sfia

No. 82 March 2007

Up to Us

down to Earth

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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The Resurrection' by Matthias Grünewald, Isenheim Altarpiece (1510-15)

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Detail from Banner created by women of BIASAN (Bradford Immigration and Asylum Support and Advice Network). Each woman used her own handprint. Photo: Cicely Herbert.

sofia **is the magazine of the Sea of Faith Network (UK)**

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

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

sofia in rejecting the supernatural, is for humanity with its questing imagination and enabling dreams.

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

Up to Us

editorial

Sofia 81, called 'Down to Us', noted that this phrase and its apparent opposite 'Up to Us', are both used to mean it's our responsibility. Appearing near Easter time, this issue 82 is called 'Up to Us'.

It opens with an article by Anthony Freeman , 'Open up to God'. Freeman suggests that just as consciousness is an 'emergent property' of the brain, so 'God' is an emergent property of human consciousness. In other words, we create and to some extent become 'God' as our consciousness expands. He takes the Christ of traditional Christology as his paradigm and suggests 'just as the mind or soul is not an added ingredient to the human body, but an integral and emergent feature of it, so Christ's divinity is not an added ingredient to his human person, but an integral emergent feature of it.' He goes on to say that we too can share this development. Of course ordinary human beings can never attain infinite knowledge but throughout our lives we can go on becoming more conscious. God, Freeman suggests, *is* this quest: 'God is altogether best understood as a high-level emergent property.'

One of the ways in which we can explore religion as a human creation is to consider what classic theological talk about God is saying about ourselves. In his autobiography (which will be reviewed in a future issue), the New Zealand theologian Lloyd Geering speaks of a 'secular trinity: the self-creating universe, the culture-creating human species and an emerging global consciousness.' I noticed that both numbers 2 and 3 in this trinity are about *knowing.* Number 3 as 'an emerging global consciousness' reminded me of the Spirit whom Jesus promises to send in John 16:13, who will 'lead you into all truth'. So this was a distinctly 'Johannine' trinity. rather than an 'Augustinian' one. In Augustine's version, the second person , the Son, is the *Word,* God's self-knowledge; and the third person, the Spirit, is *Love,* the Father and Son's 'mutual love', which overflows so that God also 'so loved the world'.

Both these classic theological models of the Trinity are very suggestive when we are thinking about human potential. As well as possibly becoming more conscious and knowing more, human beings also love/hate and *do* things. We could also consider God as 'emerging' (or not) in what we love and do. We can build, weave, knit, gestate other things besides ideas (in fact, when we use those terms about thinking they are *metaphors* from the material world). Interestingly, the God in the Old Testament is jealous and does *not* want humans to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and does *not* want them to build a Tower or Ziggurat (like Babel) up to heaven. That invites hubris and 'pride comes before a Fall'.

In the second article Tom Rubens, a stalwart of the Ethical Society, writes about Russell and Santayana at the threshold of the twentieth century. He notes how religious the vision of those two old atheists was, and discusses Russell's work *A Free Man's Worship* (1903) and Santayana's *A Religion of Disillusion* (1900). Both of them were also very much of their time in regarding 'man' not as part of nature but as fighting a constant heroic battle against it, to 'rise above' it.

Thirdly we have the lecture Don Cupitt gave last September to SoF in Australia: *God: Creator or Created?*, which discusses further what could be considered SoF's major insight: 'The historical truth is that we created God.' God is a fiction; he is not real. Cupitt goes on to say that 'in the classic scheme of thought the objective reality, the order and motion of things in the created world depended entirely upon the objective reality and the power of God. If there is no real God out there… there is no real world out there either. Nor indeed are we ourselves real.' In his article Freeman disagrees about the non-reality of the world: 'Even if (*pace* Don Cupitt) we allow that the physical universe is a fact, it still does not immediately follow that God is also a fact.' He says that the classic argument that because the world exists, God must exist as its cause, is false. This criticism of that classic argument can also be reversed: 'to say the objective reality of the world depends on the objective reality of God is false'. Why should we think about the world in terms of a God who doesn't exist?

In his letter to Number 66 of this magazine (July 2004) Don Cupitt pointed out that 'non-realism is a *philosophical* doctrine.' In this new lecture he distances

himself from the argument that the world and we are 'non-real' because God is 'non-real', by setting it within the framework of 'the classic scheme of thought', which he says has now been superseded.

He is illuminating on how we 'form the chaos of experience into a manageable world' through language – what Coleridge, in his poem *Letter to Sara Hutchinson,* called our 'shaping spirit of imagination'. Then Don Cupitt notes that 'in the words of the English Romantic poets, our world is partly perceived and partly imagined by us.' (In *Tintern Abbey* Wordsworth speaks of what we *half* create and *half* perceive.) I wondered if there was a shift taking place in Don's thinking towards this *half and half.*

Coleridge seems to be right that nature gives us our 'shaping spirit of imagination' at birth. One of the most astonishing things about watching a two-year-old learn to talk is that metaphor, symbol and 'let's pretend' (as well as joking) seem to come naturally as soon as the words are acquired. The child will go into a corner and say: 'I'm a pony in a barn,' and neigh. Or: 'I'm a naughty goblin,' and run off with a biscuit. Or: 'I'm an astronaut and this is my rocket,' (a stick). Or the child can wave a magic wand and tell his grandfather: 'You're a cat.' Grandfather is expected to miaow. The child is aware that it's a game of 'pretend' and chooses when to wave the wand again and turn Grandfather back into himself. The child may throw a teddy onto the floor. His mother says, 'Teddy's hurt,' and makes teddy sob. Immediately, the child can pat it and say, 'Teddy's better now.' But if his mother, whom he loves with the tremendous passion of his two-year-old heart, comes home with a new baby who might supplant him and he throws the baby on the floor, he has to learn that that might really hurt the baby, and it might not be possible to say immediately: 'Baby's better now.' He has to learn that he can put his hand into a picture of a fire in a book and pretend to be burnt, but if he puts his hand into a real fire, he will really be burnt.

Imagination is our birthright, but so is acquiring the ability to distinguish between the imaginary and the real, to negotiate our daily lives and not do real damage to ourselves or others. I think it is vital to acknowledge this *half and halfness,* respect *both* imagination *and* the dignity and reality of matter, life and death, and manual labour that, together with love, is builder of cities. It's up to us.

Space was very tight in this packed issue, so we have had to hold over some poems until May.

A Compression of Distances

The roof bosses of Winchester Cathedral on our 20th wedding anniversary

We could, I said, hold
one in our hands: trace
how the stone leaves
are entwined like held

hands. And then, you said,
see how the boss holds
the roofs ribs of stone, how the lines
gather speed.

Like the early universe, I said,
moving faster and faster
towards light years.
The geometry of space

and the curving of galaxies.
Then think about our space,
you said, and the curve of our bodies
together. Suddenly

our anthem, Mozart's *Ave verum,*
rose through the stone spaces
compressing time
and distance. Intersections

of stone and time held us.
Think of the word games we've shared,
all the stories you've told me, the rich ways
of our life... Look how each knot

of stone is an ease and complexity of leaves.

Daphne Gloag

Daphne Gloag read classics and philosophy at Oxford but worked mostly in medical editing and journalism. Her poems have been published in magazines and anthologies and she is a member of Second Light Network of Older Women Poets. Her poem 'A Compression of Distances' is reprinted with permission from *Images of Women*, edited by Myra Schneider and Dilys Wood (Arrowhead Press, Darlington in association with Second Light), 2006.

Open up to God

Anthony Freeman suggests that just as consciousness is an 'emergent property' of the brain, so 'God' is an emergent property of human consciousness.

Introduction

In a recent article for this magazine ('Bless my soul', July 2005) I commended the idea – espoused by a number of contemporary philosophers-of-mind such as John Searle – that consciousness is an emergent feature of the brain. This doctrine of emergence stands midway between two other well-established approaches to the mind-body relationship. These are (1) dualism, long associated with Descartes, which says that mind and body are two quite different kinds of substance, and (2) reductionism, favoured by many scientists, which treats mental states as identical with brain states, or at least explicable in terms of brain function alone.

Emergence combines elements of both these positions, saying that (a) consciousness does have its origins in the brain, but also that (b) the mind is not simply the same thing as the brain. On this account, having 'emerged' from the physical body, the conscious mind exhibits new features over and above the sum of its parts, but does so without any added ingredients from outside. Thus it takes on an existence of its own, and has a legitimate place in the external world of bodies and events (something reductionism denies), but cannot altogether be divorced from its physical basis in the brain (something dualism denies).

In my earlier article I developed this approach to suggest that just as Christ's human mind arose from the complex physiology of his body, especially his brain and nervous system, so his divinity arose from the complex system which was his total humanity. In other words, just as the mind or soul is not an added ingredient to the human body, but an integral and emergent feature of it, so Christ's divinity is not an added ingredient to his human person, but an integral emergent feature of it.

I now want to take this development beyond Christ's divinity, and explore the possibility that God is altogether best understood as a high-level emergent property. Just as the human mind is 'caused by and realised in' (to use Searle's expression) the brain, so God results from and is expressed in the physical-and-mental-totality of human beings.

Background Voices

To give my ideas some theological background, consider first a scholar of the last generation who understood the need to think about God in the context of human nature. The Catholic theologian Karl Rahner took as his starting point the conviction that *openness* is the fundamental human characteristic. 'Man is spirit,' he wrote, 'that is, he lives his life in a perpetual reaching out to the Absolute, in openness to God.' Although his language now sounds old fashioned, Rahner made a crucial move away from treating humanity and divinity as two quite different entities. His concern was to understand the co-existence of humanity and divinity in the single person, Jesus Christ, and he saw the openness of humanity as sufficiently God-like to make the conjunction possible. As he wrote, somewhat scornfully: 'Only someone who forgets that the essence of man is to be unbounded . . . can suppose that it is impossible for there to be a man, who, precisely by being man in the fullest sense (which we never attain), is God's existence in the world.'

God is altogether best understood as a high-level emergent property.

