word. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John seemed actually more substantial than the few flesh-and-blood people still remaining in her life... Dawn would never break for her, morning never come. But her Guardians had returned... stepping forward to claim her soul, escort it through the long eternal night'. Who could quarrel with such a picture?

You will have gathered by now that Wendy Perriam doesn't do moderation. Her characters are driven by desperate needs, which demand resolution. In some cases this involves healing and reconciliation, in others the neurosis can only be soothed through the power of fantasy. When their situation is too harsh to bear, losers can invent other, better realities for themselves in which they are successful, attractive, loved. As these stories show, the results may be uncomfortable for the rest of us. But then, who is to judge what reality ought to be?



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Ken Smith reviews

Chola Sacred Bronzes of Southern India at the Royal Academy, Piccadilly, London

In my own pretty puritan religious upbringing, the Ten Commandments with their bans and taboos, reinforced with threats of judgement held me in thrall (albeit reluctantly) to imageless monotheism for decades. Now I reckon the invasion of Canaan by the Israelites with its Yahweh/Law Covenant-driven command to destroy the blasphemous religions they found there was a tragedy of colossal proportions.

But for lovers of India and especially of Hinduism, the image on this page is typically iconic. If I sleep on my left side, it is my first visual experience each morning. Shiva Nataraj sitting on my bedside table, is the Lord of the Dance; that dance being the dance of creation/destruction and back into creation again. For the devout it resonates with the sacred syllable OM (or more precisely AUM) which not only holds it and everything else in being, it is it.

Roberto Calasso, the author of 'Ka' a modern retelling of Hindu mythology, tells of that same Shiva and his *shakti* (the feminine source of his strength) Parvati locked in unending sexual congress. Monotheism to its endless shame, to mankind's enduring spiritual poverty and our continuing misuse of the earth, has found and continues to find such imagery difficult.

More mundanely as you come up the escalator at Piccadilly Circus London Underground Station, going west up Piccadilly keeping on the right hand side, you are likely to fall into step with cultured people going to the Royal Academy. Most of them will currently be going to the Auguste Rodin Exhibition, though the more perceptive or attentive will go upstairs too, when they discover Rodin's debt to and appreciation of Indian sacred sculpture.

This exhibition of approximately forty bronze sculptures explores the artistic and cultural riches of the Chola dynasty of southern India between the ninth and thirteenth centuries of our era. Throughout their rule the Cholas were great patrons of the arts and oversaw an extensive programme of temple construction. Portable bronze sculptures, revered as physical manifestations of the Hindu gods, were produced to fulfill public functions and preside over specific festivities. Chola bronzes are widely considered to be among the finest works of Indian sculptural art.

Inside every male philosopher/theologian there is probably a grubby schoolboy trying to get out. When

that philosopher/theologian comes from a western perspective, he probably also enjoys eastern art because much of it is supremely erotic. Whether it's true also of female theologians/philosophers I have no idea, but...

What is certainly true is that the repression of fertility cults, by, for example the ancient Israelites in their assumed 'Promised Land' – indeed the whole mess of sexual repression, the aftermath of which the modern world is only just and maybe too late, coming to terms with, rooted in as it is, and to a certain extent, perpetuated by the three monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam – has created a slant on the way the world ought to be, that makes it hard for many people to escape from.

On the other hand Hinduism, with its awareness and acceptance of the raw earthiness of all life, sees no difficulty. In Southern India, portable icons of the gods came into existence for a very particular purpose – to allow the parading of the deity away from the temple sanctuary for both the god's pleasure and the spiritual benefit of devotees. In a practice that continues to the present day, the god or goddess ventures forth both to see and to be seen – *darshan*.



The production of such cast metal icons was related to a wave of devotional Hinduism that swept across southern India from the 6th to the 10th centuries CE. They provided a visual focus for the writings of Hindu poet saints, creators of the 'bhakti tradition' who in large measure were responsible for the democratizing of worship. The technique was essentially simple. Wax resin sculpture was encased in layers of clay; the clay was then heated and the molten wax drained off to be replaced with bronze. The result is stunning; 40 of them in this exhibition – some minute – others awesomely larger than life.

