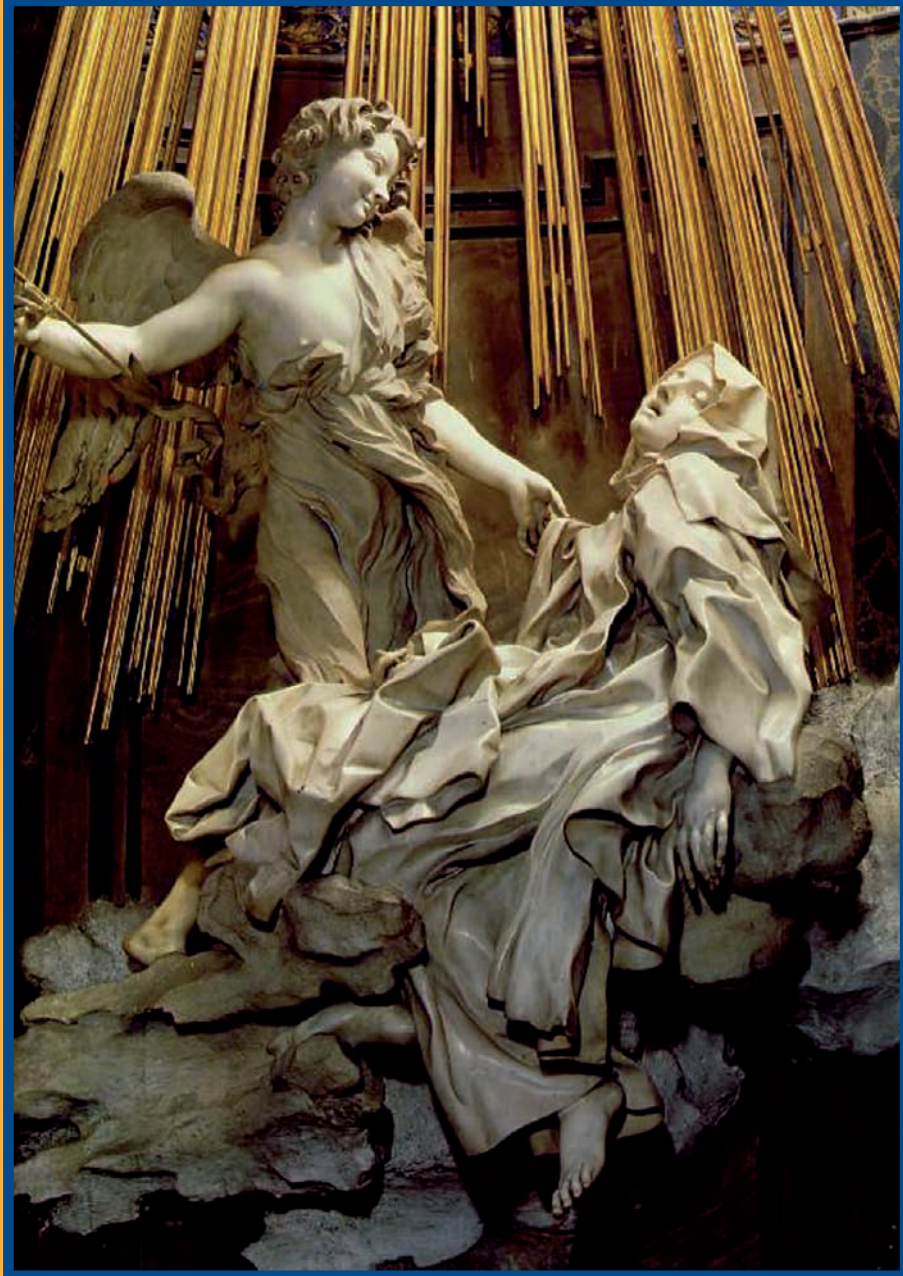


sfia

No. 84 July 2007



Experience will Decide?

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Ecstasy of St Teresa by Gianlorenzo Bernini, Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome

Back Cover Image

North Wales hills from the Red Rope website (socialist walking and climbing club) www.redrope.org.uk

sfia is the magazine of
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which 'explores and promotes religious faith as a human creation'. Registered Charity No. 1113177.

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

sfia 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.

Experience Will Decide?

This issue is about religious experience and whether the undoubted fact that human beings have been having experiences which can be described as religious for thousands of years proves that there is anything supernatural 'out there'. Two distinguished theologians give opposing points of view. Trevor Greenfield looks back over the forty-thousand-year history of religion and notes that 'the *personae dramatis* have changed over time, stood down, been defeated, been replaced, and re-emerged like an exercise in supernatural re-cycling' showing that Christianity, like any other religion, is culturally conditioned and 'the mantra of the Sea of Faith becomes self-evident: religion is a human creation.' But he disagrees that the object of religious faith expressed in many ways by these many changing cultures, what he calls 'the transcendent', is also a human creation. He thinks that those millennia of encounters 'with a transcendent reality' more than suggest it isn't just a fiction.

On the other hand, Anthony Freeman, writing from the point of view of consciousness studies, asks: *What is Mystical Experience?* He says: 'All of the experimental work so far described serves to affirm the reality of mystical experience,' but concludes: 'Such a [supernatural] reality might indeed exist, but equally it might not, and since we have no possibility of contact with it or knowledge of it, it might just as well not exist.'

Next, David Boulton comments on the Pope's recent abolition of Limbo, reducing it overnight from a doctrine to a product of the imagination. Why can't we do the same, Boulton asks, for other religious doctrines? The Pope, he says, 'tells the faithful he hasn't so much abolished Limbo as re-envisioned it. Re-envision Limbo and we can re-envision the entire lexicon of Heaven and Hell, God and the Devil. We don't have to call that abolition. We can call it creative imagination.' In two further pieces, retired Presbyterian minister Philip Smith confesses he finds himself 'drowning in the Sea of Faith' and Dorset Humanist David Warden reflects on the ambiguous meaning of 'religion'.

Sofia's editorial policy is to publish articles expressing the range of views within the Network, which sometimes conflict. Censorship would be absurd – and make for dull reading. At the same time, the Editor will express her own views plainly. You are free to disagree!

In his article, Trevor Greenfield flatteringly refers to my *Sofia* 82 Editorial praising its 'perceptiveness' and then softly, softly subverts it. Ah, theologians! My editorial quoted Don Cupitt's article in that same

issue: 'In the words of the English romantic poets, our world is partly perceived and partly imagined by us'. (In *Tintern Abbey* Wordsworth speaks of what we *half* create and *half* perceive.) I suggested that Don's thinking might be shifting towards that *half* and *half*. I concluded: 'I think it is vital to acknowledge this *half* and *halfness*, respect *both* imagination *and* the dignity and reality of matter, life and death, and manual labour...' Half my concern was for *recognition and respect for the body*, which philosophers in an idealist tradition, including postmodernists, may lack. Otherwise, how could they say such silly things as 'The Gulf War didn't happen'? No, it didn't happen in Paris or London – we saw it on television – but it *did* happen in the Middle East; people suffered *real* pain and *really* died and now in another war in that region continue to do so.

What we 'half create and half perceive' is the physical world. Yes we bring language, imagination and poetry to our experience of it but we bring it to something that is *physically there*. We make the Earth human; we don't make the Earth. We are not pure spirits and (despite a vein of clerical loathing of women that has persisted over the centuries) recognition and respect for the body are a necessary condition for both ethics and poetry.

Greenfield subverts this position by suggesting that there is no difference between our perception of something that is physically there like a tree, and an experience of 'the transcendent'. However, with physical bodies there is usually some way of checking their existence independently of our own minds. For example, if I eat a hearty breakfast and someone shoots me dead, a forensic scientist will be able to find that breakfast in my stomach when I am no longer able to tell him anything about it. With 'the transcendent' it is possible to verify *the experience*, but not the independent reality of what is experienced.

Thinking about this, I returned to *Tintern Abbey* and the words the poet uses to describe his 'transcendental' encounter: 'I have *felt* a presence'; 'a *sense* sublime of something far more deeply interfused'; 'that serene and blessed *mood*'. I thought here was a clue. Experience of 'the transcendent' is not the same as eating breakfast or picking apples from a tree. It is more like a *feeling, a sense, a mood*. Mystics have frequently described it as like falling in love. Falling in love is a common, powerful occurrence and no one could possibly deny that it happens. But the strength of the feeling does not prove that the love object exists.

At my school, girls were frequently 'madly in love' with fictional characters – from the Scarlet Pimpernel to Mr Darcy – and people from history, such as Sir Philip Sidney, Rupert Brooke or Bayard, '*le chevalier sans peur et sans reproche*', whom we learnt about in French. Even if you fall in love with someone who is alive at the time, your passion does not necessarily tell you much about him. Our Arts Reviewer tells me that when she was at school she was in love with Sherpa Tensing, whom she had certainly never met. (We were both at school in the 1950s.) Even if later you meet and fall in love with someone who is actually a possible mate, there is a big difference between lying in bed daydreaming about him when he is overseas, and having him there in bed beside you. Bodily presence can have consequences which daydreaming cannot – such as pregnancy.

Nevertheless, defending the reality and dignity of the body, including Planet Earth as a material body, does not mean devaluing the imagination, described by Mary Wollstonecraft (who was in Paris at the time of the French Revolution) as 'the true fire stolen from heaven'. No revolutionary change takes place by brute force alone; imagination is also required. Keats passionately defends 'the holiness of the heart's affections, and the truth of imagination.' The cosmos and its inhabitants are vast, glorious and mysterious enough to arouse the widest possible range of human feelings and responses – including 'oceanic union' and erotic mysticism – without having to call in the supernatural. Some people love London and feel it has a 'spirit'. Some love Exmoor and feel it has its own spirit too (as Emily Brontë loved her moors). Others are devoted to certain trees (those 'mighty senators', Keats called them) and even pray to them. These are all *natural* feelings and probably the best way of describing them is *poetic*. Of course, not all imaginary conversations with 'spirits' or fictional or historical characters are erotic. For example, in this bicentenary year, one might converse with Toussaint L'Ouverture about slavery. The young Wordsworth, his contemporary, addressed him in one of his best sonnets.