Divinity is not seen here as something over against humanity, different from it, or incompatible with it. Quite the reverse: for Rahner, to be human 'in the fullest sense' is itself to be 'God's presence in the world'. Here is a theological approach that is much more conducive to the concept of emergence than are most interpretations of the God-Man relationship. Moreover it is taking very seriously the old Biblical doctrine that humankind is in God's image.

Similar views had been published nearly a century and a half earlier by Friedrich Schleiermacher, this time a Protestant scholar, who bears the honorific title 'father of modern theology'. He spoke of a quality – which he claimed must be present potentially in all humans – that he called 'God-consciousness'. Any given person's degree of religious awareness was, in his view, a measure of how far this *potential* for God-consciousness

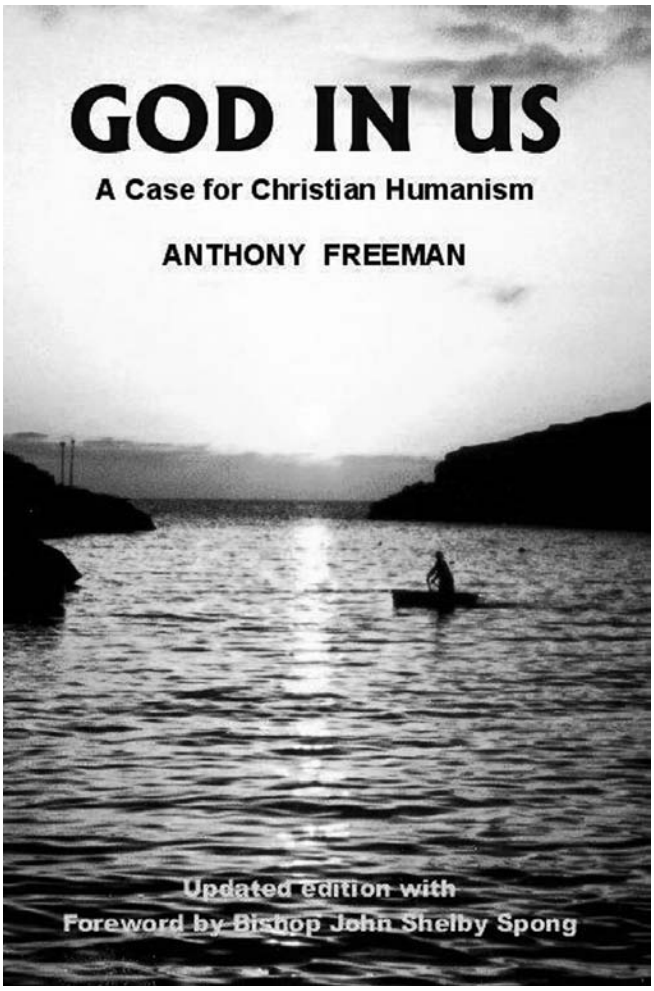
had become *actual;* and this quality Schleiermacher thought Jesus must have possessed to a hitherto unknown extent. Here was a theological key to unlock the door barring the way between humanity and divinity. On the one hand, Christ was the final stage in human evolution, so that Schleiermacher could call him 'the one in whom the creation of human nature, which up to this point had existed only in a provisional state, was perfected'. But this unique degree of God-consciousness resulted in something more. While remaining beyond any question a state of human *perfection*, its being a state of *human* perfection gave it an altogether new – indeed a divine – dimension. Thus we find Schleiermacher writing: 'The Redeemer is like all men in virtue of the identity of his human nature, and distinguished from all by the constant potency of his God-consciousness, which was a veritable existence of God in him.'

The 'like' in this quotation is more significant than the 'distinguished'. Christ's human nature is like ours *absolutely;* but the constancy of his God-consciousness distinguishes him from us *not absolutely,* but only *by his being the first.* Schleiermacher makes this clear when he writes, 'As certainly as Christ was a man, there must reside in human nature the possibility of taking up the divine into itself, just as did happen in Christ.'

Openness is the fundamental human characteristic

Here is the nub of the matter. As it stands, the reference to the divine in this last quotation is ambiguous. It could be interpreted to mean that the divine is something external that needs 'taking up . . . into' the human (rather as a sponge takes up water). But it may also be construed in an evolutionary way, as meaning that the break-through to 'the veritable existence of God in [Christ]' is a stage – albeit an extraordinary and unique stage – of the natural process of development, with the emergence at key points of new levels of existence. I think this interpretation becomes imperative when we continue with the next sentence so that the quotation reads: 'As certainly as Christ was a man, there must reside in human nature the possibility of taking up the divine into itself, just as did happen in Christ. So the idea that the divine revelation in Christ must be something in this respect supernatural will simply not stand the test.'

Schleiermacher clearly saw no conflict between 'perfect human nature' and 'the taking up of the divine', and there seems to be a good match between emergentist philosophy and Schleiermacher's theology. This is an encouragement to keep an open mind about the nature of God, and to work towards an understanding of it on the basis of St. John's belief – and Schleiermacher's and Rahner's – that it is by looking at Christ's humanity, and indeed all humanity, that we shall learn what God is like. Can it also open a window on to the origin of God?



God's Story

It has traditionally been assumed that God is a conscious agent who, before anything existed, created the world as a purposive act. God himself therefore has no 'origin'. But this is not the only or even the best way to think about God. The account of creation and redemption, related in the bible and creeds, is a story. And within the story, a central character is God, who certainly thinks, decides and acts, as though he had a conscious mind. But that is the character in the story. It is equally true to say of the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan that they think, talk, act, etc., but their conscious minds and their actions have no existence outside the parables of Jesus in which they feature. Why should God be any different?

An obvious answer to that question is: 'Because the universe is there.' Despite the activities of some dodgy relic-traders in the middle ages, no-one is going to take seriously claims to have the ring given to the Prodigal Son by his father, or the saddle belonging to the Good Samaritan's donkey. These things only exist in stories, they are fictions. But the universe – so the traditional argument goes – is not a fiction; it is real, and so its creator must be real as well. They are not fictions, they are facts.

This answer may be obvious, but there are serious problems with it. First, even if (*pace* Don Cupitt) we allow that the physical universe is a fact, it still does not

immediately follow that God is also a fact. The logical move from 'the universe exists' to 'God exists' relies on an argument, going back at least to Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century, which claims that our contingent world (i.e. a world consisting of cause and effect) can only be explained by some original uncaused (or 'necessary') reality, namely God. This 'cosmological argument' is commonly paired with a related argument, based not on the mere fact of the universe, but on its apparent order and purpose, from which it is deduced that the world must have had a designer, namely God. Such attempts to bridge the gap from the observed world to the mind of God are still popular and can be guaranteed to sell books – especially when produced by reputable scientists such as Paul Davies and John Polkinghorne – but they cannot bear the weight put upon them.

Today the possibility that the universe is just 'there' is not unthinkable, it is exactly what a lot of people do think.

St Thomas' cosmological argument depends upon our rejecting as unthinkable the possibility that the universe is just 'there' as an unexplained fact. But today such a view is not unthinkable, it is exactly what a lot of people do think. The 'argument from design' is also flawed. Despite the recently popular argument for intelligent design, based on the 'fine tuning' of the fundamental laws of nature, many people question whether the universe does in fact exhibit the good order and design which the argument requires. In any case, to shift from observing order in the universe to proposing a conscious designer is to invent a creation 'story' – a fiction – with the creator as its leading character, which brings us back to where we started.

So if the traditional creator is just a character in a story, where is creative activity truly to be found? I am reminded of the traditional 'Irish' joke: 'If I wanted to get *there*, I wouldn't begin *here*!' This joke is funny because we have no choice but to start from 'here' – from where we are – and we all know it. Yet when the journey is an intellectual or religious quest, we are apt to forget this. In particular, when exploring the concept of a creator, we always try to set out from some mythical location 'before time began' or 'beyond the physical universe'. It can't be done. The road to God – no less than the road to Dublin – starts here.

For our present purpose, 'here' means the civilised West at the start of the twenty-first century, with our current experience and best understanding of human nature, of creativity, and of consciousness. I have said that this contemporary understanding includes the notion of emergence to explain the presence of creative human consciousness, including what Schleiermacher called 'God consciousness', defined as 'a veritable existence of God' in the human person.

Anyone wishing to retain a traditional understanding of incarnation can interpret this as meaning a suitably receptive human consciousness becomes the vehicle for the external and eternal God to take up residence within his creation. But Schleiermacher's words can also be taken in a more radical way, opening up the idea that God (the creator God) actually originates in human God-consciousness. On this view, God is no longer the supernatural agent creating the world from outside, but the ultimate emergent outcome of the natural process of evolution.

In a similar way, for a person or a community of people to 'open up to God' would traditionally mean the human person being receptive to the external deity ('Behold, I stand at the door and knock', etc.). Now it can be taken to mean – adapting Rahner's terms now, rather than Schleiermacher's – that when humans are most truly themselves by being totally open to everything, then is God's existence in the world realised in the sense that only then is it originated.

For those of us brought up on the conventional view of things, it is very hard to take seriously the idea that the creator emerges at the end of the creative process rather than pre-existing it in splendid isolation. Very hard, but not impossible – especially if we have taken on board the necessity to start from 'here' in our quest for God, and if we are prepared to join the company of daring but not always popular explorers from the past. Teilhard de Chardin comes to mind, and his concept of God as an evolutionary Omega point seems an appropriate thought with which to end.

Notes on Books

I had written most of the above before coming across the book *The Re-Emergence of Emergence: The Emergentist Hypothesis from Science to Religion*, edited by Philip Clayton and Paul Davies (OUP 2006), which I recommend to anyone interested in this subject. Chapter 13 'Emergence: What is at stake for religious reflection?' by Niels Henrik Gregerson is especially relevant, and will help readers to situate the views expressed in this article on the broader map of scientific and theological emergentism.

Theological quotations in this article are from K. Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 1 (Darton, Longman & Todd 1961) and *Hearers of the Word* (Herder & Herder 1969), and F. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (T & T Clark 1989).

