

An impressionistic painting of a tree, rendered with thick, expressive brushstrokes. The foliage is a mix of vibrant greens, yellows, and blues, creating a sense of movement and light. The trunk is dark and textured. The background is a wash of similar colors, blending into the tree's canopy.

s fia

No. 83 May 2007

Mayday! Mayday!

sfia

down to Earth

Sofia is the magazine of the Sea of Faith Network (UK), Registered Charity No. 1113177. The magazine comes out in January, March, May, July, September and November.

MEMBERSHIP

Sofia comes free to Network members. New members are welcome and details of membership are available from the Secretary:

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Subscription Rates for 2007: Individual membership: £30; concession membership: £20; Magazine only: £15 per year.

The Secretary can also give information about local groups.

OVERSEAS

Sofia is available in a variety of countries with payment accepted in local currency.

US readers may pay membership or magazine subscriptions by checks in dollars payable to H. Julien and marked 'for *Sofia*' at prices obtainable from him.

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 Please submit unpublished articles that have not been submitted elsewhere, or if previously published, please state where and when.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

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

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PORTHOLES

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

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ADVERTISING

The magazine is an excellent medium for advertisers targeting a radical and highly literate readership! Contact the editor at the above address.

Rates are:

£120 full page £65 half page
£37 quarter page £25 1/8th of a page

Sofia is printed by Carrick Design & Print, Cardiff.
(029 2074 1150)

WEBSITE

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

ISSN 1749-9062 © *sfia* 2007

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sfia is the magazine of
the Sea of Faith Network (UK)

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

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

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

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

Letter from SoF Chair



2007 Conference

Greetings! I hope that by now you have all received information about our special 20th anniversary conference in Leicester, taking place between 24th and 26th July.

You should have received a booking form and information with your March *Sofia*. Please think seriously about coming to join us this year, fill in the form and send it off without delay. Patsy in the Isle of Wight is looking forward to receiving your completed form and she guarantees to give you prompt acknowledgment! Contact: sofconf07@yahoo.co.uk (01983 740172). A lot of hard work is going into making this event a very exciting conference indeed. **Please note:** Although there are plenty of en-suite rooms *there are very few specially adapted ones* so if you need one of these you will have to get your form in without delay. **Please advertise this event wherever you can and think about bringing a friend with you this year!**

If you are able to come do think about offering something for one of our two loosely-termed 'workshop' slots – by yourself or with someone else. Get in touch with John Pearson (john.pearson@unn.ac.uk or 01912 325980) if you have an idea you'd like to discuss. It need not be strictly related to the theme but *does* have to fit the description that you submit i.e. something described as a 'workshop' should be such, and not a (short) 'talk' by you which allows little active participation.

Let's have some imaginative *new* ways of starting and ending the conference day this year! Get in touch with Hilary Campbell (11 Westway, Goring-on-Thames, Reading, Berks, RG8 0BX) with your suggestions.

Request: Is anyone planning on coming to conference a registered Laughter (Yoga) Club practitioner? What fun it would be to have an early morning therapeutic laughter session amongst the Oadby bushes.

Renewing Your Subscription

By the time you read this I trust that you will have received your membership subscription renewal form. If not, please contact or send your cheque directly to Secretary John Pearson. Details in green panel on left-facing page. We are very sorry that it came to you so late and hope that this hasn't caused too much inconvenience. You will appreciate that we have *not* put up subscriptions this year but have quietly added a further category on the form which we would be grateful if you would consider – becoming a SoF 'Sponsor'. In order to continue financing our top-class magazine, to invest in the exciting new development of our website (with its local group blogsite links) – and to ensure that

we can continue to deliver future conferences we need money up front. By becoming a Sponsor you can help us improve our outreach to the people and places where the concept of 'religious faith as a human creation' is unexplored. Please do think about it!

Advance Notice of our Coming-of-Age Conference, 2008

Progress is already being made in planning for our 21st annual conference, next year. We are having it in **Liverpool** as part of the European Capital of Culture celebrations. It is booked for a **weekend (July 25-27)** and its theme is *Religion and the Arts*. We will be based in Liverpool Hope University, which is located in the suburb of Childwall. There will be the optional facility of staying on in the same (all en-suite) accommodation for up to a further 3 nights on a very reasonable Bed and Breakfast basis for those who would like to participate in the wealth of cultural events that will be on offer in the city. Put the dates on your 2008 forward planner now!

Spare Magazines

We would be most grateful for your help in circulating information about Sea of Faith by contacting Stephen Mitchell for spare copies of the current issue of the magazine (in addition to back issues) to distribute to friends and acquaintances *and to leave in train carriages, on buses, in the doctor's and dentist's waiting room* etc. where someone might just pick one up and contact us to find out more! On a serious note, we ALL need to make every effort to encourage new members to join us if we are to reverse our worrying decline. Small-scale outreach can be as successful as grand 'roadshow' projects if everyone does their bit! Contact Stephen at smitch4517@aol.com or at All Saints Vicarage, The Street, Gazeley, Newmarket, CB8 8RB

Finally...

Until our new constitution has been customised to our needs it is necessary for all the Trustees to step down at this year's AGM. I guess that many of them will probably be prepared to stand again but there are (1) 15 places to (re-)fill and (2) although we have a surfeit of 'bright ideas' that have bubbled up over the last couple of years in Trust meetings – there are many more than Trustees have hours or inclination to put into practice... *We are seriously on the look-out for more 'worker ants' to join the SoF colony!* If you have any spare time on your hands please do think of (1) offering your services to carry out some non-glamorous tasks for the Trust (but with no regular meetings to attend!) or (2) standing for election as a Trustee at the AGM in July. Please contact me for more information: penny.mawdsley@btopenworld.com

Penny Mawdsley

sofia 83 May 2007

Mayday! Mayday!

Like Easter, Mayday is a Spring festival. It is also the traditional workers' holiday and Mayday! Mayday! is a distress call from ships in peril.

Mayday (Celtic: Beltane) is an ancient festival of Spring, sun, fire, new light, fertility and new life. May is the month when the May blossom comes out and the trees shine in all their glory. Our front cover is a painting by the Dutch artist Anne Mieke Lumsden showing a May tree in bloom. Its beauty and gladness may make us feel it is self-evident that humanity should stop treating each other in the ugly ways that we do, that poverty, injustice and war should cease, even if we don't know how to bring this about. The gladness of May brings a yearning for innocence and joy abounding. As Hopkins put it, mortal beauty 'keeps warm our wits to the things that are – what good means' (and therefore does *not* mean).

Easter is also a Spring festival of new life bursting out everywhere. Trees and flowers come out and the birds build their nests. Eastre was the Anglo Saxon dawn goddess – the sun rises in the East – of Spring and fertility; her sacred animal was the leaping hare. The associated Christian Easter celebrates the escape from slavery of a people and the rising to new life of one who was crucified. The paschal candle, 'the light of Christ', is lit from new fire and raised up high. Its light is spread to many candles, then it is plunged into the font with a prayer to make the water 'fertile and capable of regenerating'. The risen Christ leaping up, the 'new Adam', is humanity's namesake hero, the prototype of all its struggles for freedom, life against death, love against hate. In his Easter message Columba Ryan OP of St Dominic's in London says: 'The resurrection is not an historical event; it did not happen in history.' We may not believe Jesus really rose from the dead, but when we bring to this story or drama – as Coleridge put it – 'that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith' it can become transformed into a conviction of value, that the Earth and her people's ongoing struggle for life and love is worth the candle.

In this issue (page 17) we report on the liberation theologian Jon Sobrino's recent condemnation by the Inquisition for 'errors' in his two books, *Christ the Liberator* and *Jesus the Liberator*. Sobrino believes that where Jesus can be found today is in 'the crucified people', those who are struggling against injustice and poverty for decent human lives. That is their rising, their resurrection.

Mayday, the First of May, is also traditionally the workers' holiday, to celebrate the Spring and look forward to a fairer world. SoF Trustee Michael Morton's opening article asks: *Can Capitalism Bring Social Justice?* This is followed by Christopher Hampton's *A Humanist Agenda*, which is a response to my talk *Down to Us*. He points out that religious and poetic dramas are not in themselves sufficient to bring about a humane society. Those stories have been around a very long time and it is patently obvious that so far not all of us on Earth 'share the same loaf.'

As well as a Spring festival and workers' holiday, 'Mayday! Mayday!' is a distress call, said to derive from the French '*m'aider*', which means 'help me'. Ships in distress use it internationally and on the back of this issue we have Turner's dramatic *Shipwreck*. The beauty and gladness of May bring a yearning that things should be right on Earth. But we know that they are not, so it is fitting that 'Mayday!' should also be a distress call, both for suffering humanity and for Planet Earth, herself now in now danger of shipwreck.

Before this Editorial, there is a message from SoF Chair Penny Mawdsley, and one of the things she speaks about is the SoF Summer Conference, *The Good Life?* As this is SoF's twentieth anniversary, it was planned that the Conference should be on 'global issues'. There will be a strong input on the environment, the danger of climate change and global warming, what we can do about it. The matter is crucial: the Earth is our home and we should look after it, not treat it with crazy destructiveness, like doped adolescents stealing from their mother or trashing their family home. We should do what we can as individuals, but if we privatise the problem, we will trivialise it and not actually get very far. It would be like keeping our heads stuck in a recycled carrier bag.