It belongs to humanity to deal imaginatively with our world and that is what makes human life so rich with layer upon layer of metaphor, personification and allegory in an absorbing, ongoing conversation. Thus we can 'transcend' our own time and place. Love is a powerful force even if its object is wholly or partly imagined. For example, as well as the girlish, probably transitory 'crush', someone may develop a love that determines and informs their whole life, such as a love for Jesus as divine or even love for a disembodied God. However powerful this love or 'feeling of presence' may be, in this case too, the feeling cannot prove that the object of that feeling exists.

In *The Windhover* Hopkins calls Christ 'O my chevalier!' and in *The Wreck of the Deutschland* he describes an overwhelming religious experience (possibly from the Ignatian *Spiritual Exercises*) as a night with a tremendous lover:

I did say yes ...
Thou knowest the walls, altar and hour and night:
the swoon of a heart that the sweep and the hurl
of thee trod ...

In the second part of the poem he identifies his experience with that of the nun on the wrecked ship, who calls out to Christ, as the poem reaches an orgasmic rhythm:

But how shall I ... make me room there:
Reach me a ... Fancy, come faster –
Strike you the sight of it? look at it loom there,
Thing that she ... there then! the Master,
Ipse, the only one, Christ, King, Head.

Poets have often expressed mystical experiences in female erotic terms. But that does not mean experience of 'the transcendent' is confined to the erotic or can be reduced to sexual fantasy. 'The transcendent' can be encountered in many ways: for example, as the extreme and dangerous Other; as absolute Power; as Beauty so old and so new; as cosmic Music. These can all be understood as imaginative, poetic encounters with our own material universe – its otherness, power, beauty and harmony (Pythagoras discovered the 'harmonious pines') and show both the glory of the material universe and the marvellous strength and breadth of the human poetic genius.

One final example comes from Hopkins' *Hurrahing in the Harvest* (which his friend Robert Bridges tutted tutted was 'in poor taste'):

And the azurous hung hills are his world-wielding
shoulder
Majestic – as a stallion stalwart, very-violet-sweet!

Hopkins had a Jesuit training in philosophy and theology and of course he did not think the blue hills were really Christ's (or the Greek god Atlas's) shoulder. It is a metaphor expressing a moment of ecstasy. Its poetic power (the substance, 'vehicle', of the metaphor)¹ derives from the fact that strong and beautiful blue hills, male shoulders and horses physically exist and can be apprehended by our senses. Beauty is *splendor formae*: the shining of shape. Hopkins almost certainly thought that 'Christ God' also really exists somehow. But the poetic power and the ecstasy remain even if we think the hills are being compared to an imaginary god.

¹ This is also the case with Robert Burns's 'red red rose' quoted by Boulton on page 12.

Is God Back on the Agenda?

Trevor Greenfield argues that religion is self-evidently a human creation, but that does not prove that its transcendent object is not real.

In recent years, as a secular mindset and scientific worldview have dominated the Western cultural perspective, many people have asked the question 'where has God gone?' They see little point in looking beyond science for answers to questions that were once the domain of religion. This has resulted in what some people refer to as deity becoming a *god of the gaps*, no longer the central focus of human thinking but more and more just a ready-made solution to answers that science can not as yet respond to. The inference, of course, is that as the scientific disciplines continue to understand more and more, then so do the gaps in which deity operates become smaller and smaller until they either cease to exist altogether or become so inconsequential they lose meaning for people. Maybe, but no matter how pervasive the secular mindset becomes, there will always be questions it cannot answer, questions that simply exist beyond the range of its own understanding. And while it is true that, for some, these questions will be sacrificed on an altar of materialism, for many other people they remain unerringly constant.



Lascaux cave painting of a bison

Perhaps a better question would be; 'where is God going?' If we can't write off theological thinking as something that has all but come to an end it might be better to consider what prospects lie before it – what are its future possibilities? Christianity has been with us for two thousand years. This is certainly a long time in some respects and both the extent and triumph of Christianity in the West and the exponential rate of social and technological change that has occurred during that time add to the sense of longevity. It has been the dominant religion in Europe from the Iron Age to the Space Age. But in terms of

the religious expression of the West Christianity is still just the latest trend, this year's model, the way it seems here and now.

Our ancestors were practising religion forty thousand years ago, leaving an indelible legacy both upon the walls of the caves of Lascaux and, I suspect, upon the collective unconscious of humanity. The mindset and the mythology is long since lost to us save the apparent reverence of the female and the idea that religion is something that affects us, something that we believe but also something that we do, hopefully to our benefit. In that sense religion has never really changed. It's still mythically expressed

and it is still something we do, hopefully to our benefit. The *personae dramatis* have changed over time, stood down, been defeated, been replaced, and re-emerged like an exercise in supernatural recycling. In this respect the numerous worldviews of past and the present combine to show us that Christianity, like any other religion is of its time and place and

within that context is, like other religions and systems of belief, a culturally conditioned lifestyle choice.

So, it seems we must consider a period twenty times longer than the life of Christianity to factor the relative success and failure of religions in the West. If we take the analogy of a clock and calibrate it so that twenty-four hours represents the forty thousand years of human religious activity, the time from the Palaeolithic cave paintings till now, then Christianity arrived about one and one quarter hours ago. So, is the Christian faith the apogee of religious expression or just an interlude in the forty thousand year history of Earth religion? Is the principle of a monotheistic God the final point in the evolution of belief, or a

The concept of God, the father of the cosmos, is a relative newcomer in the ideas that we associate with the transcendent.

view that endorsed and was thus endorsed by the hierarchical societies that we developed? The concept of God, the father of the cosmos, is a relative newcomer in the ideas that we associate with the transcendent or the supernatural. Similarly the dualistic beliefs that support it neatly categorise human activity and belief. Heaven is above Earth like God is above man, like man is above woman. Evil, like good, becomes something objective, something you can choose, a path you can follow.

As you trace the history of religion the mantra of the Sea of Faith becomes self-evident; religion is a human creation. Human beings painted the cave walls, constructed elaborate tombs, built temples, developed rituals and wrote books. But the dominant philosophy of the Sea of Faith goes further than tracing the history of the self-evident. In non-realism it finds a position that denies the reality of the object that religion is focussed upon, be it God, an ancestral other world or realms variously populated with spirits, sprites and demons. As a result the words religion and God become effectively interchangeable; God, like religion is also a human creation.

Non-realism has cornered a niche market in the wider atheistic worldview in that it has continued to find value in the practice and process of religion, providing it is understood in non-supernatural ways. But the non-reality of deity has had an extremely destabilising effect on the Universe. Just as deity is non-real so too are the other presumed external entities such as self and world, with our lives being re-interpreted as a transient ever-changing flow of existence brought into being, like all other elements of experience, by language. The Gospel writer John, it transpires, knew more than he realised when he declared that 'In the beginning was the Word'.

In his recent lecture *God: Creator or Created?* (Sofia 82) Don Cupitt holds broadly to a non-realist view. God didn't create us; rather, we created God through language. God is a fiction that we made up. However, as Dinah Livingstone so perceptively notes in her editorial discussion of the lecture, Cupitt's former position on the primacy of language over experience is seemingly tempered by recognition of an

imaginative element in the human mind that structures that which it experiences. Livingstone refers to this model as 'half and half'. Instead of language creating experience, the human imagination responds to an objective world and uses language to structure it within a social context.

The possibility that humans experience a *real* otherness in their apprehension of the world presents particular problems for non-realism. How do we know, for example, that Palaeolithic cave painters, Minoan Priestesses, Celtic Druids, Christians or anyone else who expressed a belief in transcendence wasn't experiencing exactly that? If there are categories of reality prior to language then how do we know that one of them isn't deity, especially when we acknowledge that billions of people throughout history and across culture insist it is?

In the conclusion to *An Introduction to Radical Theology* I endeavoured to suggest that a non-realism which accepted the primacy of experience over

If there are categories of reality prior to language then how do we know that one of them isn't deity?

language offered a model that validated transcendence and democratised the cultural expression of religion, each having equal worth and each accessing the same objective referent. Religion, through myth and symbol points to that which lies beyond it. Yahweh, Krishna and Brahma are not real in themselves but express a reality that by nature of our temporal and cultural condition we relate to imaginatively. Many people have reported an encounter with a transcendent reality. A non-realism that is open to the origin of such experience would be both inclusive and responsive whilst celebrating the breadth and depth of human culture. Human beings made up the words *tree*, *sky* and *elephant* not because they projected these ideas out onto the world but because they reflected the reality of their experience. Perhaps that's why we made up the word *transcendence* as well.

Trevor Greenfield is the author of *An Introduction to Radical Theology*, published by O Books in 2006.

What is Mystical Experience?

Anthony Freeman reviews recent theories about mystical experience.

The Experiments

Richard Dawkins is well known as a militant atheist, but he is also an experimental scientist, and in 2003 he took part in an experiment intended to induce in him a mystical experience. He donned a Transcranial Magnetic Stimulator (the so-called 'God helmet'), devised by Canadian neuroscientist Michael Persinger, which is designed to cause activity in the brain's temporal lobes. Such activity has long been associated with religious visions, and Persinger claims that 80% of his volunteers report a sense of the divine or other non-physical presence when wearing the helmet.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, Professor Dawkins was among the other 20%, although he claimed at the time that this was a great disappointment to him. 'I of course never expected to end up believing in anything supernatural,' he said. 'But I did hope to share some of the feelings experienced by religious mystics when contemplating the mysteries of life and the cosmos.'

Had he indeed received such a revelation, he would doubtless have claimed this as proof that there was nothing supernatural in mystical experience. Perhaps his disappointment arose from this lost opportunity. Susan Blackmore, another scientific celebrity, had a more positive reaction when she went to Persinger's laboratory and underwent his procedures: 'I had the most extraordinary experiences I've ever had,' she is reported as saying.

Persinger explained the failure of Dawkins to respond to the helmet by the fact that he had scored low on a psychological scale measuring proneness to temporal lobe sensitivity. Sue Blackmore, by contrast, was subject to paranormal experiences in her younger days, and although now sceptical of the claims made for such phenomena, she does practise Buddhist meditation on a daily basis. One assumes her temporal lobe sensitivity is much higher than Dawkins'.