John Searle's ideas are conveniently summarised, along with those of other philosophers, in his book *The Mystery of Consciousness* (Granta Books 1997).

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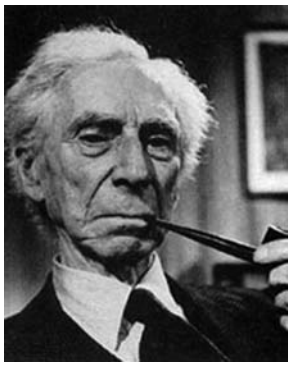
Russell and Santayana:

At the Threshold of the Twentieth Century

Tom Rubens looks at the religious vision of two formidable early twentieth-century atheists.



Bertrand Russell

First of all, let's consider what it meant, for the advanced Western mind, to stand at the threshold of the twentieth century. The nineteenth century had witnessed unparalleled advances in the sciences, and these had inevitably produced profound repercussions in philosophy. They had also massively weakened the ontological claims of Christianity, traditionally the West's major religion. Perhaps the most famous example of this undermining effect was the impact of Darwinism and evolutionary biology; but, on all scientific fronts, the assault on Christian ontology was formidable. Overall, the intellectual changes wrought in the nineteenth century made it the first century in modern Western history whose leading thinkers were predominantly and overtly agnostic or atheistic. Schopenhauer, Marx, Feuerbach, Buchner, von Hartmann, and Nietzsche in Germany; Bentham, Mill, Tyndall, Clifford and Spencer in England; Comte in France: these men, with their radically challenging perspectives, were characteristic of the nineteenth century. Some exerted widespread influence not only in philosophy but also literature. In fact, the general intellectual atmosphere they created has remained characteristic of advanced Western culture; it prevails today, in advanced circles, just as it did, in the same circles, during the twentieth century.

It was this atmosphere that nurtured Bertrand Russell and George Santayana. Santayana, born 1863, and Russell, born 1872, came to intellectual maturity in the closing part of the nineteenth century; the momentum accumulated by the secular thinking of their predecessors was at its height. Respect for science, rationalism and open enquiry was, among exploring minds, at high tide.

However, this respect was exacting, as it always is. Liberation from the mental shackles of a supernaturalistic outlook was of course exhilarating, but it was replaced by the exigencies of a scientific world view which saw the cosmos as godless, mindless, purposeless, and mankind as a minute, fragile feature of the cosmic totality. The disintegration of religious illusions about man's origin and place in the universe left a grim perspective in which humanity was seen as a marginal and transient element in the continuing, wholly mechanistic changefulness of the cosmos. Both Russell and Santayana bore the full weight of this perspective, and unflinchingly explored its implications.

At the same time, they sought sustenance in the face of grimness: they looked to certain kinds of human association, shared activities and goals, which could provide inspiration and comfort without illusions, without any falsification of reality. Their engagement with both the negative and positive ramifications of a scrupulously scientific approach to the universe is, clearly, as relevant now as it was 100 years ago.

That engagement is definitively expressed by Russell in an essay published in 1903, entitled 'A Free Man's Worship'; and by Santayana in an essay published in 1900 called 'A Religion of Disillusion'. The Russell essay originally appeared in a journal called *The Independent Review,* and was later reprinted in Russell's book *Mysticism and Logic* (1917). The Santayana essay appeared in his book *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (as above, 1900). The closeness of the publication dates seems, in retrospect, highly significant, as if the two philosophers, though of course working entirely separately, were jointly presenting themselves as the inheritors of the nineteenth century secular achievement: an inheritance which they had filtered through the medium of their own sensibilities, and were now passing on to the twentieth, having infused it with their own personal colouring.

Let's begin with 'A Free Man's Worship'. Russell avers:

> That Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his

> origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins – all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand.

In the process of referring to astronomy's prediction that the sun will eventually self-destruct, a prediction already well established by the turn of the twentieth century, Russell powerfully conveys the afore-mentioned sense of man as an ephemeral and fortuitous episode in a fundamentally non-human march of cosmic events: as a passing phase of the solar system's ultimately supra-human momentum.

Civilisation is up to us, not to some super-human agency.

This view finds a striking parallel in Santayana's words in 'A Religion of Disillusion'. Man's fortuitous status is captured in Santayana's definition of humanity as 'the product and the captive of an irrational engine called the universe'. Mankind's peripheral position in a cosmos which pursues its own course regardless of humanity is emphasised when Santayana says:

> That Nature is immense, that her laws are mechanical, that the existence and wellbeing of man upon the earth are, from the point of view of the universe, an indifferent incident – all this is… to be clearly recognised.

The essay goes on to describe the human mind from a naturalistic standpoint. Man's intelligence is seen as product of particular biological conditions, conditions which necessarily delimit it. The mind can never know more than it is biologically capable of knowing, can never transcend the context from which it originated; and since that context is but a small and transitory part of the stupendous physical evolution of the universe, intellect is, by its very nature, incapable of knowing all – or, at least, all about the future. To be omniscient, it would have to stand above space and time, as something wholly non-contingent, wholly independent of physical circumstances. The contrary being the case, the person of naturalistic outlook will recognise the futility of striving for omniscience and 'will silence the demands of his own reason and call them chimerical'. Ultimate ignorance and universal mutability are the realities he will accordingly resign himself to.

Russell too is keenly aware of the limitations imposed on the mind by humanity's physical situation. In FMW, he speaks of man's 'brief years' and 'little day' – in which, however, he may try to garner as much knowledge as his situation allows. At the same time, there is in Russell, though not in Santayana, a sense of the cosmos as a place of darkness, despite its many suns. He refers to those people who have shed the illusions bred by Christian ontology, and are therefore bereft of the false certainties which accompany those illusions, as 'fellow sufferers in the same darkness'. Further, mankind is seen as positioned on a narrow raft surrounded by 'the dark ocean on whose rolling waves we toss for a brief hour'. The raft itself is illumined only by 'the flickering light of human comradeship'. (Incidentally, in the use he makes of the idea of darkness, Russell is remarkably similar to James Thomson, in his famous poem *The City of Dreadful Night,* published 30 years before FMW)

Santayana's way of describing the cosmos is less dramatic, but equally gaunt. He speaks of 'the intractable infinite,' of 'the blind energy behind Nature,' and of the universe apart from humanity as 'a chaos'.

It is clear that much of the above, both in substance and tone, anticipates the writings of the atheistic existentialists in a later part of the twentieth century, especially Sartre and Camus. There are also echoes backwards, particularly of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche.

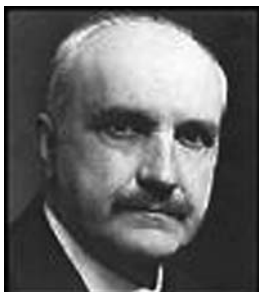
Given this daunting viewpoint, Russell and Santayana sought, as said, support and inspiration from wholly human sources. Supernaturalistic categories of all kinds were eschewed. In Russell, there is a call to assert human solidarity, and to maintain compassionate and civilised values in the face of a brute universe devoid of them. In Santayana, the argument is similar but more extensive, urging the creation of a specifically human order – social, artistic, scientific – as a riposte to the outer cosmic chaos. In these views, contemporary humanism is prefigured: the perspective of all present-day humanists is that mankind can establish and maintain its context only as something distinct from the surrounding cosmos.

Let's now look in more detail at Russell's position. He begins by emphasising the limitations within which humanity must work to construct its habitation. The harsh truths revealed by astronomy are the 'scaffolding', the inescapable parameters, which set the boundaries to such construction. The recognition of these parameters, and of the non-moral character of the omnipotent cosmic processes, must both be continually borne in mind as humanity goes about the task of creating moral and psychological anchorage for itself. Russell argues that full acknowledgement of limits will lead to a renunciation of desire for personal goods, since the latter are 'subject to the mutations of Time'. Renunciation is also called for by the recognition that 'the world was not made for us'. This attitude should, he says, be shared by all people of panoramic outlook. (One might add that the call for renunciation carries obvious echoes of the asceticism traditionally associated with religious culture. But we should remember that asceticism has been as much a part of general philosophical culture as of religious. In this case, it is humanistic.)

Russell goes on to say that renunciation is not in fact an end in itself but a path 'to the daylight of wisdom, by whose radiance a new insight, a new joy, a new tenderness, shine forth to gladden the pilgrim's heart'. (Again, in the diction, note echoes of religious culture, but also the applicability to humanism.) This inspiring and sustaining outlook is actually a state of mental mastery over 'the thoughtless forces of Nature'. By understanding these forces fully, by perceiving even their physical superiority, one achieves mental superiority over them. They are cognitively absorbed, assimilated, placed, and so lose the power to terrify and dismay. Likewise the sorrow and pain with which human life is fraught: 'to feel these things and to know them is to conquer them'.

The internal victory over the adversity of external fact constitutes a kind of cognitive heroism, and is 'the true baptism into the glorious company of heroes, the true initiation into the over-mastering beauty of human existence'. That beauty includes the great achievements in the arts and sciences – the work, indeed, of 'the noon-day brightness of human genius' to which Russell has previously referred. This is a beauty everyone can avail himself/herself of.

From psychological triumph over external adversity comes not only renunciation and wisdom but also 'charity'; 'with their birth, a new life begins'. The new life means 'to burn with passion for eternal things', and so gain a freedom which attachment to the merely personal and temporary can never give. Such burning is in fact 'the free man's worship'. In these words, we are inevitably reminded of Spinoza and his concept of s*ub specie aeternatis.* Spinoza was actually a major influence on Russell, though he is not mentioned in FMW.



George Santayana

Pervading this whole mind-set is a panoramic joy and happiness which is fully deserved because it has a valid ontological foundation. Scientifically endorsed, hard-won, purified, it is the rightful reward of everyone who has consistently trod the scientific path and steadily shed illusions. That path constantly demands toil, is constantly upward, and is unsparing in many of the vistas it unfolds. At the same time, being equal to its exigencies is a source of profound satisfaction: possessing the unflagging zeal to move higher and higher is the foundation of happiness and the essence of the free man's worship.