It must also be confronted as a global *public*, *political* matter, in which powerful interests are involved to halt or stymie any adequate action on the environment. Neither is it separate from issues of peace and justice; the same powerful interests are often involved. Our Mayday call must be for the Earth *and* its people, so that the promise of the paradisaical May blossom is not mocked, life continues on Earth and is worth living for all.

Can Capitalism Bring Us Social Justice?

Michael Morton looks at the possibilities for our present victorious late capitalist system.

During the 1930s and at the time of the Fascist government in Italy, an Italian doctor and political activist called Carlo Levi was exiled to Italy's deep south. He settled in Aliano, a village in Matera province, and later wrote of the hardship and desperate poverty he found there in a book called *Christ Stopped at Eboli*. The title came from what people said to him. They used to say: 'We are not Christians; Christ stopped at Eboli'. Eboli, south of Naples, was where the railway line gave out; beyond it there was only wilderness and despair. And in the dialects of southern Italy, 'Christians' simply meant 'people', 'human beings'. The people lamented that lacking more than just subsistence, they were not fully human. Levi's reflections point to a sober insight: that being authentically Christian and truly human are the same thing. Don Cupitt points this out to good effect with the observation that many mediaeval paintings, such as the *Maestà* by Duccio di Buoninsegna in the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena, depict just an orderly crowd of very similar and equal human beings. Religion, he argues, has long seen itself as a radical-humanist world. So too the *Decree on the Church in the Modern World* of Vatican II began:

The joy and hope, the griefs and anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing human fails to find an echo in their hearts. (*Gaudium et Spes*)

The search for authenticity may mean almost the same as the human quest to seek and to find God, which is why St Augustine once wrote simply that the glory of God is man fully alive. But is this a personal endeavour, or can we read our authentic nature off the ideologies of modern society?

Some writers on postmodernity seem to think that we have arrived at an end-point of history in the sense that humanity's struggle for social and political completion has ended. The cessation of the Cold War and the world-wide triumph of liberal democracy, capitalism and a belief in human rights have brought to an end all ideological struggles. But there are

dissenting voices. People point to the breakdown of a liberal optimism, which stood us in such good stead since the nineteenth century. It failed largely because its theories underestimate the human inclination to avoid truth in the pursuit of self-interest. Hardly a century after the French Revolution, society and religion became pluralist, eclectic and fragmented with no fixed cycle of things and no grand narratives to explain the world. It all cast doubts upon the claims of a cheerful prolific optimism that is the politicians' reply to modern life. It is harder now to find a niche within which the good life can be lived. It is no longer enough to avoid London and live in the country nor to choose domestic rather than public life nor even to put a trust in the old-style consolations of religion. Trying to reproduce or re-introduce them is like trying to keep 'em down on the farm after they've seen Paree.

The history of capitalist venture over the past hundred years does not support any argument for proposing that capitalism is self-adjusting, never mind self-regulating.

Karl Marx himself was ambiguous about the future. Sometimes he argued that capitalism would produce its own gravediggers, but in other sections of his writings he foreshadowed our era of globalised capitalism. Globalism certainly seems to have triumphed everywhere, in the economic, social and political arenas. But it is a paradoxical ideology. The history of capitalist venture over the past hundred years does not support any argument for proposing that capitalism is self-adjusting, never mind self-regulating. Time and again it has needed political, fiscal and legal correction to complement the 'invisible hand' of the market.

Then there is inequality, as Marx once again foresaw. One facet of globalised capitalism is that it offers disproportionate rewards to its best performers, not just in the City of London but in Shanghai, Moscow and Mumbai too. What will be the future political effects of having a small elite of very rich people in countries where the majority remain very poor? In countries like Britain and the USA where there is a reasonably well-to-do middle class that slowly improves its standard of living, this may not matter so much. However, once they begin to feel that the process of globalisation is making a very few financiers extremely rich by outsourcing their bourgeois jobs out East, then there will be a backlash. Others argue that capitalism will become so familiar and standard that in a hundred years there will be no general need for the word capitalism at all. The only students who will be writing about 'capitalism' or 'socialism' in 2107 will be those studying history.

Those commentators who would pastiche Winston Churchill argue that capitalism, for all its faults, is the best system that we have available. They point out that as the years of the 1960s and 70s came and went, the sheer irrelevance of socialism seemed to be apparent – the endless strikes, bolshie unions, winters of discontent and the paralysis of central government in the face of forces and movements that no-one seemed to want. Then industrial production waned, and with it the working classes. The post-war boom faded in the face of intensified international competition which forced down rates of profit. The only solution was for capitalism to make a dramatic sea-change. Staff were reduced, nationalised industries turned to private ventures and production was exported to wage-spots in the 'developing world'. The labour movement was suddenly constrained and forced to accept humiliating restraints on its liberties. Investment turned from industrial manufacture and towards the service, finance and communications sectors.

From the socialist point of view, the irony was plain. The changes that were moving it to oblivion were precisely those that it had tried to understand and explain. Socialism was not vanquished because the system had altered; it was out of favour because the system was all the more intensively what it had been before. Capitalism had not reformed itself, leaving socialist critique superfluous. Socialism had been rejected because the system appeared so hard to beat, and that was what caused so many to despair of radical change.

The point of Socialism, and even of its radical Marxist variety, may now not be apparent to people in this country who see the Yorkshire coal-mines closing, the motor industry disappearing from the Midlands and the Western working class shrinking



The Author of the Wealth of Nations

Adam Smith

away. On a world-wide scale, the inequalities between rich and poor have produced a strong militant disaffection on the part of the world's poor, who feel that they are not being invited to the party. And whereas Marx and Engels had looked for disaffection in Manchester and Bradford, it is to be found today in the slums of Dar-es-Salaam and the kasbahs of Damascus. Everyone knows that the 6.5 billion people now alive cannot live like the rich, middle-class consumers in the West. In maybe only a few decades the oil will noticeably start to run out and what took about 400 million years to lay down will have been used up in a century and a half. Sustainability may be a boring word, but it really is the biggest challenge to global capitalism today, because if capitalism literally cannot produce the goods, than what earthly use is it?

And if it does deliver, the capitalist system would need to grow from below. Only 17 years after the fall of the old Soviet Union, the modern city of St Petersburg is a strange city where poverty and squalor sit uneasily alongside fashion, wealth and a reproduced western Europe for the tourist in the shape of hotels, restaurants and shops. But the old Soviet Leningrad is never far away and we are probably mistaken in believing that any overriding

ideology can save us. Despite the victory of capitalism, there is a resistance to looking clearly at its flaws, but it must be the time now to have a discussion about the kind of economy we want. The primary locus of political attention in the past half-century has been on the state and its relationship to the individual. It has all been to do with taxation, regulation, redistribution and public services that are the staple diet of labour policies. The fruits of this philosophy are tangible, but in the end the fact is that government cannot save people. The central social issue of the future will not be the relationship of the individual to the state but to the people for whom they work, the organisation that their work supports and the people in their immediate orbit or local community. It could be called socialism without the state, or capitalism with more capitalists, but it doesn't matter. It would be what John Stuart Mill called: 'the conversion of each human being's daily occupation into a school of the social sympathies and the practical intelligence.'

Even Adam Smith, famous for his description of the invisible hand of the market and the 'greed is good' school of raw capitalism, has been reappraised. (He has just appeared to replace Sir Edward Elgar on the £20 note.) Smith argued elsewhere that economic liberty delivered political, legal and intellectual

Socialism had been rejected because the system appeared so hard to beat, and that was what caused so many to despair of radical change.

enlightenment. He supported state intervention to promote fair competition and root out privilege. He backed universal, public education and lamented outlandish profits and rewards. Compassion and benevolence are the catalysts of civil society. In the end, we seem to be moving towards the advice of the gnomic guru in T.S. Eliot's play *The Cocktail Party*. His advice to more than one of the characters looking for a way out was simply 'work out your salvation with diligence'. He may have had a point. Either the world is no longer ideology-shaped, or else it never was in the first place. It is just an ironic feature of human life that what once stood so strong sometimes merely turns out to belong to a passing era.

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



Peter Lumsden

Peter Lumsden, a long-term member of SoF and former Steering Committee Member, died on Easter Tuesday, 10th April 2007. For many years he regularly spoke about Christian Atheism and a world of justice and peace at Hyde Park Speakers' Corner in London. In 1961 he went on the San Francisco to Moscow Peace Walk and remained an activist ever since.

A Humanist Agenda

Christopher Hampton responds to Dinah Livingstone's talk *Down To Us* published in *Sofia* 81.

It's down to us,' you declare in the editorial and your article in *Sofia* 81; and there are many images from Christian iconography – from the great painting schools and painters of Europe, which have affirmed a sensate view of the world, breaking through the ideological restraints of the Church to generate an alternative, humanist view of reality – generous and open-armed and in that sense also vulnerable. And in your detailed study of New Testament texts you make eloquent sense of the luminous poetry of the Christian myth in arguing for it as 'an epic story, a poem or drama of humanity's – and the whole earth's – struggle for liberation'.

But while I would accept (and applaud) the spirit of this argument, and the delicacy and warmth of your affirmation of the Christian message, I find it difficult to go along with the belief system it gives licence to. The problem for me, is that this myth – trenchant and dramatic as it is – has hovered around the lives of too many generations of people now without ever being able to get anywhere close to coping with the contradictions of the material world it was Christ's aim to provide a resolution to. Its idealist principles (its vision of life and death) have persistently played into the hands of the ideologists of material power as an instrument with which to strengthen their control over the mass of the people, vulnerable and insecure as they almost always have been.