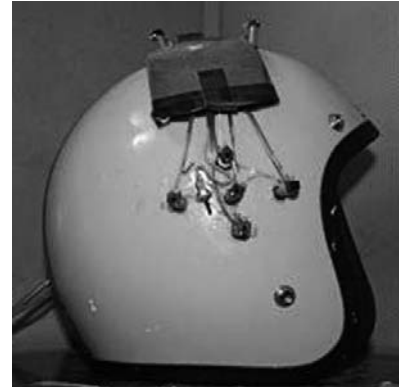
Andrew Newberg, at the University of Pennsylvania, is another of the 'neurotheologians', i.e. scientists exploring the physical states of the brain associated with religion, but he starts at the opposite end of things from Persinger. Instead of trying to induce mystical experience where there is none, he runs brain scans on religious practitioners while they are engaged in prayer and meditation. Tibetan Buddhists and Franciscan nuns have been among his subjects, and although they describe their meditations

in different words – no Buddhist will describe herself as 'dissolving into Christ consciousness', like one Franciscan did – Newberg does note common themes.

One of these (as in the example just given) is a sense of the normal

boundaries between oneself and the other melting away, and these reports are associated in the scans with an absence of activity in an area at the top of the brain called the parietal lobe. This region is known to help orient our bodies in relation to the external world, because when it is damaged the patients concerned often suffer a loss of orientation and also have difficulty telling where their bodies end and the external world begins. Newberg is keen to point out that his research does not disprove accounts of mystical experience; on the contrary, it shows up physical states that objectively endorse the subjective accounts. A further source of mystical or at least heightened experience is the taking of psychedelic substances, known as 'entheogens' when used in a religious context with the intention of 'bringing forth the divine within'. A famous example of this was an experiment held on Good Friday, 1962, among a group of divinity students at Boston University, to determine the effect of psilocybin in facilitating mystical experience. Half the students were given the drug and the other half a dummy pill as a control. Both groups took part in the usual prayers and services of this specially holy day, and Walter Pahnke, the experimenter, claimed that 'the persons who received psilocybin experienced to a greater extent than did the controls the phenomena described by our typology of mysticism'. In other words, those who took the drug reported a heightened interior awareness in the course of the formal liturgy.

All of the experimental work so far described serves to affirm the reality of mystical experience, insofar as it shows correlations between externally measured physical events and subjective reports of internal feelings and thoughts. But it does nothing to



The 'God Helmet'

answer the question, What is mystical experience? Is it, as the mystics themselves tend to believe, an opening up of the individual to a source of profound knowledge outside of oneself? Or is it rather, as Richard Dawkins and his friends would claim, that any visions or voices or suchlike are just phenomena internally generated by the brain itself?

The Theories

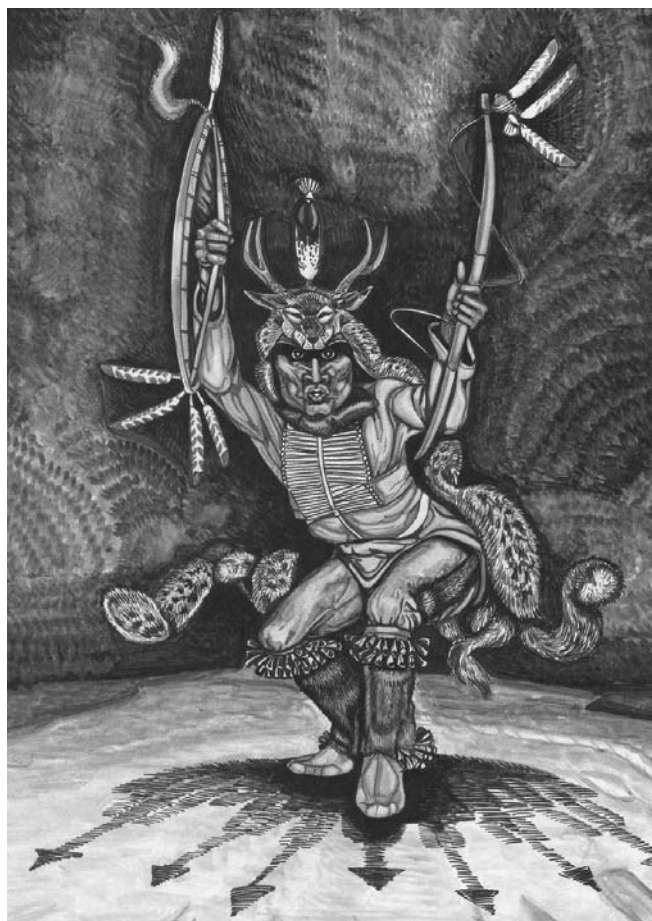
There is a branch of psychology that specially studies the states and processes in which people experience a deeper or wider sense of who they are, or a greater than usual sense of connectedness with others, or with nature, or with the 'spiritual' dimension. This is called transpersonal psychology, a field of study pioneered with some trepidation in the middle of the twentieth century, when religion had been banished to the privacy of one's inner world – 'what the individual does with his own solitariness', as Whitehead put it – and only external visible experimental science was respectable. The early transpersonalists – no mean group, with names such

All of the experimental work so far described serves to affirm the reality of mystical experience.

as Aldous Huxley, Carl Jung, and Abraham Maslow among them – were faced by the daunting challenge of restoring spiritual knowledge to the public domain of objective truth. Their plan was to develop a 'science of human experience', which would redeem inner experience in the eyes of science by presenting replicable and verifiable data.

The pioneers' confidence that this was possible lay in their belief that all transpersonal experience accessed a single underlying spiritual reality. Described in the 'perennial philosophy' (a term coined by Huxley), its most notable feature was a hierarchy of all reality, stretching from matter at the bottom all the way up to pure spirit, known as the Great Chain of Being. It followed that if all knowledge gained by inner experience in altered states of consciousness reflected the same reality, then all subjects would report similar findings, and their agreement would confirm their accuracy. Thus the sceptics would be confounded on their own empirical ground.

Since the early 1970s, transpersonalists such as Charles Tart, of the University of California at Davis, and like-minded colleagues have been arguing that knowledge gained in altered states of consciousness



can be tested and verified by trained researchers in just the same way as knowledge gained in the science laboratory. They have grown used to being sniped at by sceptical outsiders like Dawkins who mock this goal of an inner empiricism, based on disciplined introspection. But recently they have come under attack from an insider, a young professor at the California Institute of Integral Studies called Jorge Ferrer, in his book *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory*.

Ferrer is not without sympathy for the pioneers of transpersonal psychology, and he accepts that the road they took was, at the time, probably inevitable. With the Enlightenment breakdown of the unified medieval world-view, and the consequent backlash against religious dogma, empirical science had taken over the public domain of objective truth while religion became a private matter of inner experience. So the best – indeed the only – way to emancipate spiritual knowledge back into the public domain of objective truth had been the one they took. But accepting its inevitability should not, he says, blind us to its consequences, namely, an in-built contradiction that must eventually prove fatal to the whole enterprise.

To appreciate the subtlety of Ferrer's revolution we need to consider a little more of the background to the study of transpersonal phenomena. While it is important to avoid simply equating 'transpersonal' with 'spiritual' or 'religious', there is undoubtedly

much experiential overlap between all three. Consequently, there spill over into the broader transpersonal area some fiercely contested issues relating to the interpretation of overtly religious reports. As William James discussed a century ago, there is a wide variety of religious and mystical experiences, and this fact itself is uncontroversial. It is how to account for this variety that raises major disagreements between scholars, with psychologists of religion falling into two broad schools of thought.

In one group are essentialists, among them advocates of the perennial philosophy, claiming that in mystical states a single underlying reality is experienced in all cases, and then differently interpreted according to the particular religious and cultural and linguistic tradition to which the individual belongs. On the other side are

Since we have no possibility of contact with [a supernatural reality], it might just as well not exist.

constructivists (or contextualists, to use their own preferred designation), who deny any such universal commonality and insist that each experience is genuinely different 'all the way down'. They argue that the experiences themselves (rather than simply their post-hoc interpretations) are profoundly and irrevocably determined by predisposing personal, social, and cultural factors, including religious doctrines and particular forms of spiritual practice.

At the heart of the problem is the status of claims made by mystics to privileged information or knowledge not available to people in ordinary states of consciousness. Put in the jargon of philosophers and psychologists, what is the epistemic or cognitive value of mystical experiences? If the contextualists are right, then there are no pure or unmediated experiences, in which case there can be no experiential or cognitive access to the fundamental mystical reality alleged by the essentialists. Such a reality might indeed exist, but equally it might not, and since we have no possibility of contact with it or knowledge of it, it might just as well not exist.

To readers of *Sofia* who are familiar with past debates in the Sea of Faith about Don Cupitt's 'non-realism', and whether we can go along with his general idea yet still accept that there is 'a sliver of reality' out there, this will all have a familiar ring to it! What Ferrer is trying to do is to transcend the perennialist/constructivist divide by changing the

terms of the discussion. To his mind, neither of these approaches can break free from an erroneous dualism, in which human knowledge and a supposedly uninterpreted reality are treated as two quite separate things. If we think of them in this way, they are bound to look as if they are simultaneously linked and held apart, because we are tied to one or other of two equally unsatisfactory conceptual frameworks which allow only partial communication between the two.

To paraphrase his argument somewhat, this basic and erroneous dualism naturally engenders two interdependent myths about how human beings know things. One is the Myth of the Given, which tells us there is a single pre-given reality out there independent of any cognitive activity (i.e. the truth is out there whether we know anything about it or not). The other is the Myth of the Framework, which tells us that we are epistemic prisoners trapped in our conceptual frameworks. According to Ferrer, while everyone tends to subscribe to both myths to some degree, perennialists seem particularly bewitched by the Myth of the Given, while contextualists tend to be especially constrained by the Myth of the Framework.