We all know that what the world looks like depends entirely on where you are sitting at the time and who it is that is looking. The wisest of us get off our backsides and move somewhere else to see how things change. Well a trip to this exhibition in Piccadilly, London up till the 26th February might well be that somewhere else.

Ken Smith is Letters Editor, Editor of *Portholes* and a SoF trustee.

Open Liturgy 2

William Imray (Brown) reports on further developments to his Open Liturgy.

In the edition of May 2005 our editor kindly reported on my attempts to put together both words and music of something I called an Open Liturgy, – a celebration, that is, for all people of good will, but specially for those who hold no firm religious conviction. I am greatly indebted to all who got in touch with me since for their comments and queries and for telling me of the use they made of various bits and pieces of the material I sent them. Most of all I owe a debt of deep gratitude to Don and Margaret Feist of Dunedin, New Zealand for the invaluable feedback they provided from their try-out of the complete text. From this and from the numerous reactions communicated to me from elsewhere, I feel I must attempt to remedy what I now see as three chief flaws:

1. The original centred on Jesus of Nazareth. This gave the impression that what was being offered was merely a sanitised version of Christianity – definitely not what was on offer.
2. Similarly, the use of Bread and Wine gave the wrong impression. Completely different elements would be needed if the assumptions – or perhaps their comparative absence – within such a ritual were to be properly represented.
3. The style of speech was in places lengthy, verbose and complex. It seemed also in places over-obsessed with definition. Something more curt and arresting would better serve, something more suggestive than precise. Above all space should be allowed for actions and music – to speak louder than words.

Using the apple as an element I aimed quite openly to turn Genesis III on its head.

As to (1), I think I probably ought now to attempt a basic Liturgy having no particular theme over and above those embodied in the three main parts – Preparing, Offering, Receiving – and centring on the need for Openness of Mind, Hand and Heart. Should particular people fall to be celebrated, these should be simply such as can be plainly perceived to have fostered the growth of Compassion and Understanding. Of those there are many, both men and women, from all ages, cultures and walks of life. Let us say I merely began with a 1st century Jewish man, a gifted preacher and healer, who was tortured and killed for his pains. I have already prepared the material for the celebration of other clearly different individuals, who, I would claim, offer no inferior contribution to our betterment. (I am here of course separating Jesus of Nazareth from the archetypal figure which others have erected on his bare

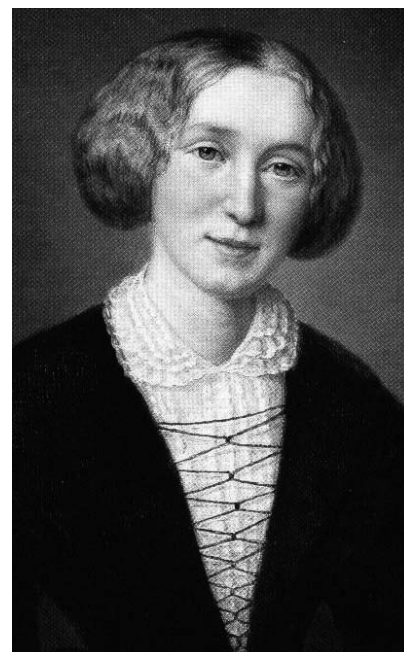
biography.) To be more precise, let me say who those are for whom celebrations are already produced, as well as others who, I feel, may prove worthy of similar attention.

First, as in some ways a complete contrast, comes a lady of the present day, by education a Buddhist of the Theravada persuasion, a political activist, writing and campaigning for the human rights of the oppressed and exploited people of Myanmar (Burma). This is Aung San Suu Kyi. Deeply spiritual, a fearless advocate of compromise and compassion, she has risked death for her cause. Now over 60, she is for the third time under close house arrest.

Second comes another lady, a 19th century Englishwoman. Confirmed in the Established Church of her day in the Midlands countryside, she became in her teens a stout Evangelical, then in her twenties a thoroughgoing Unbeliever and translator of two key works of Biblical Criticism: Strauss's *Life of Jesus* and Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity*. In her thirties she was contributing editor of an important free-thinking monthly, and in her forties and fifties a best-selling novelist. Through her novels, works ruthless in critical perception and rich in human understanding, she gradually perfected the means to express profound ethical intuitions in language which owed nothing to religious presupposition. For many years she cohabited with a married man, being labelled in her day 'heathen and outlaw'. This was Marian Evans (alias George Eliot).