These familiar texts may well reflect (and chart the course of) Christ's ministry 2000 years ago as part of an alternative history that challenged the authority of Roman law and its oppressive ideology as imposed upon its subject peoples. But its idealist other-worldly appeal could not offer any sort of material challenge to the power of Rome except by becoming an institutionalised church incorporating 'the image of (an) invisible God' as 'the head of the body, the church' which holds 'all things together' by inducing fear of the unknown and of the Evil One. And that world gesturing to a world healed and re-made through the pain of Christ's death, was very soon caught up in the fundamental disputes and derangements which then plunged Europe and the rest of the world into violent collision, thus virtually betraying the vision of Christ.

If the time for us, the *kairos*, as you put it, is now, that now has still not come, except for those who believe in an after-life. And it has not come perhaps because it preaches a non-material, metaphysical consolation for the oppressed, the hungry and the poor – their acquiescence, their acceptance of the injustices they suffer. Nor has the blessing of the poor and the hungry – poor and hungry as so many are – brought peace,

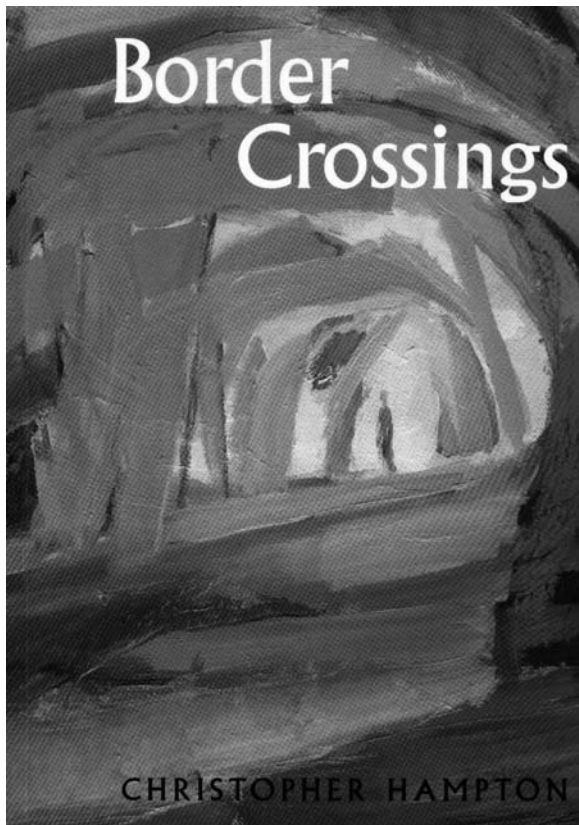
because beyond the blessing lie the powers that dictate and control the actual conditions of material reality, the forces of production which determine the ways we live. And there is no evading these conditions. It may be that the peacemakers are among the blessed; but they are continually confronted by men waging wars in the name of peace and justice; and this ugly reality is not to be overcome unless we are prepared to face up to it. The vision of global justice, that is, cannot in itself bring any sort of qualitative change; and the struggle for this must inevitably involve us in physical collision with the enemies of humanity.

If the time for us, the *kairos*, as you put it, is now, that now has still not come.

In other words, Sobrino's 'crucified people' must sometime or other, as he says, rise up against the passivity and acquiescence that make them victims. And so long as the 'project of human possibility' remains an 'imaginary project' they will remain victims. To declare that 'we who are many are one body because we all share the same loaf' is clearly inadequate, because the many are not, and have never been, 'one body'; and they palpably do not 'share the same loaf'.

True, the message of Christ is that we are all dependent on each other; which means we have to find grounds for trust, the trust and love of others, and organise together, collectively. But still one has to ask whether that vision of Christ is not itself flawed in its argument for a world transformed, let alone the one we actually live in; or whether, in coming down to this world 2000 years ago, it can speak for this world or remain anchored or 'embodied' in it. For as it stands, that vision mystifies the material, rises out of it into the invisible and the ethereal; and from that point on creates a false and irrational consciousness dominated by invisible powers; an ideology which dictates and enforces acquiescence through fear, timidity and awe, to an unaccountable and unanswerable Prime Mover (God) from somewhere supernaturally beyond our control.

Yes, of course, the Old Testament God is different from the god embodied in Christ through the New Testament, with Christ himself as a peacemaker. But in what kind of world? And to what end? That other world beyond death? But there is also the world of human society, the world we live in, the world of Europe's countless wars, the devastating eruptions of the 20th



century, which came to a climax with the unspeakable horrors of the Nazi creed and its death-camps. And that world too has to be taken into account in the reckoning: what it is that is down to us.

In other words, there are layers of ideology and of metaphysics to be negotiated, dealt with, understood and resisted in dealing with the interaction of the theory and practice of reality, if we are ever to break the regressive fundamentalist bonds which hold most people back from fulfilling their potentialities. We've had enough, that is, of

Many palpably do not 'share the same loaf'

the irrational hierarchic forces clamping down upon us from above. And we've never been more in need than now of a rational materialising alternative to these inflamed ideas and ideologies.

That is why I would find myself wanting to emphasise the need for the sanity and rigour of the work of the great historians – men like E.H. Carr, E.P. Thompson, A.L. Morton, Christopher Hill, and Lord Acton. Acton, for instance, insisted on putting 'conscience above both system and success', and called for judgement because he believed that history was about justice, about giving 'voices to those seen as hitherto voiceless in the master narratives of history – the poor, women, minorities of every ethnic, social and ideological description'. And as a Catholic radical, he was as severe in his judgement of the Papacy and the Roman Church, because of the damage they had done to the concept of progressive thinking and action, believing

no-one and no crime should be permitted 'to escape the undying penalty which history has the power to inflict on wrong'. 'Power', as he observes, 'tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.' So the challenge continues – the pursuit of 'truth', the defence of human reason – as people like Galileo and Bruno knew it had to if there was to be any progress, even though they knew that the system had betrayed them. And these, it seems to me, are the crucial issues, based upon the most rigorous and exacting standards, which cannot be expected from the visionary texts of the gospels, because their aim was to promote a vision and had a different purpose.

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.

Question and Answer

So what kind of voice do we have to have to get the message through?

Just turn your back, just turn your back.

No, listen! What I'm saying is we cannot let this go. Can you?

Just turn your back, just turn your back.

But that's no answer. Let it all go?

That's what they want us to do.

Just turn your back, just turn your back.

So you believe no answer's best – to shrug one's shoulders and ignore it all?

Yes, turn your back, just turn your back.

But that would leave them in control.

Is that what you want? Is that what you want?

It makes no difference. Fight – you lose.

We have no power. It's they who choose, control the ground, hold all the weapons.

Turn your back, just turn your back.

But doing that's against all sense, all common ground, all shared experience.

We cannot let them get away with that.

But look at the facts, just look at the facts!

They've sewn it all up – technology's global magic puts the market out of reach.

So turn your back, just turn your back.

Christopher Hampton

This poem is reprinted from the author's collection *Border Crossings* (Katabasis, London 2005).

Required: A New Moral Sensitivity

Dominic Kirkham argues that morality arises not from a 'chain of argument and induction' but from an 'immediate feeling and finer internal sense.'

Oh for the Middle Ages! When God was in Heaven and order reigned on earth; a vision of harmony encapsulated in the stones of dreamy cathedral spires and the shimmering domes of mosques. When prophets and saints walked the earth and believers followed these heroes of moral rectitude. When the ragged fringes of doubt could be readily trimmed by inquisitor/mullahs or crusader/jihadists. This is the dream from which modernity awoke.

But many haven't! Indeed, it is beguiling enough to persuade increasing numbers to try to resurrect it in the face of social anomie. Both religious fundamentalists and political neo-cons (there is considerable overlap) share a vision of a more ordered, defined world in which everyone will know their place. If they differ it is in that whilst the former may believe this sincerely the latter have their doubts, but see no other viable alternative. The 'con' in neo-cons is the willingness to blank out the reasons why (some of) humanity awoke from its dream of Medievalism and chose to reject its various Gothic reincarnations.

Reasoned rules, based on clear ideas, have seemingly not yet made the world a utopia.

Underlying both is fear: fear of a moral vacuum, of existential emptiness, by which we condemn ourselves to live out our lives on the edges of despair as the tide of social disintegration and the Nietzschean deluge laps around us. Now everything fails us, from marriage to the railways – we don't seem to be able to keep our trains on track, let alone our lives. So is it any wonder that younger generations become increasingly wayward? What they (we) clearly seem to need is definitive markings, tablets of stone or Koranic script for all to see.

Only we don't. The hope of every moral revivalist is that admonition will do the trick. A word will be spoken and people will change. Only they won't. Even those who claimed to have 'awoken' from the dream of Medievalism – 'the enlightened ones', such as John Locke, Kant and J.S. Mill – continued to believe in the power of clear ideas, the strength of moral argument and principle. It sounded convincing, but has been clearly ineffective. Reasoned rules, based on clear ideas, have seemingly not yet made the world a utopia; but then to utopians the adverb 'yet' is everything!

But all is not lost. To those of romantic disposition another vocabulary is available. It hinges on the word 'sensitivity': something felt in the veins of



unremembered pleasure, in which, as the poet Wordsworth phrased it, 'our affections gently lead us on.' Could this be, 'Love a Hoody'? No, but it is an essential beginning. It hinges on a crucial and neglected insight of the philosopher David Hume, that morality arises not from a 'chain of argument and induction' but from an 'immediate feeling and finer internal sense.'