The upshot, in Ferrer's opinion, is that these epistemological myths not only create all sorts of pseudo-problems about the nature of spiritual knowing, but also create a genuine and fundamental difficulty by severing our direct connection with the true source of our being. His solution is to transcend this dualism by invoking the 'participatory epistemology' put forward by Richard Tarnas in his book *The Passion of the Western Mind*, in which human beings are themselves regarded as an essential vehicle for the creative self-unfolding of reality. According to Tarnas, 'Nature's reality is not merely phenomenal, nor is it independent and objective; rather it is something that comes into being through the very act of human cognition.'

On this approach, spiritual paths are seen neither as purely human constructions (as supposed by contextualists), nor as a variety of alternative routes to a single, predetermined ultimate reality (as essentialists believe). Instead, the various spiritual traditions can be better seen as vehicles for the 'participatory enactment of different spiritual ultimates'. What this means, if I understand Ferrer aright, is that constructivists like Cupitt and myself are right in denying a pre-existing reality 'out there' and independent of us, but wrong if we deny that human beings by their openness (see my earlier *Sofia* article 'Open up to God') participate in the creation of spiritual realities that do ultimately have significance beyond ourselves.

So what IS Mystical Experience?

Having read a lot of views about these matters I see at least three levels (often confused in discussion) relating to what we call mystical experience:

- (1) spiritual realities themselves
- (2) conscious experiences of spiritual realities
- (3) beliefs about those experiences

The transpersonalist establishment would say the primary raw data for transpersonal science are to be found at level (1), which is faithfully transmitted at levels (2) and (3), and provides spiritual knowledge that finds expression in the perennial philosophy. To the extent that there are differences of detail between the various mystical traditions – Buddhism, Vedanta, Western esotericism, etc. – these are to be explained by a degree of interpretation intruding at level (3). But this does not, on the official view, invalidate the truth claims of the perennial philosophy.

The alternative to this perennialist view, as put forward by contextualists, such as Steven Katz in his book *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, sees things differently. On this account, spiritual experiences – level (2) – are already inescapably shaped by the concepts the mystic brings to them. Consequently, it is impossible to gain any direct knowledge of spiritual realities in themselves – level (1) – from such experiences. Indeed, level (1) might not even exist.

If we follow Ferrer in abandoning both the Myth of the Given, i.e. the perennialist idea that there is an objective observer-independent spiritual reality at what we are now calling level (1), and also the contextualist's Myth of the Framework, i.e. the idea that all experience at level (2) is predetermined by the conceptual scheme we bring to it, then it seems to me to follow that no usable data will be found at either of these levels. Which leaves us with level (3), our beliefs about our experiences, as the only place where we can learn anything from or about mystical experience.

When I published this conclusion last year it was unsurprisingly attacked by Ferrer's followers, and I do not deny that I may not have fully understood his position. However I do maintain that in a most important sense, mystical experience IS what it is believed to be. All that flows from such experience depends on what the individual concerned believes it to be, because that is the level – our level (3) – on which the mystic and those who accept his or her testimony will actually be basing their claims.

Put otherwise, the fruits of mystical experience will depend on what is believed about it rather than what might, hypothetically, be 'true' about it. And as William James urged over a century ago, should not claims of oneness with God be judged by their fruits, rather than their roots?

Books Mentioned

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Anthony Freeman is a priest in the Church of England and managing editor of the *Journal of Consciousness Studies*.

The God We Create

is the God that we desire
The God who is
Is the God who creates us
Yet even that latter God
Is not free from us
For our imagination gives
the language and the opportunity
For God to be.
Without us God cannot be
Though God is always
More than I am
or ever able to be.
All human beings together create
God and Gods
Who are more than we are
or ever able to be.
So poetic wisdom's task is
To provide words, images
and ideas
Wherein our Gods may dwell
And God will be
What God will be.

James Findlay

James Findlay is a retired minister of religion now more at home in the Unitarian Church.

Where Have All the Babies Gone?

David Boulton reports on the Pope's 're-envisioning' of Limbo, reducing it overnight from a doctrine to a product of the imagination, and asks: why stop there?

So the Pope has abolished Limbo. On April 20th 2007 he authorised publication by the RC Church's International Theological Commission of a 41-page document entitled 'The Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die Without Being Baptised'. It recognised that 'people find it increasingly difficult to accept that God is merciful if he excludes infants, who have no personal sin, from eternal happiness, whether they are Christian or non-Christian'. So, in the words of the former Cardinal Ratzinger, 'Limbo should be abandoned because it is only a hypothesis, not a defined truth of faith'.

One day it was there, receiving the souls of dead babies, the next it was gone, wiped off the cosmic map at the wave of a pontifical wand. Limbo, generations of Catholics were taught, stood at the *limbus*, the border, of Hell, taking in unbaptised babies born with original sin who hadn't yet got round to actual sinning, the righteous born before Christ, and the odd AD misfit soul deemed deserving of neither the beatific vision in Heaven nor everlasting punishment in Hell.

Now this convenient dumping ground is no more. Has it been towed away and sunk by the Vatican, absorbed into a Greater Heaven or Hell, or simply vanished away by magic? Was God consulted? Now you see it, now you don't. So where have all the babies gone, long time passing...?

Ah, I hear my Catholic friends reply, you haven't understood Limbo. The Church has never pronounced on Limbo's *existence*, never asserted its status as a *place*, never dogmatised it as necessary truth. The doctrine of Limbo has always been in limbo, as it were. We should understand it as evocative rather than descriptive, poetically rather than literally. Limbo is and always was an imagined state of being, a conceptual response to a theological problem. The Pope hasn't so much abolished a territory as abandoned a way of thinking that has come to be seen in the modern world as posing more questions than it was meant to answer.

But if that is true of Limbo, where does that leave the three remaining corners of the old four-square cosmos – Purgatory, Hell and Heaven? Purgatory was abolished by the Protestant churches at the Reformation, simply because they couldn't find it in the Bible. To Luther and his followers (for whom Limbo was a non-starter) there was no room for a 'third place': you were either saved or damned. Get yourself washed in the blood of the Lamb and you went to Heaven, reject Christ's atonement or die in ignorance of it and you went to Hell. You were either sheep or goat, saved or damned. Catholics were more accommodating, making provision for those who died with unexpiated venial or minor sins by providing an ante-room where such blemishes could be purged away to fit the soul for the Heaven itself.

But if Limbo can be first downgraded from place to state of mind or being, and then summarily abolished altogether, why not Purgatory? And if Purgatory, why not Hell? And if Hell, why not Heaven? If one can be pontifically eliminated, why not two, or three, or all four? If Limbo is now to be understood as a figure of speech, why not the whole cosmic neighbourhood?

And it doesn't stop there. What about the inhabitants of these regions infernal and sublime? If the dead babies in Limbo are figments of our imagination, what about the demons and damned in Hell and the angels and saints in Heaven? Are we to locate them in a real parallel universe, or are they, too, all in the mind?

Then there's God himself. When the transcendent territories and their native spirits are understood as products of the creative human imagination, states of mind conjured into being, perhaps, by our human cravings for protection, justice, and meaningfulness, why not make sense of God in the same way?

The Pope tells the faithful he hasn't so much abolished Limbo as re-envisioned it. Re-envision Limbo and we can re-envision the entire lexicon of Heaven and Hell, God and the Devil. We don't have to call that abolition. We can call it creative imagination. We all speak and read two languages, one of poetry and one of prose, one fanciful and one literal. 'My love is like a red, red rose that's newly sprung in June' is rich, imaginative, evocative poetry. It's true: she is vibrant, fresh, enticing, like the June rose. But as literal prose it is nonsense. She has no petals and she isn't red (let alone red, red) unless she has scarlet fever. All the world isn't a stage to the prosaic onlooker, but it is just that to the poet.

Re-envision Limbo and we can re-envision the entire lexicon of Heaven and Hell, God and the Devil.

'Poetry is a way of taking life by the throat', wrote Robert Frost. 'A criticism of life', said Matthew Arnold, 'Truth in its Sunday clothes' wrote Joseph Roux. Poetry has a dynamic, and even a precision, that plain journalistic prose can never begin to match (and that's a journalist talking). 'Poetry is a subject as precise as geometry', insisted Gustave Flaubert.

Could it be, then, that our God-language, the language of religion, is best understood as poetry rather than prose, symbolic and metaphorical rather than factual and literal, our way of transcending the mundane? A literal Heaven and Hell, literal angels and demons, a literal spirit world and a literal God are dead as Limbo. But they live as our imaginative creations, and the life of the imagination – the 'poetic genius' Blake called it – is a life more abundant, free, and attuned to the wholly human spirit than the literalists have ever managed to grasp. Tell that to Pope Benedict – and pass it on to Richard Dawkins.

David Boulton is a former Editor of this magazine. The second edition of his book *The Trouble with God* was published by O Books in 2005.

Dante's Limbo

Dante and Virgil his guide enter the First Circle of Hell, which is Limbo.

So he entered, and so he made me enter, into the first circle that surrounds the abyss. Here there was no sound to be heard, except the sighing, that made the eternal air tremble, and it came from the sorrow of the vast and varied crowds of children, of women, and of men, free of torment. My good Master said to me: 'You do not demand to know who these spirits are that you see. I want you to learn, before you go further, that they had no sin, yet, though they have worth, it is not sufficient, because they were not baptised, and baptism is the gateway to the faith that you believe in. Since they lived before Christianity, they did not worship God correctly, and I myself am one of them. For this defect, and for no other fault, we are lost, and we are only tormented, in that without hope we live in desire.'

When I heard this, great sorrow gripped my heart, because I knew of people of great value, who must be suspended in that Limbo.

The Great Poets of Antiquity

We did not cease moving, though he was speaking, but passed the wood meanwhile, the wood, I say, of crowded spirits...

Then Dante asks Virgil:

'O you, who value every science and art, who are these, who have such honour that they stand apart from all the rest?' And he to me: 'Their fame, that sounds out for them, honoured in that life of yours, brings them heaven's grace that advances them.' Meanwhile I heard a voice: 'Honour the great poet: his departed shade returns.'