The idea of moral and cultural sharing which runs through Russell's thinking is taken substantially further in Santayana. Once, he says, humanity has realised that, outside the human sphere, all is alien, chaotic and beyond control, it should aim to create and maintain order in the small physical region it occupies. If the extra-human area is chaos, in the sense of being purposeless, then the human area may be made a cosmos – meaning, as in the original Greek sense of the word, a purposively ordered system. Though human evolution is founded on the aimlessness and non-rationality which underlie all physical facts in the universe, man can give that non-rationality a conscious direction and aim. Through the exercise of intelligence, he can bring satisfaction and fulfilment to the energies which, having come into being blindly, precede intelligence. In thus rationalising the pre-rational, humanity creates 'the cosmos of society, character and art' – indeed, the whole realm of culture and civilisation. Metaphorically speaking, this cosmos is 'a Noah's ark floating in the Deluge' or 'an oasis…in Nature'.

In examining the benefits of such order within chaos, Santayana puts considerable emphasis on equanimity. Once, he feels, man has properly understood his place in nature, he will attain peace with himself, and at the same time make peace with the crude forces that surround him. Having established his province and differentiated himself from the rest of the universe, he will have no desire to

sink back to the mindless turbulence from which he first emerged, and out of which he has, with great difficulty, managed to raise himself.

Also, in achieving inner peace, he will take an objective view of the whole range of his volitions, and so be better able to satisfy them in an intelligent, circumspect manner. This objectivity will be instinct with the naturalistic perspective, and so will ensure that men do not regard their will as having a sacred character or supernatural source.

The constructing of the human cosmos is 'the building of our own house', the race's way of achieving 'something like its perfection and its ideal', under planetary conditions which constitute a fortuitous equilibrium of natural forces favourable to that advanced form of animal evolution that is mankind. This equilibrium, though accidental, has proved long-lasting, and may well be 'no less stable than that which keeps the planets revolving in their orbits'. (Santayana does not here refer to the prediction about the sun's self-destruction, though he does elsewhere in his work.) Thus civilisation 'need not be short-lived'.

Nevertheless, such a balance of forces is only culture's necessary condition. Its sufficient condition is the human willingness and resolve to create it – 'for there is none other that builds it for us'. Civilisation is up to us, not to some super-human agency. Only by understanding this in all its implications can we make 'that rare advance in wisdom which consists in abandoning our illusions the better to attain our ideals'.

Throughout RD, Santayana maintains a distinctive note of sobriety and restraint. Recognising the contingent and accidental character of human existence, and confronting the vastness and indifference of nature, he recommends 'patience and dignity'. He emphasises the need to avoid unrealistic hopes and excessive or misplaced enthusiasm. One of the many strengths of his writing in general is its effect of radically disciplining mind and emotion.

We might add that the world could do with far more of the restraint he advocates, because it would reduce violence and the threat of it. The century at the start of which Santayana wrote has been the most murderous on record. It has been fraught with killing produced, for the most part, by conflicts with roots in rigid ideology, nationalism and ethnicism. These conflicts could, in the main, have been resolved peacefully if human beings had had a wider scientific sense of themselves: a sense of common evolutionary origin and of shared vulnerability as members of a hard-pressed species which is alone – as far as present knowledge shows – in a universe which knows it not.

They sought sustenance in the face of grimness: they looked to certain kinds of human association, shared activities and goals.

The same point can of course be made in connection with Russell's advocacy of wisdom and charity. It even relates to his recommendation of renunciation. In a highly acquisitive society, such as our own has increasingly become in the twentieth century, there is clear merit in arguing for a major reduction in consumerism and the desire for possessions. This is not quite the renunciation urged by Russell, which is perhaps not what most of us wish for, or could attain even if we did wish for. But it is a significant step in that direction: one that brings considerable benefits by increasing peace of mind, and co-operation between individuals and whole societies.

All in all, the contemporary situation stands in need of improvement. The resurgence of fundamentalist religious influence, and the consequent hostility to or neglect of strict scientific method; the worsening of economic pressures on people with the growing emphasis on competitiveness; the international violence produced by both fundamentalist resurgence and the ruthless pursuit of economic interests on the part of the rich and powerful: these are among the factors militating against the outlook which is truly appropriate to modern man, and which can offer genuine guidance, illumination and peace. Such is the outlook jointly provided by Russell and Santayana 100 years ago, and one that still awaits general adoption.

An earlier version of this article appeared in the *Ethical Record*. Reprinted with permission.

Tom Rubens teaches English at Havering College in Essex. He is the author of four books on philosophy, and also writes poetry and fiction.

God: Creator or Created?

Don Cupitt believes that the future of religion will be a purely this-worldly religion of commitment to life.

Which is the universal creator whose activity forms us and our world: is it the God of the three Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam; or is it the ceaseless flow of human language, within which we are all the time building, criticising and rebuilding our pictures of ourselves and of our world? Is the world a fixed stage *on* which we live, or a temporary human consensus *by* which we live? Do we see the world as having been fixed from the beginning by the language of *God*, or do we see it as continually growing and developing within *human* language?

If we think of the creator as God, we will presumably hold a strongly realistic and metaphysical view both of God and of the world of finite creatures – creatures that he first made at the beginning of time, and still by his almighty power and wisdom maintains in being, guiding them towards the future consummation that he has from all eternity planned for them. God is Infinite Spirit: he is self-existent Being, absolute, necessary, simple and eternal. He is unlimited in his power, perfection, wisdom and goodness, and like an infinite computer he has pre-calculated the entire course of world history from beginning to end. He is the Author and the Lord of all history.

So, on this classical view, which is still held by a largish portion of humankind, God is out there, an Infinite Spirit and the absolute world-Ground, and there is also a ready-made cosmos, or created world, out there for us to live in. God is the playwright, and the whole of human history is the play. He has scripted the entire thing, and he alone actually stages, runs through, and watches over the definitive performance. (There is of course only *one* actual performance of the whole drama: only one is needed). As for us, we find ourselves born into and growing up within the play. The world is like a furnished house that runs according to rules that we find have been already built into it by its Creator: we call them the laws of nature and the moral law. Fortunately God not only made the world by his creative utterance, but also gave his own language to the first humans. He created us with minds that are little images of his own, so that by using our God-given reason and conscience aright we can come to understand the world in which we find ourselves, and can tell how to live in a way that pleases our creator. Eventually, after death, we may hope to live forever in his presence.

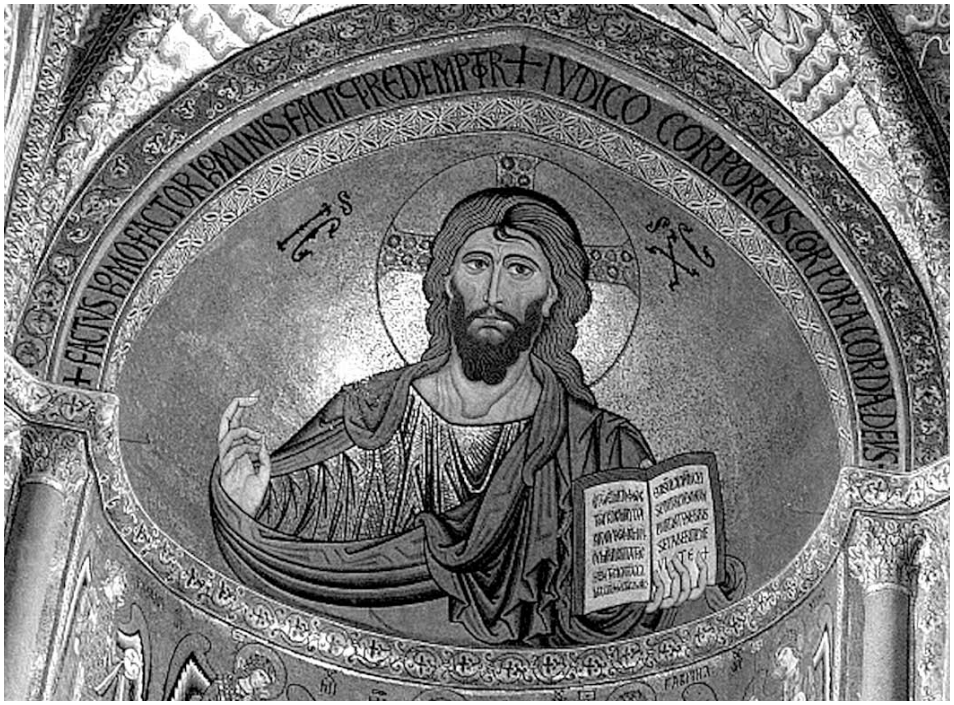
This fully-developed monotheistic doctrine of God and Creation is well sketched out in the later chapters of the book of the prophet Isaiah in the Hebrew Bible, and seven centuries or so later was sealed into Western Christian thought by St Augustine of Hippo, especially in his book *The City of God,* written between A.D. 413 and 426. The last great Western philosopher to take it all seriously was Leibniz, in the writings of his later years around A.D. 1690-1716. But a number of theologians and Christian intellectuals continued to defend something like Augustine's world-view until as late as the 1950s, and even the early 1960s. Today, fully-orthodox realistic theism, with its classical philosophy of history, is confined to people who are very consciously neo-conservative and militantly 'anti-liberal' (which means anti-intellectual).

The historical truth is that we created God.

Why has this happened? One reason is the difficulty of trying to reconcile the self-revealing, human-language-using, personal God of the biblical tradition and popular religion with the infinite, timeless World Ground of the philosophical tradition. Another reason is that we have come to think of language as human, with a human history. If indeed God was the only original inventor and user of language, if God himself thinks in language, why did he build into his language so much reference to gender, to space and time, to the senses and to the body? Language is for communication, but God is One: so who did he have to talk to from all eternity? Not to mention the further problem that language presupposes time.