What could he mean? According to those who loosely call themselves 'social intuitionists', the decisive arena of moral judgement is within the hidden world of unconscious emotional intuitions. When people decide what to do, what is right or wrong for them, reasoning plays a minor role. Of course all have their reason ready after; but initially it is within the emotional inner depths that the decisions are taken – 'for' us, if not 'by' us, as when we intuitively 'decide' if we like someone at the first revealing glance. It is about how we are emotionally structured, or sensitised.

And herein lies the challenge. A psychopath or sadist does not enter upon his actions after embarking upon a chain of reasoning. They do so because of a failure of empathy – a failure to make any emotional linkage. There is evidence of some degree of damage or abnormality of the brain in the psychopathic criminal, but these are extremes. What is normal is that our emotions are tutored by experience. Where there is no experience of affection, trust, security, support, none such are likely to be forthcoming, whatever the admonitions.

What is required is action. The action required is the creation of a context, an environment of affection, stability, care and respect. Traditionally different cultures have formulated how such things may be transmitted in a moral code. But the code is secondary. Humans are not 'hardwired' with one type of morality any more than they are for one language. As in learning a language, all people are born with the instinct for learning a grammar. Which one is for parents to provide. But, whatever the words, what is now required is an essential grammar of affective sensitivity.

In a multicultural society this is important to note, otherwise we will be arguing over the wrong things, the accidentals rather than essentials. Rather than life programmes or principles, morality first requires a lifestyle. Someone (usually parents) have got to make the first move to show affection and care and those things will be the base of the moral personality. And here it is necessary to use an old-fashioned, somewhat antiquated word: sacrifice. All ancient religious traditions made a big thing of sacrifice – but for the wrong reasons: to placate unpredictable deities. Our modern need is otherwise: to placate unpredictable offspring.

If we are not prepared to do this, then 'Don't blame the kids'. This is the mantra of woman of the year, Camilla Gelhidabatmansingh, founder of the Kid's Company. This groundbreaking organisation works with some of the most disturbed offspring of our society. Its policy is simple: to put in place some of those emotional

essentials that children have missed out on. (A second window of opportunity/hope appears in early adolescence when the brain reorganises itself for adult life and when it is particularly susceptible to – and in need of – affective support and stability.) Their absence will be a seriously disturbed brain and recalcitrant behaviour.

The alternative life programme is one of punitive restraint: costly and largely ineffective. Without the dual input of affective sensitivity and sacrifice into the matrix of our society then there is little real hope for the future. We should resign ourselves to posting over it those words Dante placed over the entrance to Hell (in the time people believed in such a place): 'Abandon hope all you that enter here.'

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

Perhaps

If you think there is nothing
then you have nothing to say
If you think there is something
then you have something to say
and if you think of honour
you will have something
honourable to say.

There were those people –
I'm talking of the past
when there was still a choice
of occupation.
The word itself is an indication
as to the choice.

There were those whose occupation
was the occupation of territories
and there were those
whose occupation was work
small tasks slender hopes
in and on and for and with
their peopled land.

There was always a conflict
over the meaning of words
nobody ever agreed
except in groups of languages
certainly there were words in abundance
all those languages
each discussing the same
and each in their own language
nobody ever agreed
except in groups of languages.

So there was this word
occupation.
There were two languages
which misunderstood
each other's definition.

One said – right, I occupy,
let them work,
that's their lookout.
I'll take all their produce
by force or by hook
or by crook.

So some were forced
and some were crooked
and some were hooked.
The more abundance was produced
the more the occupiers took
the more the people worked
the more they got exploited.
Frequently they changed sides.
All because of a word with two meanings.

But even in those days
there were people
who were honourable.
Such a person, by what I hear,
was the poet Catullus who once
addressed Caesar
in the following lines:

*Nil nimium studeo, Caesar, tibi velle placere
nec scire utrum sis albus aut ater homo.*

He had no desire to please Caesar
or wanted to know him at all.

John Rety

John Rety came to England from Hungary in 1947.
He runs the Hearing Eye Press and the regular
Torriano Meeting House Poetry Readings in London.
The poem is from his collection *In the Museum*
(Hearing Eye, London 2007).

The Struggle Shared

A Dialogue Between Atheist Friends: I

Philip Berry's dialogue between two atheist friends, Thomas and Simon, takes place over a number of years. This first episode is called Youth – Arrogance and Abstraction.



A park, at night

Thomas: Why would you say we are here, Simon?

Simon: I would say that we are here to remain here.

Thomas: To procreate you mean. As individuals, I would agree that that is a priority and perhaps a duty, but as a species, what of that?

Simon: I can imagine no ultimate aim or point to existence. But I observe that the only thing mankind has done consistently is further its knowledge of the world and the universe in which it lives.

Thomas: So you would say that is our goal, if there is one. To increase our knowledge? To work out how we got here, where we are in the universe, how we relate to it?

Simon: Yes.

Thomas: Doesn't the acceptance of God's existence inadvertently answer both the how and why? Whenever a believer in God considers those philosophical questions, he invariably comes to a premature halt. When confronted by the unanswerable, he gives up striving, and turns to that production of his mind, the idea that was implanted at childhood, God. This creation answers the difficult questions for him. To the atheist the question would remain unanswered, but to the believer it is now closed, sealed. The inquirer is satisfied, and stops seeking a solution. This man, who may have been capable of probing further, of finding an answer, gives up, for all the mysteries can be ascribed to a greater power.

Simon: You are saying that people who believe in God will have no hunger to answer important questions. If all humanity believed in God mankind would not advance.

Thomas: Exactly. I say that religion, by its conclusive nature, its finality, stunts the growth of humanity. And in another way. Would you agree that people need an example, a vision of perfection, to achieve improvement?

Simon: All religions, through the prophets, saints, and fathers of their various creeds, provide such examples.

Thomas: But just as religion provides premature answers to deep questions, does it not, by the very examples of perfection that it describes, shortcut and facilitate the process at which we as a species should be continually struggling. It is a form of complacency. 'We need only be Christian (or Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu... whichever is chosen) in our behaviour to ensure a comfortable life after death.' The vision then, is directed not at the present, but beyond it, where it hangs like a promise and a threat. Agreed, if en masse every individual adheres to the Christian way of life, be their motivation the genuine desire to be good or the fear of what will come later, then earthly conditions do improve, but for humanity to prosper surely we should act not as instructed by our disparate religions but by genuine desire. It is another example of religion stunting, through its provision of easy answers, humanity's progress.

Simon: You are accusing billions of intellectual and moral inertia. But I can prove that religion is necessary for the continuation of humanity. There are a number of axiomatic rules by which civilised humans live. They are not consciously taught, but our instincts necessitate their deployment in everyday life. If we, by thinking too deeply, undermined these axioms of nature, the result would be a chaotic breakdown of civilisation.

Thomas: How can 'thinking too deeply' undermine civilisation?

Simon: Because without answers, and you must accept that finding those answers will take hundreds of generations, you meet only fear and despair. I feel it, lying alone in bed, contemplating the universe. Its size, its lack of boundaries, scares

me. And focussing in on this slightly terrifying mental state, I concentrate on our galaxy, and our solar system, and finally our planet, and its people. And I get up, put my clothes on, and think – why the hell am I bothering? Nothing I do will make the slightest bit of difference in this infinite universe. Apathy, nihilism, a drowning sense of unimportance. These are the results of atheism.

Thomas: But Simon, you are an atheist. You're worrying me. You need to find a way around these feelings.

Simon: I have, I think. I only find myself thinking like that because of our conversations together. It's not normal. Most people don't lie awake thinking that way. But if you do, like me, you need to sidestep, let it go past you so as not to get depressed. And I do that by ignoring, by forgetting the unimaginable magnitude of it all, and finding my way through everyday life, like the existentialists.

Thomas: Surely that is a form of self-delusion, just like religious faith.

Simon: Yes, you're right. And you have proved me right. To exist, to continue in our lives, without hitting that note of despair, you need to create a delusion. I cannot use God, because I know He does not exist, but I can find other ways. Consider the population of Earth, each individual adult or adolescent mind (and I think it is we, the youth, who think most about these things). They cannot each be expected to find a personal route through this problem. It is far more practical, and healthy, to present to them during their upbringing a ready made structure, a set of answers, to assuage that fearful, frustrated realisation that indeed, nothing really makes much difference...

Thomas: A sop, to pacify ignorant minds.

Simon: It is this offensive disregard for your fellow men and women that will isolate you Thomas.

Thomas: Yes, yes. Now listen. I argued that God will perpetuate this deficit in our mental capacity, by suppressing our attempts to increase our understanding. You now argue that this deficit will destroy us, de-motivate us, reduce us to apathetic transients on a planet that will one day be destroyed by supernova, and that God therefore saves us from ourselves. So which one shall we go for – intellectual stunting or a slow death? You might say it's best to survive: so what if we fail to understand the properties of matter or learn to travel to neighbouring systems, best, surely, to just be. But you cannot agree with that Simon...because you agreed with me that the reason we are here, is to further our understanding. That's the point of us, you agreed – to understand.

Simon: No. We need faith, to sustain ourselves while we make that effort. Before we arrive at the answers we will have to go through a long uncertain stage, being unsure and doubtful of humanity's axiomatic principles; so destruction

will occur before the resolution of the important questions. We are, in any case, talking of a time scale of thousands of centuries. Look how far we have come... we still do not know if we are alone in the universe, we still cannot make energy without destroying the planet on which we stand, we still cannot suppress the wayward genetics that lead to cancer. We are a long way off understanding how and why, and without God I do not think we can maintain the required social stability to produce the individuals, systems and technologies required to find answers.

