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'Dry Cracked Ground' is from the free image internet site [imageafter.com](http://imageafter.com)

*sfia* is the magazine of  
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*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.

# The Good Life?

This Conference issue of *Sofia* on the theme of The Good Life? is tightly packed with the talks by all three speakers, Tim Jackson, Jonathon Porritt and Stephanie Dowrick.

Structural, unjust, massive poverty is the shame of our current geo-economy. As well as the Conference talks, this issue contains an article by William Gumedé (reprinted from the *Guardian* with the author's kind permission) warning that climate change cannot be tackled if existing injustices in global politics are overlooked. In their own language all three of our speakers agree with this vital point. Jackson points out that our consumerist society's 'framing and disbursement of rewards is iniquitous'. Porritt says the good life 'has to be for the whole of humankind. It is not possible, morally or pragmatically, to talk about creating a sustainable future for a segment of humankind.' Dowrick reminds us: 'Poverty is crushing.'

Tim Jackson's talk on consumerism stresses that in order to counter it and seek alternatives, we must first understand it. To do this, his subtitle introduces the rather difficult term 'theodicy', which he explains as 'the attempt to "make sense of" our lives, faced with persistent injustice, the prosperity of ill-doers...' Consumerism, he says, is a secular attempt of this kind, which is ultimately doomed to fail. Of course, traditional theodicies such as Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost*, whose aim was 'to justify the ways of God to men' were not very successful either with the 'problem of evil'. Famously, Blake, who illustrated *Paradise Lost*, said Milton 'was a true Poet, and of the Devil's party without knowing it'. Why shouldn't human beings eat the apple and grow up, instead of forever submitting to a tyrannical father?

Fascinatingly, Jackson analyses the role of consumerism and then points out how it is 'not entirely pathological but clearly flawed.' He looks at 'the ability of sheer stuff to take on symbolic meaning ... an extremely influential "osmosis" between the physical and the cultural world'. Later in the discussion he mentioned the Guatemalan Indians and I was reminded of the close connection between eating, loving and becoming in many American Indian cultures, as well as in a sacramental Christian theology. In the *Popol Vuh*, the Mayan creation story, the gods create human beings from maize, which makes sense because maize was their staple diet. I think that, far from being pathological, a reverent attitude to the Earth must include the greatest respect for and enjoyment of what it offers us to eat and drink, as that

is part of the way in which we are connected in one ecosystem. What is wrong with consumerism is its *excess*, especially when it threatens the Earth itself. As Porritt says, we need a sense of 'enoughness'. Obesity, even in childhood, is a major problem in Britain (even more so in the USA) and so is alcoholism. But *pace* those big Quaker temperance capitalists like Fry and Cadbury, who said 'Let them drink cocoa' and made their money in chocolate, I think wine is a wonderful osmosis between nature and culture, a gift for which we should be very grateful. The problem is *excess*: alcoholism and obesity are illnesses, symbolic of what is wrong with consumerism as a whole.

In his talk Porritt mentioned his book *Capitalism as if the World Mattered* and said the time we have to deal with the environmental threat to the Earth is much too short to set up an alternative system to capitalism, 'so we have to get it done through market-based capitalist systems.' He described some of the work of Schumacher and Berry and said we need a new spiritual vision of reverence for the Earth and a living sense of our interdependence. His vision was inspiring and heartfelt. However, I wondered if getting huge multi-national corporations – who have so much power – to share that vision might not be as difficult and take as long as creating an alternative system to capitalism (or a more responsible and more strictly and democratically controlled capitalism), or if indeed, the two tasks might not amount to the same thing.

The main focus of Stephanie Dowrick's talk was that we would be happier if we took a friendlier, more positive attitude. That is undoubtedly true. When she spoke of our attitude to queuing, I remembered, to my dismay (and my grown-up children periodically remind me!) how when I was queuing for the lido on a boiling hot day with tetchy kids, and another woman in the queue jostled and spoke rudely to me, I slapped her in the face. Of course, if I had heeded wise spiritual words to improve my attitude I would have avoided that disgraceful behaviour, but if the preacher of the wise words had brought us all a large bottle of water, that would have helped more. Obviously, it is right to continue exhorting ourselves to be more positive and friendlier.

But when I heard Dowrick say we are 'restricted ... rather less by external circumstances than many of us might think,' I thought: 'Hold on a minute!' I thought of the women I knew in London in the 1970s devouring the books that came out from Virago, and the Women's Press, and *Spare Rib* magazine. If one of them had had a husband who beat her up and terrorised the children and a cleric had come along and told her to put up with it and take a more positive attitude, they would have hooted with derision. I imagined the Tolpuddle martyrs transported to Australia and being met by an interfaith minister, who patted them on the head saying: 'You silly boys! You should have put up with your lot and not tried to fight it with a trade union. Never mind, if you think positively here, you can settle down and become good Australians and your great-grandchildren may get on *Neighbours* and become celebs.' At the end of her talk Dowrick mentioned visiting Gandhi's ashram. Gandhi was an activist.