After the voice had paused, and was quiet, I saw four great shades come towards us, with faces that were neither sad nor happy. My good Master began to speak: 'Take note of him, with a sword in hand, who comes in front of the other three, as if he were their lord: that is Homer, the sovereign poet: next Horace the satirist: Ovid is the third, and last is Lucan. Because each is worthy, with me, of that name the one voice sounded, they do me honour, and, in doing so, do well.'

So I saw gathered together the noble school, of the lord of highest song, who soars, like an eagle, above the rest. After they had talked for a while amongst



William Blake: *Dante's Limbo*

themselves, they turned towards me with a sign of greeting, at which my Master smiled. And they honoured me further still, since they made me one of their company, so that I became a sixth among the wise. So we went onwards to the light, speaking of things about which it is best to be silent...

The Heroes, Heroines and Philosophers

We came to the base of a noble castle; surrounded seven times by a high wall; defended by a beautiful, encircling, stream. This we crossed as if it were solid earth: together with those wise ones, I entered through seven gates: we reached a meadow of fresh turf. The people there were of great authority in appearance, with calm, and serious looks... There, on the glossy green, the great spirits were pointed out to me, directly, so that I feel exalted at having seen them.

I saw Electra with many others, amongst whom I knew Hector, Aeneas and Caesar, armed, with his eagle eye... And I saw Saladin, by himself, apart. When I lifted my eyes a little higher, I saw the Master of those who know, Aristotle, sitting amongst the company of philosophers. All gaze at him: all show him honour. There I saw Socrates, and Plato, who stand nearest to him of all of them; Democritus, who ascribes the world to chance... Avicenna, and Galen; and Averroës, who wrote the vast commentary...

From Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, canto 4. This translation (slightly adapted by the Editor and cut for reasons of space) is freely available on Tony Kline's site *Poetry in Translation*: www.tonykline.co.uk

All the decent verse translations known to the Editor are still in copyright. Bilingual texts are available, e.g. *Inferno*, translated by John D. Sinclair (OUP 1939) is in print. Comment on page 19.

Drowning in the Sea of Faith: On Finding I Have Insufficient Buoyancy

Since retiring 15 years ago, ex-Presbyterian minister Philip Smith has been reading contemporary works on theology and New Testament. And has not found much that is sustaining.

God

I have long since departed from the notion of a supernatural, interventionist, theism. What evidence is there that any supernatural being intervenes in any consistent way to favour one party but not another? None. So I turn to pantheism. Fine: we all, and everything, belong 'in God'. So what's the difference between 'God', 'Nature', and 'Fate'? Well, 'God' could be greater than the nature we name and recognise on our planet. And the consistency of the laws of nature is very striking. On the other hand, many say that there seems to be no evidence of a God of purpose or of love within nature. Nature's birth-rate is prodigal and survival-rate small. Again, all life survives only if it can devour other life – cruel, and hardly consistent with our idea of a loving God. Of course nature could be 'fallen'. But try to convince the parents of a painfully deformed child that a loving God tolerates that.

So no direct link exists between 'God' and 'nature'. Perhaps 'God' exists on a higher dimension, one beyond our science or mathematics? The trouble with this is that a Christian professor of astronomy tells me that mathematically this is not possible. And yet, and yet...Is it not arrogant to declare that there is nothing beyond what our minds can conceive? Are people all misguided who experience a power beyond their understanding? Do not many people, who cannot name God, still believe in a transcendent power?

Jesus the Christ

I was trained, fifty years ago in divinity college, that there is no certain knowledge of God except through Jesus Christ. So I study scholars like Marcus Borg, John Shelby Spong and Geza Vermes. And I find

that the overwhelming probability is that Jesus the man saw himself as a Jewish non-violent messiah teaching his rural contemporaries that the heart of their traditional insights was social justice for all and purity before God; and that they should prepare their hearts and behaviours for the nationally expected apocalyptic Kingdom of God to come. This, it was expected, would bring the just and righteous rule of God permanently to transform our existing world. Well, our news bulletins and our knowledge of human

nature tell us that that has not nor will ever come. Was Jesus misguided?

What of the Christian's trump card, the Resurrection? Well, the gospel accounts, which all vary, are not histories as we would write or film them today; they are devotional commentaries, stories akin to parables. Eg Luke wrote two accounts of the Ascension, one as a resurrection experience of the disciples at the time of the

resurrection, and the other placing it 40 days later, by which time the intensity of the experience would have abated. This fading they explained by a story of 'ascension'. I see this as a sign that resurrection appearances were the inner experiences of Jesus' bereft friends and disciples, which extended only over several weeks. I note that when people die today, such intense feelings of the nearness of the deceased can often be remarkably similar, and extend for the same sort of length of time.

Had Paul not come on the scene, and turned the Jewish Messiah into a universal Christos; had John not depicted Jesus as the lamb slain for the sins of the world, and as the divine Logos, existent before all worlds; then would we today have heard anything much of Jesus? Would he not have been consigned by



history into just another great Jewish prophet? And did Paul have the right to describe Jesus as 'the Christ' when he never met him? Did Paul know Jesus better than did James, Jesus' brother, and have the right to direct the first Christians away from Jesus' strictly Jewish laws and life? And would not Jesus the 'son of man' have been horrified at being called later the 'Son of God', so blasphemous to a good Jew?

We seem, today as then, to be able to read into the meaning of 'Christ' anything we want to. We make him what appeals to us. 'The Christ' sure is a human invention! No, I don't feel I know enough of who either Jesus or Christ is to have a certain knowledge of God. Am I so unlike a great mass of folk in the Western world today? I don't think so.

Spirit

I can't define this word. But I acknowledge that there does seem to be a spiritual 'dimension' to life; and it can be found within and without all religions. It involves idealism, purpose, direction, life-style, empathy with others, and much more. Many of us see hope in the Buddhist philosophy, which says we shall never know how the universe came into being or if it has any purpose (so we should play down the credal 'Maker of Heaven and Earth'). Instead, the Buddhist cultivates the peaceable, the compassionate, the forgiving, the calm spirit. Make the most of this life in an unselfish way.

I do think that Christian morality, at its best, is what benefits society the most. What, of course, do I mean by 'at its best'? I mean something along the lines of this Buddhism, and that which adapts flexibly and carefully to new world situations. Nothing is for ever; all things change; and our beliefs and practices should be allowed to change too, without the taunt that we bend too easily to the current winds of fashion. I suppose I'm a 'secular humanist with nostalgic Christian longings'. At least I'm no longer a Christian Longing for Orthodox Theology (CLOT for short). More a Christian Humanist, Universalist, Morally Progressive (known as CHUMP). Again, I believe I'm not alone.

Churches

I have the greatest respect for those congregations whose people do great good, often unsung, and whose individual life-direction is beyond reproach. But their public worship seldom accords with modern understanding of either science or theology. Instead, devotions are addressed to God as if 'he' were a super-man out there somewhere, but who made a surprise entry once-upon-a-time before departing our shores once more. Should not churches' prayers much more be meditations on our inner

motivations and ideals and on the needs of others, but not all addressed to 'God' who is apparently pictured in this out-of-world way? It is clear to me that we can't go back to the early church's time-conditioned dictats and creeds, which are set in stone – or the stone age. Yet human beings have a need to come together to share our beliefs about the deep things, and public meetings and liturgies can do this. But existing liturgies don't. Yes, 'God' may still be a word which has meaning for some, and public gatherings can acknowledge this. But not in an exclusive, central way.

Would, however, meditations in place of prayers, addressed inwards and not outwards, have mass appeal? Would they attract the many agnostics if we transformed public worship into such human, idealistic centring? And do we know how to do it anyway? Quakers and Unitarians have been doing something like this for generations, but the mass of folk remain untouched. If however we could persuade existing, strong, congregations to transform their worship and declared beliefs, might new members more than balance out the inevitable loss of some existing ones? Or is what's on offer too wet and woolly a straw for a drowning civilization to clutch? Unless, however, we offer something new and positive, may not most of us continue to drown in a sea of insubstantial faith?

Philip Smith is an ex-Presbyterian minister and member of SoF.

Theology Lesson from my Cat

She wakes me early, jumping on the bed.
I go to let her out, but it is raining.
She turns back from the door, complaining,
twining herself around my legs, expecting me
to switch the weather off

Especially when the mess is of our making
it's no good asking God to put things right.

Joan Sheridan Smith

Joan Sheridan Smith is a retired English teacher and grandmother living in East Anglia. Her poems have been widely published in the small press.

Message in a Bottle

Dorset Humanist David Warden asks: Are we exploring religion as a human creation? It depends on what is meant by 'religion'.

I am not a member of the Sea of Faith but I do subscribe to *Sofia*. I enjoy some of the articles – usually those by your illustrious inspirer, Don Cupitt – but many of the contributions are a bit too self-consciously 'spiritual' for my taste. Perhaps that marks me out as a 'dry' – someone whose predominant mindset is masculinist and rationalist. Nevertheless, I am interested in SoF's stated purpose of 'exploring religion as a human creation' and I would like to tell you about our little Humanist experiment in Dorset.

Dorset Humanists started life about ten years ago when a previous Humanist group, about which nothing is now known, was 'revived'. For the first five years of its life, no-one could be sure that the new group would survive because its membership was so precariously small. And then, five years ago, the new group started to take off and we are now able to boast a membership of 120 with a regular monthly attendance of 40-50 people.

What then is Dorset Humanists? We are a Humanist group affiliated to the British Humanist Association. The BHA's efforts are mainly focused on political campaigning and the maintenance of a ceremony officiants' network. Affiliated groups therefore are allowed to organise themselves autonomously with no interference from the centre. We meet in a community centre in Bournemouth and we have regular monthly meetings with speakers on a wide range of topics. We've had several 'big' names including Peter Tatchell who spoke to us on Human Rights Day and Stuart Lee who told us about his battle with the fundamentalists over 'Jerry Springer The Opera'. I myself have just delivered a talk about the life and works of Tom Paine, and every February we celebrate Darwin Day with a buffet lunch and a talk on a subject of scientific

interest. We make donations to a variety of charities through a fund called 'Humanist Aid' and we support a Humanist school and orphanage in northern India. We are well-represented on local SACREs (Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education) and we regularly talk to schoolchildren about Humanism. We also receive regular invitations to get involved with other multifaith organisations in the local area. The only thing which stops us is lack of time and resources.