Thomas: So we must be carried, protected from uncertainty, cosseted by faith...what chance is there that we will ever comprehend the enormity of existence, if we cannot face the question without such protection?

Philip Berry is a London doctor. He has published various articles in journals, some in dialogue form.

Sofia hopes to publish further episodes of this dialogue in future issues.

Jesus & the Trojan War: Myth & Meaning for Today

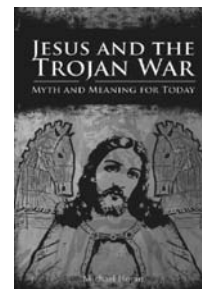
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ISBN 9781845400811

Published April 2007

by Imprint Academic



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Cardenal Points

Dear Editor,

I think that the letter from Patti Whaley and Rob Wheeler (*Sofia* Jan 2007) does not come up to the standards that they set in their last sentence, promoting reason and condemning rhetoric. The writers object to Cardenal's '216 countries invaded' claim. They make vague, judgemental and unsubstantiated comments in the two sentences starting 'I've seen the list...' Simply making claim and counter-claim enlightens no one. If the writers wish to question the number they should produce, or at least reference, the facts which justify their refutation. Moreover, Cardenal's implied criticism of the USA would be no less valid if it had invaded only 100 countries rather than 200. Then comes the strange sentence about putting Bush on a par with Stalin's gulags and the Nazi Gestapo. It is far from clear how one can put on a par a person on the one hand, and a prison camp or a police organisation on the other. Nonetheless, Cardenal makes no reference to the Nazis other than using the word 'gestapo' to indicate a political police organisation and makes only a single comparison between Hitler and Bush namely their ability to start wars. He makes no reference to Stalin. The reference to gulags is a quote from Amnesty International and the word gulag is no longer restricted to Stalin's prison camps, any more than the term concentration camp is restricted to British camps in South Africa. Whilst Cardenal makes allusions to Hitler, the published words cannot reasonably be interpreted to justify the assertion that he is claiming that Bush has travelled as far as Hitler. To conclude that they do might be described by those with an interest in rhetoric as 'simply hysterical.'

Of course, if you have a specific objective, to call a spade a spade is not always the best strategy. If one did equate Bush and Hitler there would be some, perhaps those who are unwilling to face up to the reality that the emergence of another Hitler-like figure is still possible, who would argue that there are significant differences between Bush and Hitler (For example, Hitler was not without some talent as a writer, he probably had the excuse of being mentally ill and he did not avoid conscription to the trenches in World War I.) Having done that, they can then rationalise not even listening to the message. Moreover it may not be necessary to directly draw the comparison. The facts can speak for themselves. Hitler accused other countries of preparing to attack Germany or Germans

as a prelude to his invading them. Hitler regarded some people (Jews, gypsies and the mentally ill) as less human than others. Hitler authorised arbitrary arrest and detention without trial or access to lawyers. Hitler's regime sanctioned torture and extrajudicial execution. Bush's record on similar issues is available for the world to see. People can draw their own conclusions about the similarities and the differences. They do not need politicians, priests or the Sea of Faith to tell them what to think. However in today's world, where governments are all too keen to conceal evidence, we need all the help we can get in ascertaining what the facts really are.

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Emergent What?

Dear Editor,

Open up to God by Anthony Freeman in *Sofia* 82 contained much that interested me, but I had a problem with his use of the term 'Christ'. The distinction between the undoubtedly human Jesus, and the post-Resurrection Christ, with whom the Church of today claims to be in a living relationship, is an important one. But the first time Freeman uses 'Christ', it is to speak of 'Christ's human mind'. So it seems that for him 'Christ' is a synonym for 'Jesus'. But this creates a difficulty that need not exist. The post-Resurrection Christ, the Christ of the 21st Century Church, is, essentially by definition, divine. Nothing to establish, nothing to argue about there, no matter how radical you may want to be.

About the human Jesus, it is surely equally self-evident that, as Freeman says, '*his human mind arose from the complex physiology of his body, especially his brain and nervous system*'. But I cannot see why anyone in the 21st Century would want to go on to say of Jesus: '*just as the mind or soul is not an added ingredient to the human body, but an integral and emergent feature of it, so [Jesus'] divinity is not an added ingredient to his human person, but an integral feature of it...*' unless he were desperately trying to re-package traditional, orthodox dogma to make it appear to be consistent with modern knowledge.

It seems to me that Anthony Freeman has got himself into a tangle that he might have avoided if he had made use of the usual distinction in meaning and usage between 'Christ' and 'Jesus'. It makes very good sense to me to suggest that the human Jesus attained a fuller degree of what humanness can be, than anyone before him or than most people since. But I cannot see what we gain by trying to label this fullness '*divinity*'.

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Regarding Anthony Freeman's article *Open up to God*, which appeared in the March 2007 issue:— at least two objections need to be raised against Freeman's postulate that God is an emergent property and resultant of the human mind and body, and that He is a stage of the natural process of evolution.

Firstly, this stage is said to be 'ultimate'. Yet, from a genuinely scientific and biological standpoint, no evolutionary stage can be regarded with absolute certainty as final. Such certainty is ruled out by the fact that natural laws are only statistical and probabilistic. Hence it is simply anti-scientific to pontificate on this matter, and in the apparently arbitrary way that Freeman does.

Secondly, the usual view of so-called 'emergents' from the evolutionary process is that they do not power the process from which they have emerged/ resulted. But Freeman, referring to the emergence of Deity, says that 'the creator emerges at the end of the creative process'. This appears to mean that Deity actually engineers His own appearance; the 'creator' must, logically, be driving a process which is 'creative', and therefore must be anterior to it, not a product of it. On these obvious objections, Freeman may wish to comment.

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Whose Razor?

Why do I wake today to the sound of my grandfather sharpening his razor on that ancient strop of his? It surely can't have anything to do with that article about = 'emergent properties' I read just before going to sleep!

A curious article, right enough. I couldn't quite see why, for instance, the writer was treating as reality — even as some sort of 'emergent' reality — an entity whose existence he seemed so keen to sideline. All right, Jesus of Nazareth was in some ways a rather exceptional person, so seemingly exceptional in his own day that his followers made exceptional claims concerning him, claims expressed however in terms of which we can now make little sense — terms like 'heaven-inspired prophet' and 'Son of God'. Why indeed do we even feel the need to make sense of such terms, when we can find perfectly acceptable interpretations of the supposed facts without them? Try the likes of this:

A young man of no great learning but claiming (not unlike some before him) a certain depth of insight into the ethical doctrines of his tribe, gifted also perhaps with the gifts of healing, sets out on an evangelical mission. He is soon hailed by many as the long looked-for prophet who will herald the coming

of their god's 'rule of righteousness', such being the religious climate of his day. Accepting this view of himself and his mission, he heads for Jerusalem to make his mark where it really matters, staging there the sort of entry whose symbolic purport is plain for all to discern, and proceeding, on the strength of his reception, to make a violent attack against the 'ungodly' establishment on its most prestigious of all sites. The 'ungodly' establishment sees to it that he pays the price which is not at all what he believed would happen. Overwhelmed by uncomprehending despair, he dies the savage death decreed for rebels of his generation, accepting nevertheless that this is the will of his Heavenly Father and trusting perhaps that the promised 'rule of righteousness' will be somehow speeded by his suffering. A truly tragic tale of great goodness and even greater delusion, but ending with an uncertain but inextinguishable hope. Understandably the stuff of drama, as in the greatly moving liturgies of Holy Week.

Openness, I agree, we need; openness even to the point of an admission that there exist in heaven and earth things as yet undreamed of. But it is no part of openness to cling to what we have no further use for. And no, it isn't the flip-flop of my granddad's razor I'm hearing in the mind's ear. It's the ulnar motions of our far more distant ancestor, as he hums his favourite ditty:
ENTIA NON SUNT MULTIPLICANDA PRAETER NECESSITATEM!

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Anthony Freeman is the managing editor of the *Journal of Consciousness Studies*. Would he be someone who could write an article for *Sofia* on *Mysticism*? I think that is an important element in world religions. Mystics are just as relevant as philosophers!

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Anthony Freeman has agreed to write an article on mysticism for a future issue of Sofia. Ed

The God Problem

In issue 82, Don writes: 'Which is the universal creator whose activity forms us and our world: is it the God of the three Abrahamic religions or is it the ceaseless flow of human language...?' Just those two alternatives? What about the non-Abrahamic faiths and the philosophical traditions that accompany them? Most of them do not, I think, give rise to the monotheism which developed out of a jealous tribal God.

To my mind, the Sea of Faith Network exists to explore the totality of human religious thought which is indeed a 'ceaseless flow of human language', and we have no good reason for rejecting it, unless we insist on regarding the fundamentalist monotheistic parody as normative. There are many ways of understanding the word 'God'. These do not have to be competing truth claims; outside the monotheistic tradition they rarely have that flavour; rather, they are sources of inspiration and cosmic awe. They do not depend on the objective existence of the perceived god; that idea hardly occurs.

Perhaps only in the Abrahamic faiths does the concept of God as a Being 'out there' take centre stage; and it could well be argued – as indeed Sea of Faithers do – that that sort of objectivity (or 'realism') is out of place there too. The mystics of Judaism, Christianity and Islam often have more in common with their cousins further East than with their co-religionists.

Maybe the other faith traditions of the world have something to teach the Abrahamic faiths about finding a thoroughly humanist god in the depths of their own tradition. That might be better than ditching the term 'God' altogether, thus (you might say) throwing out some valuable bath water with the baby!