Next comes a gentleman of the 5th century BCE. He was a physician on the tiny Aegean island of Cos, which he was to make for all times famous as a centre for both the scientific study of Medicine and the establishment of Medical Ethics. To him and his School of Medicine we owe the high standards of expertise and patient care which we now demand of our own Health Service. This was Hippocrates. Those entering medical professions the world over still subscribe to a form of undertaking first sworn to on the island of Cos two-and-a-half millennia since and styled after him the Hippocratic Oath. In his legacy we find combined both Care and Understanding – that Understanding of the scientific variety, which we neglect at our peril.

Actively pursued as likely candidates for celebration are, first a 20th century writer on matters



George Eliot



Aung San Suu Kyi

psychological, a sane and readable exponent of the latest insights which are available to us in our quest for self-understanding. This is Anthony Storr. Then there is a less heard-of lady, a painter from 17th century Rome, whose mould-breaking depiction of women as they are, neither moral ideal nor man-destroyer, but victims of patriarchal dominance, laid certain of the foundations for liberating reform. This was the

artist Orazio Gentileschi's daughter and pupil, Artemisia. Meanwhile kept in mind are the Sikh Guru Arjan, the Sufi Prophetess Rabi'a and the Stoic Philosopher Zeno, all three in their time and clime proponents of the entire Brotherhood of Man.

As to (2) – elements replacing Bread and Wine – in a celebration meeting agnostic needs, I now feel that two attitudes must be above all catered for. The first is the acceptance whole and entire of our mortal condition. This entails full acknowledgement of death and sexuality – something which requires to be heavily stressed in cultures dominated by those brands of Christianity which passionately reject the one and pathetically resist the other. In an effort to meet this particular need I devised a Sacrament of Fruits, using the apple as element. In this way I aimed quite openly to turn Genesis III on its head.

The second feature of our mortal condition which must, I feel, be stressed is our partial nature as individuals – the extent, that is, to which we must patiently await the intervention of influences beyond our conscious control if we are to make any headway whatsoever in the direction in which an ethical dedication points us. It was already a feature of the original Liturgy; but now I think I would tend to make the point through a parallel Sacrament, which I would call the Sacrament of Oils. This incorporates features, of course, from Christian practice, oils being mingled for use in unction. But anointing has a longer and richer history. In each one of its known occurrences however it symbolises a benefit which recipients are in no position to confer upon themselves; and in many instances it is administered at points in their lives where a particular dedication is called for.

Texts of both Sacraments are available, which I must allow to speak for themselves. Anthems are also suggested, for which music is available. as well as a through-composed version of the complete ritual, with parts of the Anthems employed to accompany each phase of the performance.

Those interested should contact: William Imray (Brown), The Coach House, Huntly Place, ABOYNE AB34 5HD, Aberdeenshire
Tel : 013398 87100
Email: biro33@aol.com
Skype available (please phone first)

Eurydice

'How have they got us at last?
What madness has lost us?
Oh, I am low, Orpheus.
I must go. Now twice
they have forced me to leave you.
My eyes are swimming
and slowing my consciousness.
Goodbye. I am taken away
wrapped in enormous night
reaching out hands
that I wanted to give you.'
She did not say another word
but disappeared like smoke dissolving
into air which is bodiless.
She did not see him clutching
at shadows, with nothing spoken.
The gaoler did not let him
cross the marsh again.
What could he do?
For the second time his wife was gone.
Could he weep or sing to alter
the will of god or fate?
Now on the Stygian river,
she shivered in the boat.

Virgil

Orpheus

When he played his lyre
to the shades
it was his first awareness
of the everlasting praise.
When he had eaten poppies
with the dead
his ear was new attuned
to every smallest sound.

Understand:
though an image in a pool
confuses,
voices
are mild and immortal
when they rebound.

Rainer Maria Rilke

'Eurydice' is from Virgil's *Fourth Georgic*. 'Orpheus' is one in Rainer Maria Rilke's sequence of *Orpheus Sonnets*. Translations are by the Editor.