Dorset poet Thomas Hardy wrote 'God's Funeral'.

We do not conduct ceremonies ourselves for weddings, funerals and baby-namings but we are associated with a well-established local group of non-religious/Humanist officiants. Our membership is predominantly elderly but our members are valued equally, regardless of their age. Some of them meet socially in between our regular monthly meetings, either for pub lunches or to have discussions on topics of interest. One of our members, a former Mayor of Bournemouth, has just written a short book entitled '*Hypocrisy to Humanism*'. He was an Anglican lay preacher for forty years and has finally found his 'spiritual' home in Dorset Humanists. One of the aspects he likes most about us is the fact that the 'congregation' is allowed to talk back to the speaker – a democratic luxury he never encountered in a church.

The question I would like to address in front of my SoF audience then is this: are Dorset Humanists 'exploring religion as a human creation'? This is not a question I could easily address in front of a Dorset Humanist audience because the word 'religion' is anathema to most Humanists. We are ostensibly a secular rather than a religious humanist organisation. But I wonder whether there is any meaningful distinction between the two types of humanism. Neither group is interested anymore in theology; our focus is on values. If you like 'ologies' we could

reclassify ourselves as 'axiologists' – theorists and practitioners of values. Tom Paine's classic triad of values – liberty, reason and humanity – neatly sums up what we're about.

Some religious humanists still talk about God as some kind of metaphor or symbol for those underlying values. Anthony Freeman is perhaps the most prominent exponent of this view. I note with interest, however, that others such as Don Cupitt and John Hick are coming round to the view that we may have to drop the God-talk in view of the fact that God remains so stubbornly realist and sectarian. Religious humanists also tend to talk about Jesus quite a lot as someone who shows us the way to be or become 'fully human'. I am weary of this pious nostalgia. I am not even convinced that Jesus was an historical person given the very severe problems explored by John Bowden in *Jesus: The Unanswered Questions* (1989, SCM). Robert Funk and the Jesus Seminar may have uncovered the 'real' Jesus but does it matter whether Jesus was real or not? All that matters is that Jesus said some very humanist things such as 'the Sabbath was made for man...' and 'Let him that hath no sin...'. Can we thank him for that and move on?

Secular humanists are not fixated on any one hero, guru or saviour. We have a pantheon of heroes to celebrate – Paine, Mill, Darwin, Russell and so on. We are also interested in the humanistic psychologies of Fromm, Rogers and Maslow. It's true that we are still stuck, to some extent, in the realist discourse of Dawkins but perhaps that's excusable given the frightening resurgence of fundamentalism.

The answer to the question 'Are Dorset Humanists exploring religion as a human creation?' depends, of course, on the meaning one gives to the word 'religion.' If religion entails subscribing to a superstructure of doctrinal beliefs revealed in sacred texts, and the adoration of an almighty God, then the answer to the question is of course a resounding 'No'. If, on the other hand, religion is community of like-minded individuals getting together to celebrate and practise their core values then the answer to the question is surely 'Yes'.

As a Dorset Humanist, I would like to extend warm greetings to members of SoF. Our different versions of Humanism may be not altogether to each other's taste, but I am convinced that we are navigating the same sea.

David Warden graduated in theology from Kent University in 1982 and now works in local government.

Please send your letters to:

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Dear Editor,

Sometimes I'm haunted by the realisation that 'what goes around comes around'. Let me tell you what I mean.



I attended a meeting of the Ipswich SoF on 12th May and was lucky enough to join a lively debating group after the main speakers had finished.

I mentioned that we live through times when we need to build bridges with other faiths so we can stop demonising each other and understand each side better. That launched us into a search for potential themes for such bridge building. Perhaps your readers can think of a few examples themselves for use in their own communities.

For us, the clear winner was 'mountains' – and particularly the sacredness of mountains which has been recognised and revered by just about every religion on the planet. Then a remarkable thing happened. The woman sitting opposite me quoted from a book that was published ten years ago, called *Sacred Mountains: Ancient Wisdom and Modern Meanings* by Adrian Cooper. Two others in our small group immediately piped up with huge praise for the book and its relevance to them. I too voiced my admiration for Cooper's book. It really is a wonderful and clear exposition of the experiences of pilgrims from many faiths and backgrounds on how they have found in mountain landscapes the reasons to awaken their spiritual commitment.

It therefore made me wonder how many others have found supreme value in this ten-year old gem. Perhaps your readers are among them. If you are, I'd be fascinated to know how mountains have worked to inspire you, particularly if your faith was sailing through the doldrums before your mountain travels. And if you haven't yet discovered Cooper's book, perhaps it might be lurking in a local library ready for its discovery. I would certainly be fascinated to know if others have found the same value in mountains as one small debating group from Ipswich. Let me know.

Toni Fergusson
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A Don't-Know-What that They Keep Stammering

From *The Canticle* by John of the Cross

The Bride is speaking:

Oh, who can heal me?
Why can't I have you altogether?
Don't send another
messenger
who will not tell me what I want to hear.

All who come refer to
a thousand things about you I'm remembering
and distress me
but what slays me
is a don't-know-what that they keep stammering.

How can I go on
living a life which is not where I live
and dying
from the piercing
of my imaginations of my love?

Why, when you wounded
my heart, didn't you heal it then?
Why did you take it,
then leave it
and didn't want to keep what you had taken?

Be my troubles' end,
since you alone and no one else will do.
Let my eyes look at
you who are their light.
I only want them so I can see you.

Give me your presence
and let me die of seeing you and your grace.
My love is an agony
which will not go away
unless it has your presence and your face.

O Silver fountain,
won't you on your surfaces of crystal
show me the reflection
of the eyes for which I long
that are printed on the bottom of my soul?

Take them away my love,
I'm flying to you...

My beloved is the mountains,
the solitary forests in the valleys,
the strange islands,
sounding rivers
and the whisper of the loving breezes.

The peaceful night
and also the rising of the morning,
music gone quiet,
solitude resonant,
the supper which refreshes, stirs our loving.

Chase off the little foxes,
because our vine has now begun to blossom.
Let us knit
a tight rose-knot
and let no one disturb us on our mountain.



Current Affair

Comment by Owl

Now here's a new twist to the euthanasia debate that we maybe thought had nowhere else to run. It's reported (*Sunday Telegraph*, 20th May) that some Australian pensioners are so keen to get their hands on the veterinary sedative Nembutal – current drug of choice, it appears, for a 'good death' – that they are sloping off to Mexico for it and smuggling it back in their smalls or their toilet bags. Others back home have succeeded in concocting a similar potion in back-garden tent laboratories. Well, you have to hand it to Aussie get-up-and-go! And courage, since these elderly criminals are facing jail if convicted. According to Exit International, those involved outnumber by four or five times the membership of Sea of Faith (UK).

There are two main reasons why the British debate on the ethics of euthanasia gets aired for a while then flags. First, it is pretty generally accepted that legalised euthanasia will not ever get as far as the Statute Book. Secondly old age, senility or death – good, bad or just plain boring – tend to overtake the best and clearest thinkers before they achieve the means or opportunity of making their quietus as they would ideally choose. Australia has not opted to legalise either, but the majority of Nembutal smugglers and stirrers are said to be mainly 'enjoying healthy and active lives.' They are 'adamant' however 'that they want the choice – and the means – to escape lingering, painful deaths.'

Even if we refuse the time of day to the ludicrous traditional arguments (that suffering and pain are in some way good for our souls, or that a god or goddess, such as Nature, should be allowed the freedom to dictate the malady and the fateful hour), there are good arguments against our being given or appropriating that choice. The burden of pressure on medics, friends or relatives to aid and abet suicide is one; the unpredictable ripple effects of one's 'chosen' unaided suicide on those left behind is another.

But there are equally strong arguments for continuing to seek clearer understanding of what we can reasonably demand as the privileges, if not the rights, of being a thinking, sentient human. Some of the language used up till now, including the language of 'rights', may not indeed be very helpful. The concept of 'dignity' in particular is, arguably, quite inappropriate. In what ways can dignity ever be applicable to the death-bed, other than in romantic films? Enduring a common cold or dose of flu should be enough to prove that point to anyone, without recourse to contemplating the horrors and duration of



more exotic ailments. Even the ambulant can forfeit dignity at the end of their lives – clothed, but no longer in their right mind. That can happen to any of us. I once presented a box of chocolates to a highly respected senior academic colleague whose brain tumour was about to kill him. It was just before his lunch, but he had the box open and was tucking in like a four-year-old. And the time for life-or-death choice, if choice had been available, was long gone.

'I want to be in charge of my own death,' a sixty-something former teacher from Queensland is reported as saying. 'I want to have the same degree of choice in dying that I have in living – independence and dignity and no pain.' The practical reply would be, 'Well you'd better hurry up and do the deed now.' The painful reality, which has to be factored in, is that for most of us, when death seems to be on the cards, we are led perforce to places and situations where we have no wish to go. Yet pre-empting this pass, by any version of suicide, is normally read as some kind of cowardice. Or courage? Traditionally we'd project these oldies beyond the grave: 'Ah but, if you hadn't done it, the legal drugs could have worked their miracles. You might have had many more years in the merry old land of Oz.'

Well, yes, till the next time . . .

Mayday Notes



Dante's Limbo

When Virgil guides Dante through the descending circles of Hell, the first circle is Limbo. Virgil explains that the crowds of 'children, women and men', including Virgil himself, are here because, though they did not sin, they cannot go to heaven because they were not baptised, so that 'without hope we live in desire'. Dante is shocked and distressed, 'because I knew of people of great value, who must be suspended in that Limbo.'

Dante asks Virgil if anyone ever got out of Limbo and Virgil tells him of the Harrowing of Hell 'when I was new to this state' (Virgil died in 19 BC) when Christ rescued great figures from the Old Testament (for reasons of space this story has had to be cut from the *Inferno* extract on page 12).