I think Don colludes with Western myopia when he suggests that the traditions of the Sikhs and Baha'is, Radhakrishnan, Vivekananda, Tagore and Gandhi are dead. And what about Buddhism and the Tao, and indigenous animism and neo-paganism all over the world? They are not dead; beleaguered yes, and ignored by the West because we consider our own civilisation to be superior to all others. This arrogance is, I think, a major source of the great danger our world is in. We need the old Gods precisely because they are human creations – symbols of our creativity for which we must learn to take full collective responsibility.

David Paterson
Oxford

In his helpful review of *The God Problem: Alternatives to Fundamentalism* by Nigel Leaves, Michael Morton mentions that Leaves finds non-realism the most intellectually authentic and compelling reading of Christian faith, while worrying that it will be hard for people to abandon the more emotionally appealing belief in the Supreme Being that has sustained society for so long. Morton rightly maintains that non-realism can only be taken seriously if it can identify itself as a continuation and interpretation of traditional faith, which, as Leaves implies, springs from both emotion and intellect. Therefore, in this age of non-realism, our search for faith in God may have the greatest chance for success if we can combine both emotion and intellect in our quest.

Don Cupitt writes in *Radicals and the Future of the Church* that we need a church, because 'It is a theatre in which we solemnly enact our deepest feelings.' The theatre analogy points to how non-realism could work in real churches.

When we go to the theatre, we usually suspend disbelief naturally and easily to enter into the world of the actors who by speech and action evoke in us in turn actions, feelings, experiences and thoughts. So, likewise, during a religious service we may also suspend disbelief, and have religious feelings and experiences. We create the play of and about God and perform our creation for ourselves and others who also are creators and performers.

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Letter From God

Dear Humans,

God here (via one of you, as always).

This is a letter I should have written to you long ago. It is to request you to be considerate to me, and sensible to yourselves, by not trying to contact me. While billions of you, on one half of the earth, are asleep as I dictate this, on the other half, billions of you are awake so that, unfortunately, millions of that lot are busy addressing me. Most, if not all of you, manage to get some daily sleep, but because of the babel directed at me: the praying, begging, thanking, cursing, complaining, praising, etc., I get no sleep whatsoever. Also, you don't seem to have realised that whenever there are more than one of you addressing me (which is always the case), I cannot understand what anyone is saying. All I can hear is a roar and all I can see is a huge variety of facial expressions. The only way I could ever be able to understand what was being said would be if you all spoke with one voice, and you know as well as I do that that will never happen. Please stop wasting your time then, trying to contact me; as you can see, it's a hopeless situation. Try to contact instead, a friend who would be able to hear your voice alone, enjoy your company and perhaps thank you or help you.

Yours sincerely and I hope, helpfully,
God
via Peter Mavromatis
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Mayday Notes



Jon Sobrino condemned by the Inquisition

The Vatican is determined to *control* the interpretation of scripture and insists that later theological developments proclaimed by Church Councils are already present in the New Testament. It imposes its own dogmatic 'Jesus Christ' and sees any deviation from this as a flouting of its authority. The Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (Inquisition) has published a *Notification* condemning Jon Sobrino's two books on christology, *Jesus the Liberator* and *Christ the Liberator*.

Shortly before this Pope's first visit to Latin America, the *Notification*, together with an explanatory note, was posted on 14th March 2007 on the Vatican website www.vatican.va (for the full text enter the site, go to English version and enter 'Jon Sobrino' in the Search box). Sobrino is condemned for making the basis ('place' or 'setting') of christology, 'the Church of the poor', rather than 'the *apostolic faith* which the Church has transmitted through all generations'.

Sobrino's works, says the Vatican, 'do not conform to the doctrine of the Church in certain key areas: the divinity of Jesus Christ, the Incarnation of the Son of God, the relationship of Jesus with the Kingdom of God, Jesus' self-consciousness, and the salvific value of Jesus' death'. The *Notification* says: 'A number of Father Sobrino's affirmations tend to diminish the breadth of the New Testament passages which affirm that Jesus is God.' It berates Sobrino for saying that Jesus was 'a believer like ourselves' and insists that 'Christ enjoyed in his human knowledge the fullness of understanding of the eternal plans he had come to reveal.' The *Notification* quotes Sobrino's sentence: 'Let it be said from the start that

the historical Jesus did not interpret his death in terms of salvation, in terms of soteriological models later developed by the New Testament, such as expiatory sacrifice or vicarious satisfaction.' Then it says Sobrino is wrong in maintaining that Jesus did not 'attribute a salvific value to his own death'.

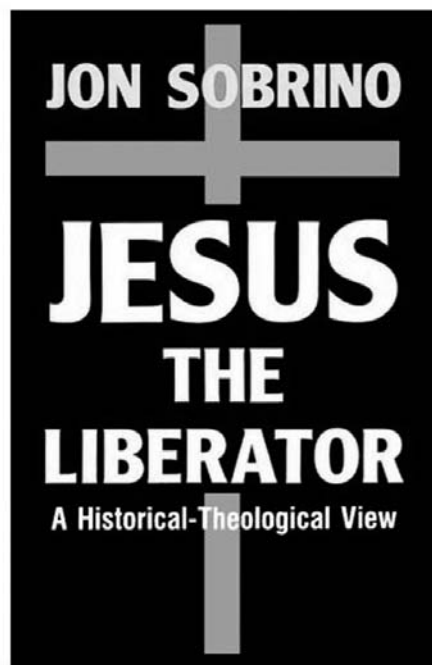
The *Notification* was sent to Sobrino via the Jesuit Superior General, Peter Hans Kolvenbach, demanding that he should give *unreserved assent* to

it. In his reply to Fr Kolvenbach, Sobrino has refused to do so, saying: 'I think that endorsing these proceedings does nothing to help the Church of Jesus, or to help present God's face in our world, or encourage the following of Jesus or the crucial struggle of our time for faith and justice.' The Vatican, he says, has conducted what amounts to a dirty war against liberation theology for the last 20 or 30 years. In particular, Joseph Ratzinger (now pope) has attacked Sobrino's theology continually, for example, because Sobrino has said: 'The true God is only the

one who is revealed historically and scandalously in Jesus and in the poor, who continue his presence.'

Sobrino's bishop, Archbishop Fernando Saenz Lacalle of San Salvador, a member of Opus Dei and former chaplain to the Salvadoran military, supports the Vatican *Notification* and has forbidden Sobrino to teach theology in his diocese, which includes the UCA (University of Central America), where Sobrino has worked for many years.

Messages can be sent to the UCA at correo@www.uca.edu.sv or by post to UCA, Boulevard los Próceres, San Salvador, El Salvador, Central America.



Ronald Pearse reviews

Wrestling With God: The Story of my Life

by Lloyd Geering

Imprint Academic (Exeter). 2007. £14.95. pbk. 263 pages. ISBN 9 781845 400774

Shortly after this book appeared, the New Zealand New Year's Honours List 2007 announced the award of that country's highest honour, the Order of New Zealand, to the author, Lloyd Geering. Professor Geering is not as well known in the UK as he ought to be. This is partly due to his modesty. Although he has travelled considerably, much of this has been for his own learning (or for taking fellow New Zealanders on learning trips to the Middle East), rather than on promotional tours. His first three main books (up to 1980) were published in the UK, but from then until now publishers in this country have neglected him. During that period some of his works have been published in his home country and become bestsellers there. Now, Imprint Academic, of Exeter, are to be congratulated on bringing out a UK/US edition of his autobiography.

My first awareness of Lloyd was in 1991 when Don Cupitt recommended him as a useful Antipodean contact for the Sea of Faith Network. (Don had benefited from Lloyd's *Faith's New Age* (Collins, 1980) in preparing his *The Sea of Faith* (BBC, 1984).) As Network Secretary, I had the privilege of opening the correspondence and then the audacious duty of inviting Lloyd to speak at the 1992 Sea of Faith conference in Leicester – without fee and without guarantee of finding his airfare. He came (and we found enough to pay the fare). The result was two lectures, which became chapters in *Tomorrow's God* (Bridget Williams Books, 1994).

Who was this quiet and unassuming personality? His grandparents had emigrated to New Zealand from England and Scotland. Lloyd endured many changes of school in his formative years while his father moved between factories and farms in New Zealand and Australia during the difficult employment years of the Depression. As a boy he had no pocket money beyond what he gained by gathering mushrooms and trapping occasional rabbits. Despite the previous unsettled schooling, Lloyd prospered at Otago Boys' High School, becoming a bright student and a keen hockey and cricket player. Then at the University of Otago he gained a First Class degree in Mathematics. During his time there he began to have contacts with the Presbyterian Church and with the theologically very liberal Student Christian Movement. Eventually he offered himself for selection as a minister, inspired more by a desire to serve humanity than by a personal devotion to God.

The book is the story of the development of its author's family and professional life. After three parish ministries into which he threw himself with great enthusiasm, he moved to lectureships, first at Emmanuel College, Brisbane, Australia and then at his alma mater, Knox Hall, Dunedin, the NZ Presbyterian Church's sole institution for ministerial training. In both posts he developed his passion for Hebrew and Old Testament studies, and eventually became Principal at Knox. Then, forty years ago, he was tried for heresy. The trial was the result of his writing articles in a church journal bringing the church up to date with scholarship of the past fifty years. In the UK we were not aware of – and probably cannot now

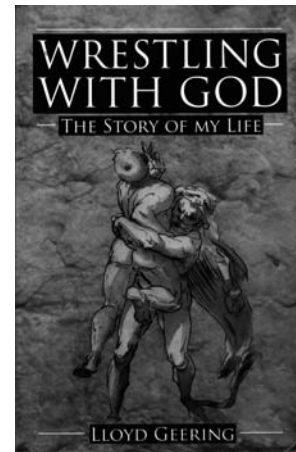
imagine – the impact on the nation's life which this public trial made in the whole of New Zealand. Under the blaze of TV lights, it was the talk of the country.