Crossing the Styx

Cicely Herbert visits a Primary Schools Project by the English Touring Opera and the Wonderful Beast Theatre Company

As a relative newcomer to SoF, I was moved and excited by Don Cupitt's talk, reported in the November 2006 issue of *Sofia*, in which he concludes that 'we should give up grandiose cosmologies' and 'come back to this world, to the present moment, to ordinary language and everyday life.' (It's what I've always believed!) However, there is much about life that is frightening and inexplicable for children and young people, as indeed it is for all of us, and we will always need art, stories and myths to help us understand the powerful emotions that drive the human race.

In England today, we are passing through a time when Government measures seem to have put a constraint on teachers who must, perforce, follow curriculum guidelines and teach only those subject areas deemed necessary to reach targets and achieve statistics. This leaves little time for the exploration of subjects such as poetry, music, art, theatre, and, to a lesser extent sport, all of which are, I believe, essential for the healthy development of any child, and which appear to have been sidelined in favour of other, more pressing matters.

If this is a rather gloomy assessment of the current situation, then it's all the more heartening to discover that there are several interesting and imaginative projects underway, run, in the main by large state-funded Arts Institutions such as the Royal Opera House, the National Theatre and some of the major Symphony Orchestras, all of whom now regularly work with children. But it's perhaps in the smaller, more flexible arts organisations that some of the most exciting educational projects are taking place around the country.

The English Touring Opera has established a truly excellent 'offshoot' company, which sends a musician into schools and community centres, in those towns where the opera company is playing, so that the children are alert, well-prepared, and excited by the prospect of a music/theatre group visiting their school. This autumn, a new, specially written 'opera', based on the myth of Orpheus, has been taken into 30 primary schools across the country.

I recently attended a workshop performance of *Crossing the Styx* at Childs Hill Primary School in north London. This is a lively, racially mixed school, bright and cheerful: a model of its kind. Proper groundwork had clearly been done before the company's visit. A member of the Wonderful Beast Theatre Company, who collaborated with the ETO on this project, had visited the school over a period of one and a half days,

and worked with the children, teaching them the songs they were to sing. At least one of these, a wedding song, was from *Orfeo*, Monteverdi's version of the legend. The second part of the performance had music specially composed by Rachel Leach and the company of six were required to move from piano playing to singing, from mime to trombone or sackbut and back, all of which they did, with apparent ease and considerable skill.

Throughout the performance that I saw, the children were utterly absorbed. They listened quietly, responded intelligently and when required to, sang with thrilling commitment. The teachers had been given education packs, which included a cartoon strip of the story: a clever idea which meant that, by the time the performers arrived, the children were already familiar with the legend. The props and costumes were simple and effective. In addition to this, a versatile and engaging storyteller acted as a link, appearing throughout the show in various guises, sometimes as a Pied Piper-like figure, then as a strange creature, half human, half from the underworld.

The young volunteers from the audience chosen to play two of Cerberus's three heads were utterly compelling in their portrayal of this scary creature. Yet another dimension was added through the skilful manipulation of shadow puppets. Later, when Orpheus turned around to look at Eurydice, too soon, before they had reached earth again, and he lost her forever as she faded back into the Underworld, one child had to be comforted by a teacher. But soon, she, like her classmates, was eagerly raising her hand during the time set aside for questions afterwards. Among the many questions put to the performers was, 'What happened next?' – surely a measure of the success of the venture. I believe that those children lucky enough to have taken part in such an imaginative educational project will have been profoundly enriched in ways that will stay them all through their life, here, on Earth.



This autumn *Crossing The Styx* visited 30 primary schools in Sheffield, Doncaster, Buxton, Lincoln, London, Cambridge, Snape, Malvern and Ulverston.

Cicely Herbert is one of the trio who founded and continue to run *Poems on the Underground*. Her poetry collection *In Hospital*, together with the Victorian poet W. E. Henley, was published by Katabasis in 1992.

A PROPHECY

The deep of winter came,
What time the secret child
Descended through the orient gates of the eternal day:
War ceased and all the troops like shadows fled to their abodes.

William Blake



The house without a window is hell;
to make a window is the essence of true religion.

Rumi

They shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks:
Nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.

Isaiah