Then Dante meets the great poets of antiquity, who welcome Virgil back among them. They are led by Homer with a sword in his hand because he wrote of war. Now comes one of the most touching moments in the whole book. After the poets have talked amongst themselves, 'they turned towards me with a sign of greeting', at which Virgil smiles. How that smile must have smitten Dante's heart, because next the poets 'honoured me further still, since they made me one of their company'. What poet could ask for more? To be counted among the great.

Then they come to a noble castle with a beautiful green lawn and encircling stream, where great spirits are pointed out to Dante and he feels 'exalted at having seen them'. He sees Greek heroines and heroes like Electra and Hector. Then he sees Saladin, the noble Muslim hero and opponent of the crusaders (who died just seventy-two years before Dante was born). A little higher up he sees philosophers and sages, first, Aristotle, 'the Master of those who know' with Socrates and Plato near him, and then a whole array of great names, including the Arabian physicians and philosophers, Avicenna and Averroës.

Dante treats them all with the greatest respect. The whole canto has a warmly human and humanistic tone. He does not see it as his role to question Catholic doctrine but the nobility of all these great spirits excluded from 'blessedness' speaks for itself.

John of the Cross's *Canticle*

One of the first things we notice about John of the Cross's *Canticle* (1577), a dialogue between Bridegroom and Bride, based on the *Songs of Songs* and mainly written in prison, is that she does most of the talking. She also makes most of the running. The *Canticle* opens with her anxious: 'Where have hidden yourself and left me to groan?' She sounds like a woman in love complaining: 'Why hasn't he phoned?' She then sets out to pursue him, full of determination. And she gets him.

The Old Testament *Song of Songs* is described by its Jerusalem Bible introduction as originally a series of secular love songs with an allegorical interpretation being applied later. In it the Bridegroom has lengthy passionate passages as well as the Bride (for example, it is he who is speaking for nearly the whole of chapter 4). In John of the Cross's *Canticle*, intended as a dialogue between the 'soul' and her *divine* lover, she is the protagonist throughout, he speaks much less and is a more remote, less realised character. In sumptuous poetry it is the *Bride's* (*the poet's*) feelings that are the main focus. And even though notoriously more difficult to write well about, her feelings of happiness and fulfilment at the end of the poem are expressed as poignantly as her previous feelings of longing and lack (see the extract on page 17).

It is extraordinary how this celibate male mystical poet identifies so vividly with a woman in love. In Tudor England the sonnets of Shakespeare, his contemporary, all have a male protagonist and so do most love sonnets of the period. I think Don Cupitt is right in his *Mysticism after Modernity* (Blackwells 1998) to say that mystical poetry is subversive. The subject of John's poem is human – the Bride, the 'soul' – and in comparison, the divine object of her love is shadowy indeed.

I first read the *Canticle* during what would now be called my gap year in Spain more than forty years ago. As a fervent adolescent, I was enthralled by lines such as 'a don't-know-what that they keep stammering', especially in the original Spanish: '*un no sé qué que quedan balbuciendo*'. Today I have long since stopped believing that God exists. When I walk through the park where giant poplars are rustling, I mutter '*un no sé qué que quedan balbuciendo*' and find I am still delighted. As with the Hopkins quoted in the Editorial, the delight remains even if the poem's divine figure is imaginary.

The Four Gospels and other texts – A Critical Handbook of the New Testament

by Dick Butler

Barbican Press (London 2007). 206pages. Pbk. ISBN: 9780955486104

Up and down the land there must be hundreds of clergy filing cabinets hiding treasuries of teaching aids. As priests and ministers have tried to communicate the findings of scholars to their people, they have made maps, created charts and invented clear and telling ways of communicating. This certainly goes on, but only the local flock in each case gets the benefit. Dick Butler has had the wisdom to publish his charts, and to write the necessary explanations.

He has charts for the Gospels, explaining clearly their structure, and offering ways of understanding the purpose of the writers. He introduces the reader to Midrash, and its place both in the Gospels and in Acts. This is done in a clear and straightforward fashion, although it is perhaps over-dependent on one explanation – namely the suggestion that the first three Gospels are based on the Jewish calendar and form lectionaries. This explanation is, of course, linked with the name of Michael Goulder – more on him anon.

Butler then looks at specific Gospel themes, and in particular the ones where the shoe often pinches for modern man. He looks at the Birth and Passion narratives, parables and miracles (sadly ignoring the Johannine parables, which he says don't exist), the Lord's prayer (all these with helpful charts), and then three particularly good chapters on Jesus' family and friends, the Empty Tomb and the Sermon on the Mount. The chapter on the empty tomb is a fine example of Butler's clarity and straightforwardness as he disentangles the later Empty-Tomb traditions from the earlier Resurrection ones.

Paul gets a short chapter (I would have liked more) and no charts. Then there is a helpful chapter on the history of the New Testament text, and another on the Calendar (developing Goulder's ideas in more detail). Finally two chapters on the Old Testament: Creation and the Ten Commandments, both useful in today's world.

The first appendix is an appreciation of Michael Goulder. Here I feel I must criticise Butler. Not for his admiration and use of Goulder's work, which is all to the good, but in his over-dependence on Goulder alone. Butler uses the analogy for New Testament scholarship of a crossword part-done and with some of the solutions inked in wrongly, particularly those based on the so-called 'four document hypothesis'. This is a good analogy, and Butler goes on to explain how first Austin Farrar and later Michael Goulder

have shown where we need to tippex out the ink and re-work the crossword.

However, there are others with other solutions – I am thinking especially of the work of John A. T. Robinson – and these other solutions are ignored. One example would be the identification that Butler makes between the Beloved Disciple and Paul. It is not the only possible solution; indeed, it is by no means even the most plausible.

He also makes the usual mistake with the *Birkath-ha-minim* (the Synagogue exclusion of Christian Jews). He correctly states that it achieved its final (formal) expression around 85 AD, and then, by using the allusion to it in Luke 6:22, claims the Gospel can't have been written before about 90AD (p 43). There is a double fallacy here (even more glaringly used in Johannine studies). Firstly, it assumes that the *Birkath-ha-minim* had no pre-history. Secondly, it assumes that a whole gospel can be dated from the history behind one verse, as if it were a purely literary narrative originating at one point in time – the time-point of the context of said verse. In most of his book, Butler himself warns against this over-literary view of the classical New-Testament scholars.

I would also have liked at least a glance at the more radical views on dating. Butler himself notes (p.134) that Luke does not know how Paul died, but does not say how unlikely this would be thirty years on. Could it be that Acts was finished before Paul met his death?

Having said this, I remain full of admiration for Butler and his book. It is one that I can put into the hands of laypeople, confident that it will open doors and aid their encounter both with scripture and with key elements of the Christian journey. It is also one that will lead people to demand more; it is my own experience that once you give people even a little bit of this, their appetite grows and grows. It is therefore just as useful for house-groups, bible-studies and the other teaching experiences of Church life as it is for the lone enquirer.



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Preaching to the Converted

Kathleen McPhilemy reviews

Jesus and the Trojan War

by Michael Horan

Imprint Academic (Exeter) 252 pages. £14.95. Pbk. ISBN: 9781845400811

Jesus and The Trojan War by Michael Horan raises a range of fascinating and important questions. The writer explores the relationship between myth and history, investigates the human need for myth and considers how different myths, including the myth of Christianity, can continue to be of importance and use in the 21st century.

However, it is not at first clear whom this book is aimed at, nor what its purpose is. Although Mr Horan appears impressively well-read across many different fields, he fails to bridge the gap between his interesting and informative presentation of the sources of the stories of Arthur, Troy and Moses and his views on the place of religion in contemporary life. He sometimes seems to be addressing a rather Victorian audience of anxious Christians who have realised that the Bible may not be literally true. Horan is reassuring: 'Emphatically, there is no intention of attacking religious belief in itself: quite the contrary.' Unfortunately, he never successfully defines religious belief, seeming sometimes to see it as membership of a faith group and at others as a vague thirst for something spiritual. The tenor of his argument suggests that the story of Christ's life, death and resurrection, whether or not it has any historical basis, should be regarded as an example of myth, something we can make use of now, and prospectively. Recognition of the value of this myth will lead us, according to the final chapter heading, to a 'New Beginning'. How this will happen is not obvious. 'Ancient stories' have 'mythic truths' which are 'a part of the eternity in which we and our neighbours dwell'. Somehow, 'perhaps, we have joined the *Via Transformativa*' which 'leads on to an agenda which reaches far beyond personal redemption, to a concern for one's neighbour, and for a planet that could be green once more'.

The word 'perhaps' is an indicator of a recurring weakness in this book. Early on, Horan rejects the language of assertion and certainty. 'It is to be hoped, therefore, that I will not be caught too often using words and phrases such as obviously...of course...the fact is...we can be sure that...' Unfortunately, these phrases are replaced by 'perhaps' and 'probably' which disarm criticism and sidestep debate.

The links between history and myth are fascinating and I enjoyed the readable recounts of the stories of Arthur, Troy and Moses. However, I would have welcomed a much more substantial exploration of the ways in which myth becomes history, of how psychological, sociological and historical pressures select and transform events and legends into myth, and of

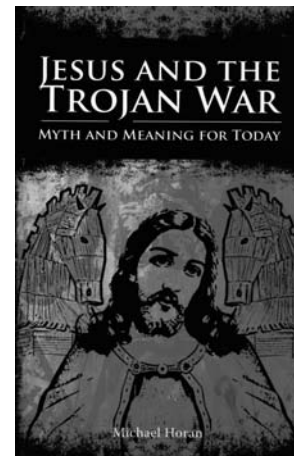
how these myths are constantly mutating to meet the demands of new circumstance.

There is a hint of this in the epigrammatic description of St. Paul's effect on Christianity: 'The focus of Paul's religion was no longer on the Sermon on the Mount, but on a cross on a hill.'