He was accused of grave impropriety in teaching doctrines contrary to the Bible and with disturbing the peace and unity of the church. After days of debate, he was acquitted. The trial has been written about since then, but, until now, not fully by the chief figure in it. It cannot be understood in isolation and so needs the background of the accused's theological development, which this book gives. This, in turn, is best understood alongside his development as a person. The trial's long-term effect on the Church is also considered. So, in this book there is something of importance to New Zealand in the understanding of part of its recent history. After the trial Geering went on to an academic life outside the Church (but without abandoning the Church). As a minister still and as professor of religious studies he did not disappear from the public gaze, but continued to be in demand for a liberal or radical view on many subjects. Now, aged 89, he is still writing and speaking.

What use is this book to us in the UK? It is the story without national boundaries of one who has wrestled, if not with God as a person, then with the *idea* of God and with developed ideas about religious faith that are of enormous value to us in the West as we now drift rudderless after the rapid decline of organised Western Christendom. His writings help us to get a *perspective* on life and history. A key thought appears on page 47 where he writes of a time when he came to see that instead of indoctrinating people with creeds and confessions as if they were unchangeable truths, it would be more enlightening to present Christianity as a living and ever-changing cultural tradition. Also, on page 70, 'Doing the right thing took precedence over having the right beliefs.' Increasingly and passionately he has been concerned about doing right for our neighbour – including our neighbour the environment.

He says he writes, not for scholars, but for ordinary people like himself, 'who are trying to make some sense of the awe-inspiring yet bewildering universe, and to find some purpose in their lives.' The book lacks a full list of the author's writings, but in the text there are references to the most important ones, which can still be sourced via book suppliers. It is a good introduction to them. This is a warm, human book, which the author offers 'as a theological tale' in the hope that it may encourage its readers on their own paths of faith. I commend it heartily.

Ronald Pearse was formerly SoF Network Secretary for many years.



reviews

Current Affair

Comment by Owl

'Having met with you, great happiness happened.' That's what I should have said (in Hindi) when my Muslim auto-rickshaw driver friend introduced me to two teenage nieces in an Indian street. Instead I came up with a lazy, instinctive 'It's nice to see you' (in English). It was lazy, and inaccurate. Sparkling, vivacious and well-educated the girls' masked eyes might have been, but without the skills of the blind I was flummoxed – how do you engage with a person who has been de-personalised into a black blob?

On February 21st Mr Justice Silber decided that a 12-year-old Muslim girl was not entitled to present herself as a faceless entity at school if that school's uniform policy said otherwise. It's a case that will chunter on wherever its educational, sociological, legal, cultural, political, religious and ethical ripples are seen as significant. Of possible knee-jerk reactions mine might be: 1. Should a 12-year-old be allowed so much power (to expend money, create havoc, take up judicial time etc)? 2. If the child is actually being manipulated to fulfil the ends of adults, that is also unacceptable. 3. Being the subject of a high-profile case is vastly more distracting for an adolescent than learning to deal with 'the gaze of men'. 4. I'm not a fan of 'slippery slope' arguments, but then again, supposing a pupil rolled up and said, 'I'm a sky-clad Jain. I won't be wearing any uniform – also I'll require you to turn the heating up.' Won't happen? Don't count on it!

Let's face the 'face' question, however. The girl's school did argue that facial expression was vital in the normal teaching-learning process. Though we'd all like to have veiled the spots and blushes of our school-days, that wasn't an option. In my day-job, teaching English to international business men and women, the role of eyes, smile and tone of voice in communication is easily as important as that of correct prepositions. Is not this too big a matter to be labelled 'cultural' or 'religious' – because it is actually universal? Different codes of facial expression and readings of people's faces are 'cultural'. Wearing impenetrable sun-glasses is an adult choice. But surely no female should, by any ideology, be sanctioned to avoid human facial contact? (Nobody has suggested veiling for males, lest they incite the lustful gaze of women or other men.) Facing people is a privilege and, arguably, a duty: without it how could great happiness happen?



REMINDER

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Michael Senior reviews

Radical Theology

by Don Cupitt

Polebridge Press (Santa Rosa, USA). 2006. 145 pages. £8.26. ISBN13 9780944344 97 2.

This is a collection of pieces ('selected essays') written between 1972 and more or less now, either unpublished or obscure. Part One consists of talks given at Sea of Faith conferences or prepared for various events, some of which never took place. Part Two is a set of sermons, including the important statement 'God Within' which belongs to the period of the publication of *Taking Leave of God*. Part Three is a set of academic essays, in which Cupitt the religious historian is perhaps at his best; here we have several investigations of the idea of Christ, culminating in the short but important piece called 'Religious Humanism' (as opposed, that is, to secular humanism). And with Part Four being two recent pieces we thus, in one neat book, cover much of the ground of the development of the ideas behind the Sea of Faith. We may also, as this late stage, see it referring back to its roots, since one of the most recent pieces (2003) is called 'John Robinson and the Language of Faith in God', being part of the commemoration of the fortieth anniversary of the publication of *Honest to God*; and although Cupitt makes clear here the differences in thinking between him and Robinson, this book is dedicated to John Robinson's memory, in recognition perhaps that it was that work that sparked off the movement which is here being called Radical Theology.

One slight surprise might be the title. Cupitt insists that he is a theologian, though a radical one: he is, he says, "not ashamed of the label 'radical theologian' ". He has 'been trying to discover and spell out something that might serve us today as true religion' – but, we wonder, in what sense is this theology? To him (in 'God Beyond Objectivity') God 'is not an objective being, not a person, and does not exist as things exist'. Where, then, is the 'theo' bit? Yet we are reminded that in *Taking Leave of God* he had been concerned to reject 'the charge of atheism'. 'I am no sceptic', he says here (in 'Religious Experience'). While again and again, in this book, being confronted with the question 'Does Don Cupitt believe in God, or doesn't he?' we are at the same time faced with his strenuous honesty on the subject, and his feeling, as in 'An Apologia for my Thinking' that he has somehow

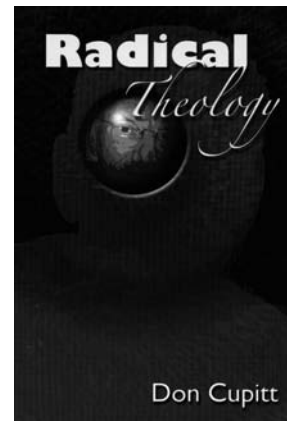
failed to get the point across. Although he has been trying all his career to explain himself, 'I don't

seem to have succeeded very well'. When he then sets out to explain in words of one syllable what he has been trying to do we may feel our request about to be answered. Yet it is not so easy. The whole of this book reveals a search, an extended impression of a searching and penetrating mind, and in itself finally adds up to a fierce defence of independent and truthful thinking. The clarity is sometimes breathtaking, as when, in 'Make Believe', he finds himself in a group of Anglicans discussing whether there is enough scriptural evidence for the corporal assumption into heaven of the Virgin Mary, 'as if we knew what is meant by a corporal assumption into heaven'. The language appears to him to be meaningless, and he 'can't take part in a meaningless debate'.

By the time we reach the end we begin to understand why it is almost impossible to say in simple terms what Don Cupitt believes. This is because his set of beliefs turn out to be something dynamic rather than static, to be seen as a motion through periods of the development of a small, but interplaying, set of ideas, and as the lamination resulting from superimpositions occurring along that way. When he does, in the end, set it out, as one had hoped, in 'An Apologia for my Thinking', it reads a little like a summary of the intellectual movements of our time. Non-realism led to relativism, to interpretation, then to nihilism, to existentialism and finally to post-modernism. There is no space here to explain these concepts: read the book. Suffice it to say that one comes away convinced that Don Cupitt has worked his way to a personal religious position.

Michael Senior is a doctor of philosophy and full-time writer. He is a long-term member of SoF Network.

The book is available for £8.26 from amazon.co.uk



reviews

Michael Morton reviews

The Creative Christian

by Adrian B Smith

O Books (Winchester).2006. £9.99. pbk. ISBN 1905047 754

One of my theology professors in college was fond of saying that reading ancient texts, especially those as old as the Bible, offered an example of the difficulty of reviving past conversations. What he meant was that past conversations require more knowledge and information than was originally needed by the people who engaged in them. This is true of much of the New Testament, because the figure of Jesus is so remote and so controversial that we do not know enough about him to justify any claims about him or even frame an agreed picture of what he did and what he taught.