Another reason for the decay of the old philosophical theology is that it makes God in effect the only historical agent, whereas in the modern period ideas of human agency and of historical development and evolution have become very widespread. You could

say, briefly, that it is not science but history that has been the main reason for the breakdown of the old Christian world-view. By the sixteenth century our knowledge of ourselves, our world and our own history was growing too fast to be held within the old framework. It was inevitable that there would be a great effort to reorganise everything around human beings as *themselves* the builders and testers of all the language, the knowledge, the values and the world-view that they live by.



Christ Pantocrator God-Man, Cefalù Cathedral, Sicily

From what I have been saying you will gather that I think we are today in transition. The last vestiges of the great Augustinian synthesis, which still captivated a man like C.S.Lewis, are now breaking down. Just for the present many people still declare themselves to be realistic theists, but they may not realise how much that commits them to, and how much things have to change when the old world view finally passes away.

The main point is that in the classic scheme of thought the objective reality, the order and the motion of things in the created world entirely depended upon the objective reality and the power of God. If there's no real God out there giving to everything its existence, its order and its motion, then there is no real world out there either. Nor indeed are we ourselves real. So if God is not making the world, ordering it and empowering it all the time, who is?

The answer given by Kant in 1771 makes him the greatest figure in the history of Western philosophy. If God doesn't make the world real, who does? *We* do. Kant tried to show that if we believe that we have, not just sense experience, but more than that, namely *an objective world* around us, we must do so because we ourselves see the world as being structured by space and time, and as ordered in terms of things and their qualities, interacting causally with each other, and so on. What we have about us is not a world ready-made for us by God, but a world that we form by the way we see it. We are the legislators: we order the world. Our minds organise the chaos of experience into a negotiable, intelligible world, and Kant tried to prove rigorously that our minds must do this in the way they do in order for us to have a world at all. We cannot live without forming the chaos of experience into a manageable world, and being what we are we must build our world in the way we do.

To recapitulate, in the old days, when people really believed in an objective God out there, they also believed that they already had an objective real world laid on for them by God. It was *the* world, the fixed stage on which all human life was lived; and notice here that because physical law and the moral law were built into the creation by God from the first, the laws of Nature and of morality remained unchanged over the millennia. The old world-picture was not historical. But then during the Enlightenment there was an explosion of new man-made knowledge, and people began to get ideas about cultural difference, about historical change and development, and about progress. They began to see themselves as the makers of their own language, their own cultures, and their own history. They began to see their world, not as an unchanging God-made cosmos, but as a human world, *our* world, that is constantly evolving through our own human action. We made our world, and we change it. In short, the creation of the world is ceasing to be something that *God* did once and for all long ago, and is instead becoming something that we are doing all the time, through our own ever-changing conversation. In the words of the English Romantic poets, our world is partly perceived, and partly *imagined*, by us.

People used to think that God was the first speaker of language. A series of short sharp commands from God changed the primal Chaos into an ordered Cosmos, and in due course God passed on his own language – be it Hebrew or Arabic – to the first humans. But now people begin to think that we humans have ourselves developed all our own languages. Languages evolve and diversify over time, very much as animals and plants do. We humans have ourselves coined every word in our vocabulary, including the word 'God'. *We* have invented all our own cultures, religions, moralities and pictures of the world, and what used to be an objective and fixed Cosmos is now just a provisional human consensus. Instead of the old unchanging godmade world, we now have only our own ever-changing and developing world-picture, about which we are constantly arguing.

The religious wouldn't buy non-realism. They wanted fundamentalism.

So on this account there isn't a fixed real world any more, but only an endlessly-developing human argument. If you want to give an exact date for the moment when the death of God occurred, I'd say it was the moment in the later seventeenth century when the mathematics of probability, and tools such as Tables of Mortality, led to the establishment in places like London and Amsterdam of the new Insurance industry. At that moment the course of human life and of world-events effectively ceased to be a single invariable sequence predestined from all eternity by God, and became instead a purely secular matter of calculating relative probabilities. The old view was that there was only one way your life could go, namely the way God had decreed. God alone had pre-ordained and knew the moments of your birth and your death and the whole course of events in between. God owned your life, and had already fixed everything in it. You didn't trust insurance cover to protect you: you simply had faith in God – whereas in today's society various forms of insurance cover are in effect legally compulsory.[1] The world is no longer divinely governed: it is merely statistical.

Now notice an interesting corollary of all this. When God created the world, God was supremely real and God guaranteed the objective reality of the world. Your whole life was predestined, and you never needed to consider other possibilities. Everything could be left in God's hands, everything was under control, and God's eternal Will would certainly be done. But in the new post-God world nothing is objectively real and nothing is certain. On the contrary, at every moment there is a jostling crowd of possibilities. Science may assign to many of them various degrees of probability. One of them becomes actual, and the others lapse. When we look back later, we see in retrospect the contingently-actual course of events up to now surrounded by a forest of unfulfilled and now-lapsed possibilities. All of us begin to wonder about those many other lives we might have lived, other loves we might have pursued and won, and other selves we might have become, had things only turned out a bit differently. The objective world and the course of our own lives are nowadays very much less real and *destined* than they used to be. We now have a much more vivid sense of contingency than people used to have, and we spend much more of our time in thinking about the other selves we might have been, and the other lives we might have lived.

I have now taken the discussion far enough to draw two conclusions. First, in answer to the question I have been set, the historical truth is that we created God. We are all of us happy to regard other people's religions as human products, so why shouldn't we admit that our own faith is so, too? The idea of God developed very slowly during the Neolithic period and the Iron Age, but its grandest form was the great Christian philosophy of God, the world, and human history that dominated Western culture from Augustine to Milton. While it lasted it seemed immensely strong, because it gave us a real God and a real world, and the confidence that we could please the one and make sense of the other. It enabled us to see our life as a pilgrimage through time to our last home in the eternal world. But over the years the old world picture gradually broke down. We began to see ourselves and the whole world in terms of ideas of historical and evolutionary development. A new sort of manmade and critically-tested knowledge grew and grew until it made us aware that we ourselves have evolved all our languages, our cultures, our moral codes and our religious systems. We made our world, and we made God. God did a great job while he lasted, but inevitably he has now faded.

For a decade or so I proposed a view intermediate between theism and atheism, saying that we can continue to have faith in God and live with the help of God if only we recognise that God is not an

actually existent Being, but rather a guiding spiritual ideal. This 'non-realist' idea of God has a long history in Christianity, starting with the Johannine equation of God with Love in the *First Epistle of St John.* So I tried to keep the idea of God, and assigned an important role to it in the religious life, because I thought that the idea of God was still a good idea. God was a unifying symbol of the goal of the religious life, and brought with him an excellent and well-understood vocabulary in which we could debate a great range of vital matters, such as the problem of evil.

So I claimed. But the religious wouldn't buy non-realism. They wanted fundamentalism; and the way the politics of religion has been developing in the past twenty years has gradually persuaded me, and millions of others, that the idea of God is increasingly coming to look like a very bad idea indeed – the worst and most destructive of all our ideas, and the hardest to get rid of. I now increasingly think that politicised, fundamentalist, militant religion is a serious threat to our future human wellbeing. It is even more objectionable and ugly than a malign political ideology, and we need to break with it before it seizes power over us. In fact, we may need to go further, and break altogether with the historic 'world religions' that we have inherited. In the age of globalisation and the Internet, none of them is anywhere near global enough. Their various vocabularies and histories tie them to one or another of the half-dozen or so major world culture-areas, and in a multi-faith, scrambled world of mass population movements every one of them battles to preserve its own distinct 'identity' intact and undiminished. The result is that each one of the surviving ancient world faiths has in recent years largely lost its own liberal and universalising traditions, and has instead become localist, sectarian and militant. The existing world faiths no longer unite humankind: increasingly, they divide us. They have quite forgotten their old, gentle religious values, and have become hysterically, ruthlessly self-concerned.

Accordingly, although I am still ready to see in the great religious traditions that we have inherited much evidence of human creativity in the face of the obvious human need for religion, and evidence indeed, of past human greatness, I now believe that we must start thinking about the quite new form that religion must take in a future fully-globalised world. The whole of humankind is now joined up in a single great humming web of communication. In this world-wide web of talk, as also in such institutions as schools, universities, banks, hospitals and airlines, there is already to a startling degree a single common world culture. The language of everyday life, of science and technology, of industry and commerce, and even of individual human rights and freedoms (including especially expressive freedom) is equally well understood almost everywhere. It is within this universal language of the whole race that we should be looking for the seeds of the religion of the future. I believe that it will be a purely this-worldly religion of commitment to life.

God will have to be dropped – at least for a while.

A century ago many notable figures would argue that the universal language of humanity does include, and must continue to include, the word 'God'. Such people very often came from the Indian subcontinent: they included the leading Sikhs and Bahais, Hindus such as Radhakrishnan and Vivekananda, and world figures like Tagore and Gandhi. But there is no such figure today, because God has gone 'localist', or ethnocentric. In the end, people see God as thinking and speaking in just one language, the language of my people, to whom he has given his final and definitive revelation of himself – and so on. In the end, it seems, God is always a *national* God, whose job is to justify and to personify the most extreme ethnocentrism. It seems therefore that God now has no future at the universal level, which is why even John Hick, the most eminent multi-faith monotheist of the generation above mine, now thinks that God will have to be dropped – at least for a while.

1 The old belief in God strictly entailed predestination. But if you believe in predestination the whole of the reasoning on which the insurance industry is based must appear to you impious and irrational. The insurance industry presupposes the Death of God.

Don Cupitt made the original Sea of Faith TV series in 1984 (now reissued on DVD). He is a Life Fellow of Emmanuel College, Cambridge and his 34 books include *After God*. His latest book, *The Old Creed and the New*, has just appeared from SCM Press.

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Cardenal Points

Dear Editor

I found Ernesto Cardenal's 'Message to Berlin' inspiring (*Sofia* November 2006), and was surprised by the letter in January's edition criticising his 'tendentious' and damaging use of rhetoric in preference to reason.