Volumes have already been written on the themes and archetypes which are common to different mythologies. There is nothing new here. The ideas of Jung are mentioned but not discussed. Too often, the names of major philosophers or scientists are dropped into the text but their ideas are not explored or analysed in any significant way. Chapter One contains a rather superficial discussion of time which manages to include Einstein, Shakespeare and the Australian Alcheringa or Dream Time. Undeniably, the nature of time, human attempts to explore it and the origins of myth and religion are extraordinarily interesting subjects. However, Horan teases and frustrates his readers by a failure to pursue or develop his ideas. For example, the penultimate chapter, in its attempts to come to terms with the notion of 'religious belief', first describes the Census statistics about believers, then moves to a very elementary distinction between 'believing that' and 'believing in', following up with an assertion of the validity of Christian humanism based, apparently, on the authority of numbers: 'This approach is being taken and advocated by a growing number of writers, theologians and (encouragingly) clergy, as well as many lay people.' If this was the intended destination from the beginning, I would prefer to have been told.

Although there are parts of this book which I found interesting and thought-provoking, I felt, finally, that it was aimed at a fairly small audience of like-minded people who would be expected to recognise and accept its ideas. For the unconvinced, or even those who would like to be convinced, its lack of philosophical rigour and the uneasy mixture of academic and casual style mean that it does not satisfy, whether approached as theology, philosophy or literary criticism.

Kathleen McPhilemy is a further education lecturer in Oxford. Her latest poetry collection is *The Lion in the Forest* (Katabasis, 2004).



reviews

Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act

A round-up of exhibitions and events by Cicely Herbert

In May 1807, King George III gave his assent to an historic act of Parliament which declared that 'the African slave trade, and all manner of dealing and trading in the purchase, sale, barter or transfer of slaves...should be utterly abolished, prohibited and declared unlawful.' Thus ended a shameful and prolonged period in our history. This year, in celebrating the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade, we are able to look back, fully to acknowledge our country's role in causing the suffering, displacement and exploitation of thousands of African men, women and children.

In a small exhibition at the British Museum, *Human Traffic, the Business of the Slave Trade*, the display of an horrific and weighty 'iron neck collar,' such as was worn by slaves during transportation to the 'New World', tells us, more than any words could, of the sufferings endured by captured African slaves.

At the British Library, one can see a first edition of Olaudah Equiano's anti-slave text, which describes his own experience of slavery in Africa, the Caribbean, America, and England. His book was widely read in his lifetime, going into 8 further editions. Also on display is a collection of documents which includes the plan of the 'Brookes' (published in 1789). This famous image of a slave ship shows how hundreds of slaves were packed into its hold throughout the voyage. The plan was distributed in the press and became instrumental in arousing the disgust and conscience of, firstly, members of the Quaker faith and then of the nation.

A recent exhibition shown at the British Museum, *La Bouche Du Roi* by Romuald Hazoumé recreates 'the Brookes' from a combination of materials including petrol cans, spices, and audio and visual elements. This powerful art work is described as 'a meditation on human greed, exploitation and enslavement, both historic and contemporary' and will tour the country until 2009.

Many of our major art institutions seem to be making a serious attempt to welcome those members of the public who still believe that such places are not for them. I recently met several first time visitors to the National Portrait Gallery, drawn in by an exhibition celebrating the *Between Worlds: Voyagers to Britain 1700-1850*.

Poems on the Underground has chosen six poems by African writers, which will be posted on tube trains this June, to be read and enjoyed by thousands of underground travellers in London during the summer months.

These are only a few of the many exciting events planned this year for the bicentenary celebrations. The Prime Minister, Tony Blair, has expressed profound sorrow, but has yet to make an official apology for our country's part in the slave trade. To my mind, the word 'apology' is far too mild to cover the enormity of the crimes committed in the past against humanity. Better, perhaps, to remind



Olaudah Equiano

ourselves over and again of the inhuman actions of the slave masters and to try and make reparation by celebrating the achievements of the descendants, the sons and daughters of those early slaves.

However, it is well to remember that still today, millions of people, mainly women and children, suffer from exploitation. Thousands are forced into labour by unscrupulous masters. Burmese women have been captured and taken to Thailand as sex slaves; world-wide, children are still used as a cheap form of labour. Prostitution continues, as do forced marriages, and the widespread buying and selling of women by dowry. Many migrant workers are kept in bondage through the confiscation of passports. Even in Britain there are examples of workers deprived of their basic rights. A recent, shocking, case was reported on BBC Radio 4, citing conditions in a factory in, of all places, Luton. Here, where workers are employed to pack imported 'Fair Trade' bananas, the mainly immigrant workforce has been expected to 'slave' for up to 16-18 hours a day with only two short breaks in order to earn a wage that is well below the legal minimum. Hopefully such cases as this, and of the tragic deaths of the Chinese cockle pickers in Morecambe Bay, are rare in Britain, but we need to remain vigilant.

Inhuman Traffic: the Business of the Slave Trade on display at the British Museum from May 2007 – April 2008.

La Bouche Du Roi, a contemporary artwork by Romuald Hazoumé:

June 15th – July: Ferens Art Gallery, Hull

4th August – 2nd Sept: Merseyside Maritime Museum Liverpool

15th September – 28th October: Bristol City Museum

10th November – 3rd February 2008: Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle

5th December – 3rd February 2009: Horniman Museum, London

The End of Slavery: An excellent Government publication, contains information of events and celebrations to be held throughout the country this year. For a free copy telephone 0870 122 6236 quote 06REUO4476. The publication of this pamphlet coincides with a major exhibition at Central Hall, Westminster which will run until 23 September.

www.parliament.uk/slavetrade

North Flight

by Lynne Wycherley

Shoestring Press (Nottingham 2006). £8.95. ISBN: 13978190486303

A poetry of pointlessness is, by definition, pointless. To mimic something Dr Johnson was about to say, there are two kinds of poet: those of use to us, and those who are not. To say this is not to attack modernism: arguably, that alleged (alleged, because so misunderstood) triumph of modernism *The Wasteland* is more affirmative than the lacklustre 'Georgianism' it displaced. It leads 'to fragments ..shored against ruins..' through moments of extreme perception, and the hallucinating sublime. The issue has to be with the post-modernism that came after, the spiritual decadence of Ashberry, the essential futility of Frank O'Hara, the waste of space in John Kinsella and the even greater futility of all those who thought it terribly clever to evolve pointlessness, were that possible. Mark Ford's *Soft Sift* loops the loop in exploring vacancy, the book a paradigm of literary decadence, of the exhausted spirit with nowhere to go.

As an enthusiast for Basho's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, the towering oil paintings of the great Norwegian painter Peder Balke (1804 to 1887) and the mystical, Nordic aphorism-lyrics of the celebrated Ostrobothnian quasi-separatist Gosta Agren, I approached Wycherley's *North Flight* with some excitement. She sounded like a poet who had gone somewhere. Having myself travelled in Sweden, Norway and over Iceland, I knew her destination to be worthwhile, a potential 'cleansing of the spirit'. Her book is indeed a spiritual progress, a journey from her native 'Fens' dark gift' to Shetland and Iceland. It is a journey in which someone met can say: 'I must leave one self/and raise another'. Wycherley wants to travel: 'as north as north can go,...where land must end/ and the ultimate begins,/ glass chasing glass'— from lines written near the last lighthouse, Shetland. 'It burns in me now —/one diamond/ held against death.'

Whilst one poem *iii winterland* is almost conventionally prescriptive in lines Agren might have written: 'we step from our moulds,/skin-tight roles, to face/space, light, silence, / a landscape grown/ as large and strange as love.' the fascination in the work is how different Wycherley is from Agren. For a poetry standing at the edge, meshing with the absolute, confronting the ultimate, as every voyager that far north must, it is strangely detailed, oddly serrated in a way and 'shot with fire, teathed with ice'. This is her crystalline marvel, the image-perfect detail that prevents her work from being mere travel poetry, or the kind of droll Novia Scotia-bound 'narratives' ever in search of an elusive symbolism that you find in Elizabeth Bishop. With Bishop, the fate of detail always hangs in the balance, undecided, stale often, and thus ultimately very irritating.

In Wycherley, each fine detail is a fresh apprehension, a keen moment of perception. The last poem returns to where 'the fen

drags round us'. I did not want to go back. Overall, the movement in the book is of an enervating struggle for the ultimate; you keep on getting a sharp sense of seeing the sun or eternity through a grain of ice, or of being at 'the snow-drift edge' with 'each grain a chalice/ to catch the sun' in a Nordic version of Blake's discovery of eternity in a grain of sand. The power in all the detail is cumulative. I never found it to be repetitive, or clutter before a sublime moment like 'A longship burning, /journeying west. Sailing off the edge of the world.' On the book cover is a stunning photograph of Arnason's 'Sun Voyager', a steel sculpture abstract skeleton of a longboat by the harbour in Reykjavik and the subject of the penultimate poem, a climactic vision: 'its prow points north/ into night, nil, the vanishing'. Wycherley's astonishing poem does need to be quoted as spaced:

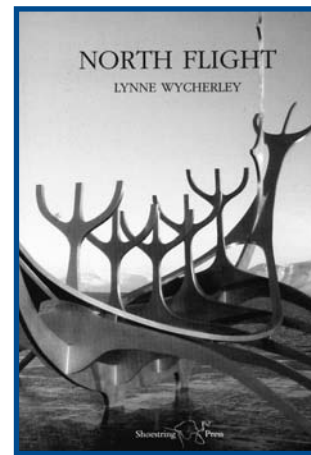
and I see tines, tongues,
andirons. Actinium
trees reaching for stars

the arctic absolutes.

Icebeak, ironfin, firebone.
To taste it is to be honed.

The last line serves to speak for the experience of reading her book. The clean lines of her poem stand in stark contrast to Heaney's limp complaint in *North*: 'I faced the unmagical/ invitations of Iceland'. His poem's lack of any sense of lived engagement is mirrored by the 'rusting' four line mini-stanzas and a fusty air of general boredom. His book never really feels like a journey to freshened perception, which Wycherley's invariably does. A sense of seeing anew is much helped by her technical skills. Each 'stanza' or laying out is always shapely; every line seems to make a satisfying unit of sound and end 'stressed', to give a sense of a perception completed. Her clean music uses the full range of the language, balancing consonants and vowels with clear tact.

Christopher Truman has been evolving a series of Zen-based black and white laser prints, some of which have been used in *Sofia*. Some counterpoint his poetry.





*‘And the azurous hung hills are his world-wielding shoulder
Majestic – as a stallion stalwart, very-violet-sweet!’*