Fr Adrian Smith, in the latest of a series of interesting books that he has written, seems to have no such misgivings. Whereas there were once quasi- biographies or *Lives of Christ*, so now there are appreciations of the character of Jesus. They are offered, not for contemplation, but as a guide to action and authentic Christian living. In this context, Jesus can be cast as a political revolutionary, an ethical teacher, a spiritual guru or a religious reformer. So Adrian claims to be able to offer a fresh perspective on the message of Jesus. He takes as a starting point the Intelligence Quotient (IQ) that is used to assess children's logical ability and develops the idea to include other quotients: Emotional (EQ), Spiritual (SQ) and Creative or CQ for short. The human CQ measures an ability to create, transform and use Christian faith to make a difference. It is a particular kind of attitude which will enable Christian faithful to become 'artisans of a new humanity' and a new religious consciousness. For the human race is reaching a point of crisis and crying out for a new vision and new order for the world. In essence, this new awareness needed can be characterised as a proficiency or ability to be able to change your thinking in order to change your life. Adrian quotes approvingly an American author, Laurie Beth Jones, who likens Christ to an American businessman possessing the triple strengths of self-mastery, action and good relationships.

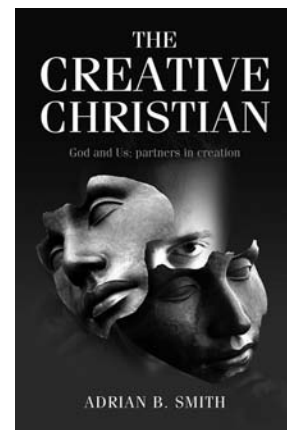
In the second half of the book, Fr Adrian turns a little to present Christ as an archetype of a new

humanity and sets out to explore the world of Kingdom spirituality and responsible

ethical living. He contrasts this with the anomaly of a powerful church hierarchy ('a rule by priests'), which is often the target of liberal Catholics who protest that 'we are the church'. Now this may be heartfelt and even strictly true, but unfortunately authority does not take it seriously. It becomes no more than a blind alley. There is just too much power in the system, too little room at the top.

More encouragingly, he is able to find some counterplay when he describes Christianity as a faith that loves the Earth and reaches out to the other great religious faiths like the Tao and Buddhism. Such a movement from Church Christianity to kingdom spirituality and a Green, earth-centred faith is a movement from a religion of history to a religion of nature. For in a religion of history, only God and humanity really matter; the Earth is just a quarry of petrochemicals and minerals to be exploited and used. In a religion of nature, the subject and concern is life itself.

This book is full of things to think about and the author helps by adding an appendix of thoughts to ponder. On the downside, I felt that the book was a bit of a rattle-bag: full of diverse ideas and thoughts that were sometimes disjointed. Fr Adrian tends to write a fifth Gospel to use for his starting-point of analysis of the 'message' and psychology of Jesus. Yet I hope I am not being too subjective if I identify Adrian's thinking with the possibility that Christian faith can exist and flourish outside the organisation and the power-structures of the Church which has held a near monopoly on religion for so long. Prayer, meditation, moral action and a commitment to the life of our world are an excellent jumping-off point for a thoroughly modern religious faith for our times.



reviews

Touching Base

by Aileen La Tourette

Headland (West Kirby). 2006. £7.50. ISBN 1 902096 95 9

Aileen La Tourette has lived more than thirty years in England but she retains the tough wit of her US origins. Wit, humour, technical skill, and fierce concern with the human condition transform an otherwise bleak vision into very readable, challenging poems. Her world is without God:

They said if He forgot me for a second I'd cease,
but it was He who flowered when I remembered,
wilted when I forgot, all-powerful but oddly weak.

(*Rhododendron*)

She is, however, deeply interested in what she perceives as the 20th/21st century need not to let go of God/Jesus/Mary. Hence eight poems inspired by a Guardian article of Maundy Thursday 2005 about the unusual places people have seen visionary images of Jesus or Mary. Titles like 'Seeing the Face of Jesus in a Frying-Pan' might lead us to expect a post-modern stunt poem; but the poems are perceptive and serious, spoken in the voices of men and women fed up with routine or rickety lives and desperate for the glimpse of another dimension. A woman prostitute has to stop making herself late-night fry-ups because:

That skillet held his face.
I didn't know what to do. Missed frying stuff.
He seemed to want peace and quiet.
Always did like low-lives, when you think of it.'

In other poems such as 'The Blue', 'Tunnels', 'One Afternoon Sitting on the Sofa', 'The Rainbow', La Tourette writes in her own voice about the overlap between the ordinary and 'the other' and, often very successfully, communicates the pressure of perceiving mysteries everywhere and of having so little time to understand. She uses metaphors involving reflections, cloud formation, contrasts of darkness and light and the disjunctions of travel. 'Tunnels' is her most achieved poem about not being able to control the forward rush of living while straining to know where we are in time and space. Tunnels are:

Hoods we put on nervously
like those about to be executed
but not like that. They never touch us
but we feel them, clammy stone weeping
through glass as we sit on the train
taking us back as they thrust us forward,
always back. (Tunnels)

One of the themes of this collection is going back to her origins, re-examining her past and that of her

country. She is distressed by the materialism and general purblindness she found on a recent 3-month return to the US. Many poems on this theme compare attitudes which prevailed in her childhood to those of today. Her viewpoint is, as always, complex and questioning. The complacent cruelty of the past comes out with great resonance in 'Flashbulb Memories, c. 1954', two short poems, near-sonnets about the colour question. Here she portrays a universal prejudice among whites which, paradoxically, is identified with the cosiness and cohesiveness of those times. In other poems she conveys that the good aspects of the settled 1950s with their tentative moves to liberalism have disastrously broken down, success/money now the dominant forces.

In a very American way, the puzzle of the human personality and the relationship of present to past, brings up the subject of the shrink. 'Electra's Therapy' is a very interesting poem in which La Tourette uses her skills of dramatic representation (she also writes drama) to convey the anger which may surface in such a stylised, frustrating bargaining for truth:-

Bloodshot face and eyes speak of the bottle,
she thinks she's the Sibyl, with her Closure
and her *Moving On*, her ox-eyed daisies
in their Oxfam vase... (Electra's Therapy)

This complex poem with its references to Greek myth is a good example of the scope of this writer. La Tourette's interest in ethics, politics and religion are very much at the heart of this book, but green politics and feminism also have a place. There are almost throw-away lines about women's historic secondary role - 'It's bloody, the battle for status/You were born male, got it gratis' (*The Prodigal*) - but also a fistful of strong poems about women defending the right to live as artists. All praise for La Tourette's intellectual curiosity (that truly rare good thing!) but hers is also an essentially full and rounded approach which will appeal to a wide range of readers.

Dilys Wood runs the Second Light Network of Older Women Poets. Her collection *Women Come to a Death* was published by Katabasis in 1997.



Cicely Herbert visits the Hogarth Exhibition, Tate Britain, London.

Early this Spring, after reading Ken Smith's review, published in the January edition of *Sofia*, I visited the exhibition of Sacred Images of the Chola Dynasty at the Royal Academy in London. There, in an atmosphere of tranquillity and calm, a young Indian man gave me an impromptu guided tour of the exhibits. As he spoke of the Hindu belief in reincarnation, I had a sudden brief vision of the spirit that connects all humans and creatures alike.

The spirit abroad in London during a recent visit to Tate Britain's Hogarth exhibition, was of a different order, but in its way, vital and life-enhancing. The journey through our capital city to reach the gallery, was, as ever, lively and unpredictable. As our bus reached Trafalgar Square, it was diverted eastward along the Thames embankment to avoid the huge crowds that had gathered there to celebrate St. Patrick's Day. Our young driver confessed cheerfully that he had no idea where he was going, but it clearly wasn't going to be anywhere near Millbank. Two and a half hours later I was admitted into the exhibition.

Once inside the 10 rooms devoted to the work of the great eighteenth-century satirist, it was a question of the survival of the pushiest. As we jostled and nudged our way round those brilliant images, the sound of delighted laughter could be heard all round us. Art exhibitions are not often genuinely amusing, but here, guffaws were in order, as we relished William Hogarth's depiction of London, with the near chaos created by her resourceful and anarchic citizens. My favourite engraving 'The Enraged Musician' shows a 'distinguished foreign violinist' attempting to practise his art, while, outside his window, native Londoners carry on their chaotic, noisy lives. A century later, in his seminal work of investigation into the lives and work of the London poor, Henry Mayhew noted the cacophony produced by the street criers and musicians of his time. In the context of this exhibition, Hogarth's famous portrait of 'The Shrimp Girl' captured in paint as she carries her basket of fish through the streets, takes on a fresh and altogether more vibrant life than when she is to be observed in the staid surroundings of the National Gallery, now her permanent residence.

Hogarth's great set pieces, 'The Harlot's Progress' and 'The Rakes Progress', 'Marriage à la Mode' and 'Street Life' hit their target with stinging precision, and can be said to have a strong moral intention. But, on the way, there is a great deal of fun to be had by the viewer. And the cats and dogs, commenting on and reflecting the drama of their masters' lives, are superb!



Hogarth: *The Enraged Musician*

The Mermaid Pew in Zennor Church, Cornwall

She bends her tail in balance with the pew,
wide-breasted girl, entangling the church.

Her belly shines where fishermen have touched
with rope-singed hands the round umbilicus.

The carver dug each nipple from the grain
and separated out two sturdy fins.

He chiselled gifts she holds up in both hands,
the mirror and the comb in truthful oak.

Half fish, half girl, she symbolises Christ
whose dual nature tethers souls to heaven.

And both claimed lives, singing out their promises:
'Let down your nets and I will give you love'.

He walked on water, certain of his bearings
but, flowing with the tides, she is the sea.

Jill Bamber

The above poem is from *Images of Women*, an anthology edited by Myra Schneider and Dilys Wood (Arrowhead Press, Darlington, in association with Second Light, 2006).

Planet Earth calling...
Humanity calling...



Mayday! Mayday!