The argument that Cardenal overstates his case in referring to all 216 American interventions in foreign states over two centuries as 'invasions' must not allow us to blind ourselves to the facts. Alongside interventions which can be perceived as benign in intent, and sometimes in effect, are the full-scale invasions and/or manipulation of the democratic processes in Guatemala, Cuba, Iraq (4 times), Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, the Dominican Republic, Chile, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Grenada, Panama, the Philippines, Afghanistan, Colombia, Venezuela and Haiti: all during the last 50 years. If we find this list so disturbing that we prefer not to be reminded of its scope, how much more keenly must the ensuing destruction be felt in Latin America, which has frequently been the target of American activities abroad.

Similarly, the systematic violation of human rights in Guantánamo cannot be dismissed as negligible in comparison with the activities of the Gestapo or the Russian gulags. America prides itself on being the defender of freedom and democracy: indeed, the administration has repeatedly stated that its purpose in Iraq is to establish democracy for the good of the people. Such claims sit uneasily beside the treatment of POWs and political enemies which we have seen in Guantánamo and in Iraq itself and which we fear is the case in various secret prisons to which suspects have been flown on 'rendition' flights.

Cardenal's metaphorical comparison of Bush to Hitler has to be seen in a Latin American context: Donald Rumsfeld recently accused President Chávez of Venezuela of being 'the new Hitler'. So the article is suggesting that, if anyone deserves the title, it's Bush, who initiated the Iraq war, rather than Chávez, who has never invaded any country and who holds no political prisoners. Since the US does not recognise the International Court at the Hague, the suggestion that its leaders should be tried at Nuremburg is apposite because they have put themselves above international law.

It is important that SoF should not be insular and should listen to voices, not only from Britain and other English-speaking countries, but from the Third World, where they see things from another point of view. As a forum for dialogue between people from both Christian and humanist traditions, we need to respond positively to Ernesto's rallying cry and commit ourselves to 'defend peace and justice' – even if this means facing up to unpalatable truths about the behaviour of our greatest ally under its present leadership.

Mary Lloyd
Southampton

Anti-fundamentalist fundamentalism?

Dear Editor

I have been prompted to write by Ernesto Cardenal's letter to the PEN Congress, which was translated and reprinted in *Sofia 80* under the headline *Message to Berlin: Bush is the New Hitler,* and comments in the editorial about him and his message.

My initial reaction is that the comparison between Bush and Hitler is ludicrous. Whether you like him or not (in general, I don't), George Bush is a democratically elected leader who will stand down in two years' time in accordance with his country's constitution. He governs a country where people are free to disagree with him and, as they have done recently, vote against him. Adolf Hitler was a dictator who attempted to systematically exterminate various groups he didn't like. As someone whose paternal grandparents (one of whom was Jewish, both of whom were communists), fled Berlin for England in the 1930s, I find the comparison deeply offensive.

My bigger concern is that *Sofia* is not being true to its mandate to be 'against fundamentalism'. Recent editions seem to be embracing a new form of fundamentalism, which may loosely be termed the 'anti-globalisation movement'. This movement has its demons (Bush, Starbucks, etc.), its saints (Geldof, Mandela), its tenets (capitalism and free trade cause poverty, the West is in the wrong), its rituals (gathering at international summits) and so on. And it is intolerant of dissent, as I have found in several discussions.

My point is not whether the 'anti-globalisation movement' is right or wrong. I am simply dismayed that this editorial, and others, appear to assume that anyone wanting to explore religion as a human creation is also buying into this specific agenda. If we have learned anything from rejecting traditional ideas of religion, surely we have learned to be critical not just of organised religion but all ideologies.

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Intelligent Faith: A Proposal.

Dear Editor

There are people who believe in evolution and don't believe in religion (Dawkins). And there are people who believe in religion and don't believe in evolution (Truth in Science). If this fact raises important issues the option is there for people who accept both to occupy the space between and offer an alternative: an exploration of the doctrine of creation for the third millennium.

My own last piece was published in *Sofia* in May and was on intelligent design. I find two major flaws in the idea. The scientific flaw is that it's a dead end: they arrive at the so-called Intelligent Designer via negatives (the 'it can't be done' defence) and when they get there they can't define the agency, which they think can do what they say evolution cannot.

They clearly haven't read Lee Smolin's work, or Stu Kaufman's or Simon Conway Morris. But there is also a theological flaw, which Nicholas Lash described as the 'fatuous illusion that we could discover or come across god as a fact about the world'. Truth in Science should not get away with the claims that their Intelligent Designer isn't God (it is), or that their ideas are science (they aren't) or that there is room for an alternative to Darwinism (there isn't).

The scientific community in USA has answered this rubbish in a collection of essays by scientists of various specialisms (*Intelligent Thought*, Vintage NY, 2006). Though an excellent collection, it is marred by the overt atheism of many otherwise helpful pieces and with that warning I commend it.

My proposal is that the theological interfaith community might consider doing the same. A collection entitled – say – *Intelligent Faith* written from various theological, philosophical and interfaith perspectives might be a useful resource in teaching both Religious Studies and Science in Sixth forms and Universities. It might help to dislodge Truth in Science from schools they have infiltrated.

Rowan Williams, to whom I mentioned this idea in passing, has let me know that he is 'very taken' with it and it seems to me that it is an ideal exercise for a society such as the Sea of Faith.

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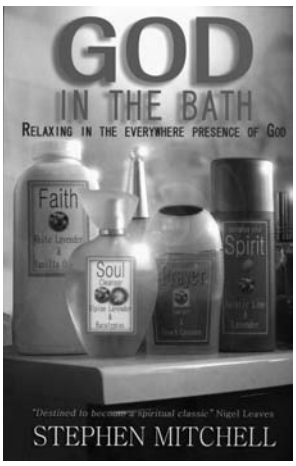
Alison McRobb reviews

God in the Bath

by Stephen Mitchell

O Books (Winchester). 2006. £9.99. 95 pages. ISBN 1905047657



This book took effect instantly. By page 6 I had run the bath and for the next seven chapters or so was cosseted in the elegant bubbles of Neal's Yard Foaming Seaweed and Arnica (pretty blue bottle, soothing fragrance). On this I'm the converted: the bath is definitely the place where the best philosophy is done.

I'm not sure the conceit works effectively throughout, however – though the more accurate 'God's a Bath' or 'In God We Bath' would hardly have been acceptable titles. No matter – even Sea of Faithers tire at times of thalasso-talk. How deeply you engage with this author's thesis will depend on where you're coming from, as they say, and perhaps how you see the book being used. Most strikingly it appears as a pastoral epistle, from a priest who knows his flock. The argument is presented as 'shocking' and 'revolutionary', which no doubt it will be for some. But the pastor's voice comes, with appropriate authority and humour, from inside the fold. The 'we' is regularly the membership, the body of the Christian Church. Groups of thinkers and seekers within that body will find plenty of discussion material, chapter by chapter, though the book has no pretensions to being a systematic manual for questioners – for that I'd direct them to Tony Windross, Doc.Demythol.

Certainly we, all of us, should rejoice that anyone is taking the trouble to write thoughtfully about 'faith' and 'God' and 'life', even if a different congregation might ask, 'What's new?' And there is no doubt that Stephen Mitchell knows his philosophy – heavy topics such as the Argument from Design are dealt with in accessible language. He also knows and loves his Bible, from which the quotations are usually short and appropriate though he misses what are surely the pithiest NT comments on 'tough' luck (Local Tower collapses – 18 Dead – etc., in Luke 13).

The problem for some Sea of Faith readers, however, and others who have long left worries about 'orthodoxy' behind, will be a deep unease that in all this enjoyable celebration which they can share, there is a concept of God which they cannot. Readers who thought they were on the *Via Negativa* might find themselves unwittingly bumping along another highway.

We all know that the quickest way to kill the bath-bubbles is to introduce a bar of soap, and here it's the word 'mystery', slippery in the extreme. Teachers of theology and clerics who are 'stewards of the mysteries' will have instant sympathy: traditionally in any tight place they've invoked a *magnum mysterium ex machina.* Yet if this book's recipe for faith and life is 'the answer', what can 'mystery' possibly mean? And do we need it?

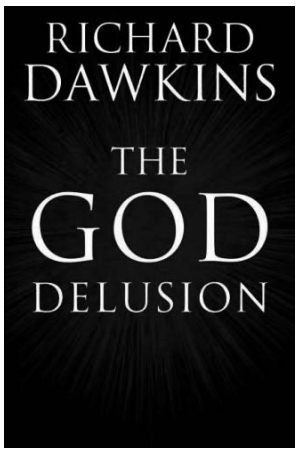
The inability to let go shows up perhaps in the author's, and the book's, genuine attachment to devotion, here devotion in the Christian tradition. (It is a pity that the shorthand term 'Christian God' is used, liable as it is to serious misinterpretation.) Yet the whole theme of the book is that there can be religion, and that devotion can be a part of life, as can art and music, without any of the 'believing in' problems which have been so effectively soothed away. The chapters on 'Imagination' and 'Death' stand confidently on their own without recourse to 'mystery', so in fact the whole book could, if that were not a step too far out of the charmed circle of 'orthodoxy'.

The book is attractively presented, in print large enough to indulge those who find steamed-up spectacles a problem for bath-time reading. We expect US spelling styles now, but perhaps not 'thunder and lightening' (*sic,* twice). Niggles are few, however: Richard Eyre becomes Roger on the next page, but is restored in the Notes, which are helpful and clear.

As a Lent Group book, then, this has everything going for it. Whether 'relaxing in the everywhere presence of God' (the sub-title) will please readers whose theology goes rather for a rigorous carbolic scrub remains to be seen.

Alison McRobb teaches theology and English Language and is a Principal Examiner in Hinduism for Cambridge International Examinations. She was last year's Chair of SoF Trustees.

Come On In, The Water's Lovely



John Challenor reviews

The God Delusion

by Richard Dawkins

Bantam Press. 2006, £20 hbk, 406 pages. ISBN 9780593055489

This is a rich collection of material, presented variously – logical arguments, comments on the current scene, case-studies, jokes – all in a vigorous, engaging way, with verve, con brio, even gung-ho.

Dawkins' stated purpose is to raise consciousness, to help atheists come out. They are a disadvantaged group. A recent poll in the USA showed that while women, catholics, jews, blacks, mormons and homosexuals are now electable to political office, open atheists are far behind, practically disqualified. In 1988, George Bush Senior was quoted as saying, 'I don't know that atheists should be considered as citizens, nor should they be considered patriots.' Well, atheists have had a hard time in Europe, too – think of Spinoza, Shelley, Bertrand Russell, numerous Quakers. Dawkins also seeks converts: 'If this book works as I intend', he writes, 'religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down.' He cheerfully admits his presumptuous optimism.

I would describe the book as a reworking of Enlightenment themes, updated in the light of Darwinism and of concern for human rights. It has sold well. It is full of humanity, and it caters for our current exasperation with religious bigotry, fanaticism, extremism and violence.

Dawkins gracefully admits, on the intellectual level, to being a bit less than 100% atheist, since it is logically impossible to prove a negative, an absence. But at the practical level, he is fully atheist. He may be carried away too far when he claims that whether or not God exists is a scientific question, answerable yes or no. In principle, in the future, in some way, maybe. But at present, surely scientific evidence is unavailable? Many will remain agnostic.

The God Delusion has been widely reviewed, sometimes quite harshly. Terry Eagleton, in the *London Review of Books* 'lambasted' it (the editor's word), mainly for displaying ignorance of (Christian) theology – though, as I see it, the sophisticated Christianity Eagleton proposes, drawing on Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein, scarcely registers in public discourse, and Dawkins shows a shrewd grasp of the down-market populist Christianity actually noised abroad. Jonathan Sacks urged readers to take the book as a help to self-criticism, with the humility Judaism and Christianity both profess – 'the supreme virtue... the opposite of the will to power.'

It may be useful, so long after the book's appearance, if I look at it from the viewpoint of a SoF member. Did the book work for me? Having read it, am I now an atheist? But was I religious when I started it? Asking these questions showed me one of the book's weaknesses: Dawkins reduces a very complex problem to a simple joust of two sides, perhaps enticing readers by the prospect of a decisive outcome. I am left as religious, as atheistic, as agnostic, as pantheistic, as before. I remember accepting the label panentheistic at some point long ago. Now all the labels seem faded, blurred, indecipherable, as if peeling off antique luggage in a dusty attic. It makes little difference which one adopts. Dawkins observes how widely, at the level of action, the liberal humanist ethic prevails (leaving aside the Taliban, the American Christian equivalent, etc.) The other weakness of the book, from a SoF viewpoint, is that it is a work of old-fashioned theological realism. There is no mention of Cupitt or of SoF. Perhaps we nowhere fit into the book's polarised framework. Discussing Wittgenstein, and meaning, in *The Sea of Faith* (p.224), Cupitt notes that the word 'atheist' 'has been used historically as a quasi-political smear-word to brand innovators... including, at one time, the early Christians.' And in his foreword to Scott Cowdell's *Atheist Priest?* (1988) Cupitt wrote: 'I said from the first that the truth is in the movement... I do not share the linguistic scientism of those who think in terms of attacking and defending formalised 'positions'.'

And yet Dawkins' book has sold well. There is a demand for realist theology and fixed position stuff, from a constituency SoF has failed to influence. We have to remain aware of the different levels of understanding and varied approaches to religion in the culture. Gibbon, writing about 1780 of the Roman Empire, observed: 'The various modes of worship which prevailed... were all considered by the people as equally true; by the philosopher, as equally false; and, by the magistrate, as equally useful.' Translate for today as you like, but I suggest Gibbon's remark still has validity.

UK paperback edition out in September 2007.

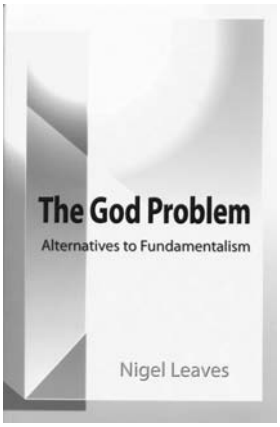
John Challenor is a member of SoF and former Editor of *Renew* (Catholics for a Changing Church).

Michael Morton reviews

The God Problem: Alternatives to Fundamentalism

by Nigel Leaves

Polebridge Press (Santa Rosa, USA). 2006. 98 pages. £8.50. ISBN 0944344984



Because Australia is so far away, most people rely for information about it from television soaps and other dramas. Then there is the advertising campaign from the Tourist Board, which features empty beaches, tasty barbecues and an attractive girl in a bikini, alone on a beach, asking prospective visitors 'so where the hell are you?' Ozzie theologian Nigel Leaves seems conscious of these images because more than once in this short book he mentions the fact that Australia and New Zealand are regarded as the most secular societies in the world. But then his work belies this image. Leaves has already written two books about Don Cupitt and he relies heavily in this present work on the venerable New Zealand theologian Lloyd Geering. Throughout the text he demonstrates a pastoral concern that people should be offered theological reflections that are in keeping with post-modernity. Within the limitations of his present book he does very well indeed.

The subject of *The God Problem* is the proposal that the existence and the notion of God have now to be rigorously debated. In other words, what does 'God' mean for the 21st century? The danger from Fundamentalism is that the question of belief in God has become not a proposition to be debated, as even Aquinas did in his most Christian age, but one to be defended at all costs. Once rationality deserts religious faith, it becomes a menace even to its own adherents. As far as religion is concerned, Leaves believes, the world is simply ablaze with bad ideas. So although problems about God can be many and varied, he wants to ask whether we can justifiably adopt a non-realist understanding of God and view God as the symbol of our ultimate concern for life and the continuation of the world where nature is the locus of the holy.

The argument of the book follows the structure given by its origin as a series of six talks. In the middle four chapters, between his introduction and concluding lecture, Leaves discusses the work of Bishop John Spong, the writings of Don Cupitt and Lloyd Geering and an appreciation of that popular appearance of spirituality wherein people move away from historic religions and find a matrix of creative and artistic spiritualities, yoga and meditation. His fourth study is of religious naturalism, which means a religious and emotional response to the wonders and complexity of the world around us. The question of what it means to be 'religious' in the 21st century is not just confined to activity in the mainstream churches.

Although he confesses that he finds non-realism the most intellectually authentic and compelling reading of Christian faith, he does worry that it will be hard for people to abandon belief in the supreme Being that has sustained society for so long. It is an important matter, for non-realism can only be taken seriously if it can identify itself as a continuation and interpretation of traditional faith. The religious faith of the 21st century needs to be the child of what has gone before it. Yet the reader will look in vain for any reference to St Thomas Aquinas, St Augustine, the Cappadocian Fathers, David Hume and other masters who have wrestled with the problem of God. Maybe Bishop Spong is not the best or sole candidate to stand as a 'template of realism'.

By contrast, when he writes about Don Cupitt and Lloyd Geering, Leaves is authoritative and illuminating. He evidently understands the thought of these two writers very well even though for the Sea of Faith Network his treatment may just be covering old ground. He offers an interesting diagram, taken from Cupitt's Cambridge lectures, of what 'non-realism' might entail and explains how his thinking raises issues for the future of Christianity and for the Church. Lloyd Geering, he argues, is more global and historical in his presentation of non-realism than Cupitt as he celebrates humanity itself and looks forward to a new kind of society that realises a 'new heaven and a new earth' in the here and now.

As is often the case with theology books nowadays, the price seems a bit steep for such a short work. Yet brevity is one of the book's strengths. Leaves writes clear and easy prose. He is able to present difficult notions lucidly and although the book does suffer from being in essence transcribed lectures, it is a good read for the non-specialist and we may look forward to more writing from Nigel Leaves and a country that may well become, theologically, a new world.

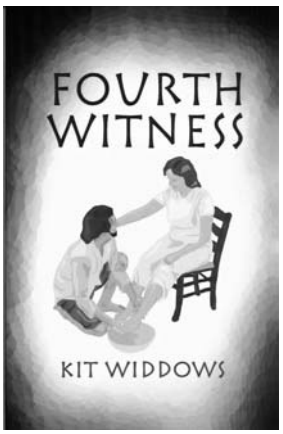
Michael Morton is a Catholic parish priest and a SoF trustee.

Stephen Mitchell reviews

Fourth Witness

by Kit Widdows

Writersworld. (Enstone, Oxon.) 2004…£8.50 pbk. 173 pages. ISBN 1904181222



Fourth Witness stands in a long and honourable tradition. From medieval mystery plays to contemporary films like *The Passion of Christ* artists have used their imagination to bring the gospels to life and to re-examine them.

It's a tradition that is easy to despise. After all, as Albert Schweitzer observed, people use the gospels as a mirror for their own beliefs. But then the very gospels themselves must, to some degree at least, have been the product of the evangelists' creativity and beliefs.

For some people this means an end to the quest for the historical Jesus. For myself, the God of Jesus was never to be found in historical fact or figures but through the imaginative retelling of the stories of faith. For Kit Widdows, the author of *Fourth Witness,* it is more complicated. Kit works in a busy city parish. He also works with his Diocesan Board for Mission and Social Responsibility. The writer of John's Gospel is his hero and he wants his Jesus to be known and accessible to 21st century readers:

> I said that my hero was the writer of John, but in truth, the hero is Jesus. I want him to escape the straitjacket that has been placed upon him by much Christian worship and pious Bible reading, and for us to see him again as his friends and opponents saw him. If this Jesus offends you, then I am sorry for it, but then again, it won't be the first time he has done that. *p. 166*

John's Gospel is traditionally dated later than those of Matthew, Mark and Luke. These first three gospels not only have a great deal in common, they clearly use a common source. Kit, along with some scholars, believes that John's Gospel contains an early, alternative and authentic witness to Jesus. *Fourth Witness* opens in the Upper Room and the washing of the disciples feet:

> Jesus was fidgeting. This was uncomfortable, as I was leaning against him on the couch. It was not surprising, after the stress of the last few days, never knowing whether we would suddenly be engulfed in a hail of stones or arrested by the police. But it was unusual. I still felt a sense of strong self-assurance from him, a curious and uncomfortable peace, but at the same time he was tense and edgy.
>
> Then with one if his swift and decisive movements, and with less than half an apology to me as I had to save myself from falling, he was on his feet and taking off his cloak. *p. 3.*

It's a clever and effective decision to hang the whole tale of the gospel around the passion story, cutting back to the earlier events as the narrator recalls them. It's also true to the gospels, the greater part of each being the passion narrative. Equally effective is the decision to have John tell his story in the first person. I marvelled at the author's ability to get across so much of the historical detail behind the original text without it grinding down the pace of the story.

John's Gospel is also one of the most self-consciously theological of the gospels. Its construction depends heavily upon the great 'I am' sayings and the long discourses given to Jesus. How can these be got across to a 21st century audience? Sometimes I felt Kit succeeded brilliantly as with his depicting of the 'I am the vine' conversation and the discussion with the Samaritan woman at the well. At other times, I felt the sheer difficulty of bringing the imagery into anything like 21st century thought was too much:

> 'Hear then the word of truth;' (that smile was on his lips again) 'You ate bread and were full, and think it wonderful. You failed to see beyond the bread. Don't go chasing after dead bread. You will be hungry again tomorrow. Come and listen and I will tell you about God's own bread. Be open to what I can give you. Indeed it comes from God whose ambassador I am.'

But this doesn't detract from the book's value. People and practitioners of faith have the task of approaching the same stories afresh week by week, year by year. They do not look for a one true, eternal, message of the story, but at how this story is speaking to their present situation. For them the gospel must live and speak with new life and power each time it is read. Kit's book provides a valuable resource for them.

I also commend this book to those who haven't read John's Gospel for a while. Not only would they be surprised at just how radical John's Jesus is but also appreciate some of the problems of making sense of this ancient text.

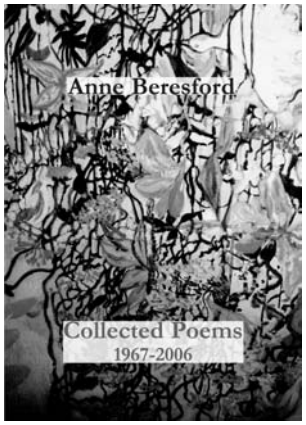
Stephen Mitchell is a SoF trustee. His book *God in the Bath* (reviewed on page 18) was published in October 2006.

Christopher Hampton reviews

Collected Poems 1967-2006

by Anne Beresford

Katabasis (London). 2006. £14.95. pbk. 350 pages. ISBN 0904872424



Anne Beresford's *Collected Poems,* covering 40 years of continuous activity and containing in its 350 pages the 351 poems she has chosen from her 13 published volumes, is an achievement that deserves the highest praise. From start to finish, the gravity and depth of these poems, their cumulative exploration of the sources of identity and meaning, are the work of a woman who finds herself living in a difficult world ordered and ruled by forces beyond her control. Though she deals hardly at all with specific events in that world – its politics, its injustices, its inequalities, the unprecedented upheavals of the last four decades – it is out there somewhere in the dark, even if registered only obliquely through the mythic forms of the poetry.

In these terms, the apparent simplicity of her poems, the ways in which they move – often without punctuation in lines that vary in length from two to eight or nine or more syllables – quickly deepens, takes on a convincing style of its own, a finely crafted logic of form that delineates through its creative hesitancies an intimate speaking voice. Inevitably, in work of this kind, there are poems that do not quite come off – when the pared-down syntax of the poems remains out of focus and does little more than glance at what lies beneath the surface. But again and again this syntactical spareness (and the silences it charts) penetrates the surface with a haunted sense of vulnerability, of threat, of longing, of desire that probes at the roots of feeling.' It is my tongue not my heart' she writes in *Confession* (195) 'that fails to function/encased in a steel barrier. If only you knew/how thin the steel!'

Such vulnerability is in fact part of Anne Beresford's strength. For these poems are engaged in a persistent search for signals that reach out for answers to questions the poet finds difficult to resolve as she makes her attempt to get at the enigmatic presences that gesture to the self's concerns and the oppressive (or releasing) conditions they are determined by.

'Tell me, my dear, /your secret', she asks in *The Captive* (93):

> I have talked with
> the winds and the sea
> my strength is failing.
> I dream of your hands smoothing my hair
> I dream of your voice soothing my fears.

The poet knows that for herself, as a woman caught in the trap of her life, 'there is no end to this story'; the questions and the doubts are there still to disturb and to haunt, and won't go away. Like the woman in her poem *In Defence of the Belle Dame Sans Merci* (97), it seems 'she has searched so long/she's even begun to wonder what it is she searches for/illusions everywhere she turns'.

These poems, that is, move across the boundaries of love and identity into the unknown, and are given their distinctive musical shape and form not by 'the conscious changes made in her life', but (in the words of Nadine Gordimer) by the 'long, slow mutation of emotion, hidden, all-penetrative'. And this 'gives a shifting quality to the whole surface of life', a verbal energy that is constantly surprising, inventive and illuminating – caught between wonder and distress, as in *2 a.m.* (349), where

> Things grow at night
> shapes change
> and there is always that area
> which floats –
> it leaves a lump of clay
> unshakeable
> only a curved moon can shift it.
>
> Words come from the heaving sea
> clear, blaze as a furnace in the dark
> and shadows move – fleeting, tentative.
>
> If memory is left
> it is emptiness
> the wind howling vengeance.

But against such contradictions, there are always things to celebrate, when:

> At last, as you embrace the light
> the dream of years will wake you
> to an ancient knowledge
> in a fountain of stars. (346)

This impressive book moves with stoic lucidity and courage through the upheavals and shifting levels of the poet's quest for understanding; and it is the discoveries she makes in the course of her long journey into (and beyond) the self, which give her poetry its authentic personal voice.

Christopher Hampton was a lecturer for many years at the University of Westminster and the London City Literary Institute. His *Radical Reader* was reissued by Spokesman Books in 2006 and his most recent poetry collection *Border Crossings* appeared from Katabasis in 2005.

Cicely Herbert goes North to visit Bradford, City of Peace.

When my friend Gerard Benson, a Quaker, agreed to accompany me on the Bradford Peace Trail, I believed it would be a journey of discovery and so it proved.

Bradford was declared a City of Peace in 1997, on the occasion of the Hindu Marathon, an International Peace Run, which has inspired more than 700 peace sites around the world. In Centenary Square a plaque reminds us of the 108,000 people killed by the dropping of bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the many thousands who died later of radiation sickness. Such devastation, unparalleled in human history, ought to be a warning to all of us, as our government considers replacing Trident. In the Memorial Gardens there's a dedication to those soldiers from Bradford who served in the first World War, and nearby, fresh flowers had been laid in memory of PC Sharon Beshenivsky, a recent victim of gun crime in the city. Another plaque remembers the victims of the Bhopal disaster in India in 1984 when thousands of people died from contamination by poisonous gas and many thousands more remain seriously sick. In the City Garden, a fountain is surrounded by an enchanting mosaic made from pebbles, forming fish, dolphins and other sea creatures.

It was raining hard, so we stopped at the Mechanics' Institute Library for shelter and a warming cup of coffee. This gave me the chance to read a collection of newspaper cuttings which charts the work of Florence White, an early feminist. Ms White set up and campaigned tirelessly for the National Spinster's Pension Association. By 1936 she had travelled over 40,000 miles in aid of her cause and in 1939 she presented an umbrella to Neville Chamberlain (perhaps in expectation of a visit by him to Bradford?). In 1942, Florence White campaigned for housing for women widowed by the war.

Leaving the library and out in the rain once more, we found a plaque dedicated to John Nelson, stone-mason and Methodist, who, in 1744 had been locked in a dungeon for preaching his beliefs. Such is the march of time, this site is now occupied by a shop offering 'Tattoos and Body Piercing'.

The Peace Museum was not open that day, but at the District Council Office we met the Museum's curator, who told us about its outreach work and travelling exhibitions. These include, 'My Country is The Whole World,' by women peacemakers, 'Champions of Peace,' about the Nobel Peace Prize, and a history of twentieth century Peace Movements, 'A Vision Shared.' Negotiations are underway for the establishment of a Peace Museum in Leeds which would amalgamate the collections of the Bradford Peace Museum and the Leeds Armoury. An interesting concept.

Outside Bradford University, I was bowled over by a stunning sculpture, 'Reconciliation.' Writing of the work, its maker, Josephina de Vasconcellos, said it was conceived in the aftermath of War and depicts a woman and man reunited, and also the reconciliation of fighting nations. Another sculpture, by Chris Hoggart, housed in the J.B.Priestley Library, has the word 'Peace' inscribed on its base in 53 languages, and is dedicated to his brother, David Hoggart, founder of the Commonweal Library. This library was established in 1975 as a resource for the newly created School of Peace Studies, and it is also open to the public. Here, we saw two of the original designs for the famous symbol of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, CND. It was moving to find some of the present generation of students, studying, seated in armchairs below these historic images. The library is an inspiration. On its reassuringly solid wooden shelves is a collection of books by the world's greatest thinkers, pacifists and historians. (I counted over ninety volumes in the collected works of Gandhi). We have to believe that a significant number of students who have worked in such an environment will go out into the world to become our peacemakers of the future. I left Bradford knowing that, in following the tracks of so many people who believe, passionately, that peace and human harmony will one day be achieved, I had made a momentous journey.

On her trip Cicely Herbert took the photograph for the back cover image for this issue of *Sofia*. It is a detail from a banner created by women of BIASAN (Bradford Immigration and Asylum Support and Advice Network). Each woman used her own handprint.

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.


Rezan
Amanda
Cathy
Judy
Zewde
Leonelle
Valentina
Svetlana
Mehret
Venera
Faranak
Janina
Felicity
Amis
Nailia
Olga
A Asian Woman's Group
Peace
Peace on Earth
Aleyha
Aleyna
A safe world for our children
Zewde
Love + peace
Rosette
Women for Peace
R-L Afghanis
Ashley
love
peace
love