I thought of that great cloud of witnesses who have tried to fight oppression and injustice, for themselves or in solidarity. Continuing with British labour history, I thought of the Match Girls' Strike against the hideous and dangerous conditions at the Bryant and May factory in 1888. I thought of the London Dockers' Strike in 1889. The East End Jews supported the dockers (many of whom were Irish Catholics) and when the fascist Moseley tried to march through the East End, the dockers remembered and came out and supported the Jews in the Battle of Cable Street on 4th October 1936. Written on the walls of Cable Street, and they shouted: '*¡No pasarán!*' in solidarity with Spain. When today I whiz above Cable Street on the Docklands Light Railway, I repeat: '*¡No pasarán!*' and rejoice that the blackshirts were stopped from passing, spitting racist hatred, through the East End of London that day. I thought of the twenty-year-old British poet John Cornford, Darwin's grandson, one of many who went out to fight the fascists in Spain and was killed near Madrid on 29th December 1936. I remembered his love poem *Heart of the Heartless World* (see page 19). I thought of another twenty-year-old poet, Leonel Rugama, who was studying to be a priest in Managua in 1969 (his poem about the Apollo moonshot was called *The Earth is a Satellite of the Moon*) and left the seminary to join the Sandinista guerrillas because he saw 'no alternative but the struggle'. He was killed by the dictator's National Guard. (The dictator Somoza was supported by the USA; one US president notoriously said: 'Somoza's a son of a bitch, but he's *our* son of a bitch.'). When you live under a dictator who has peasants flung from helicopters into active volcanoes

and prisoners kept in cages with wild beasts for his after-dinner entertainment, it is not surprising that many Nicaraguans, many of them Christians, concluded there was 'no alternative but the struggle' and in their turn determined: '*¡No pasarán!*'

I thought of many activists who are striving to fight for a better world now, such the group who, just before the war started, travelled in a red London bus to Baghdad to tell the Iraqi people: 'Yes, Saddam's a tyrant who should be got rid of, but we don't want our government to bomb *you*.' Or the member of the Christian Peacemaker Team who came to my workshop at the Conference. The recent Climate Camp at Heathrow Airport urgently reminded us of the damage another runway would do.

I remembered that historically one of the functions of clergy has been to support the powerful (however oppressive) by their 'spiritual' (usually meaning 'supernatural') authority, and keep the lower orders 'in their place'. 'The rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate. God made them high or lowly, he ordered their estate.' (Of course some clergy have always refused to play this role.) Quietism and a philosophical idealism that fails to respect the dignity of the body and of matter can be very destructive. Porritt castigates Cardinal Martino for preaching a hubristic disrespect for the Earth and its creatures ('man rules all'). That is one form of religion we can do without. Preaching acceptance of oppressive material conditions, rather than struggling against them, is another.

The central Christian doctrine of incarnation (which can be understood in a non-supernatural way as God's *kenosis* – self-emptying into humanity) requires the greatest reverence for the body and the matter from which it is made. In the Old Testament Wisdom literature wisdom is a feminine divine 'emanation'; Paul speaks of Christ as 'the wisdom of God': *theou sophia* (1Cor. 1:24). In Christ, *sophia* is *sophia ensarkike*, **embodied** wisdom, just as *logos* her masculine counterpart is *logos ensarkikos*, **incarnate** word (as in the prologue to John's gospel). The resulting sacramental theology (which includes both water and wine) sees human beings as 'one body because we all share the same bread' (1Cor. 10:16). We should share it more fairly. Theologians like Teilhard and environmentalists have made us more aware that human beings and the Earth and her other creatures are one interdependent life system, because feeding, eating, loving and becoming, we all share the same matter. Now the Earth is indeed 'groaning' (Rom. 8:19) and we human beings are her ears to hear those groans and respond.



# Where on Earth will it End?

## Consumerism as Theodicy

Tim Jackson argues that consumerism is a false 'theodicy', a doomed attempt to come to terms with the existence of 'suffering' and 'evil' in our lives. To counter it we need to understand it and build alternatives.

Where on Earth will it end? It's a rhetorical question at one level. Betraying a clear sense of concern about what's coming down the road at us. It's also, of course, a quite genuine inquiry: what is our own personal destiny? what is the fate of our kind of society? where exactly is the endpoint of all our human striving? A set of real, foundational questions about our existence, about social progress and about the human condition.

Of course the sense of rhetorical concern is not unrelated to the foundational nature of those questions. They betray a kind of anxiety, what Anthony Giddens – following Freud – described as a pervasive 'ontological insecurity'. A kind of existential angst about ourselves. About our loved ones. About the fate of humanity. And these days perhaps – who knows? – about the planet.

As Professor of Sustainable Development you'd expect me of course to talk about the planet. These days you can hardly open a newspaper or turn on the television without being confronted by global catastrophe. But actually I don't want to dwell on that. I want to talk about the positive side of consumerism. Or at least the side of consumerism that betrays our society for what it is. A society in search of answers. Answers to deep foundational questions about ourselves and our place in the universe. Questions like: Where on Earth will it end?

My subtitle contains my thesis. Theodicy is a difficult theological concept, and it's telling that we have no better one to address what I consider to be one of the most fundamental issues we face. Broadly speaking, theodicy is the attempt to come to terms with the existence of 'suffering' and 'evil' in our lives. In religious language, theodicy asks the question: why should a caring God allow evil to prosper and the innocent to suffer? But it turns out that theodicy is not just a religious concept. In fact something very

like it plays an absolutely vital role in our everyday lives. The broad argument I want to make is that consumerism has become a kind of secular theodicy. In some quite precise ways, consumerism has grappled and continues to grapple with deep foundational questions. And if we want to counter consumerism, I shall argue, we have to understand that.



Annie

But first I want to take you back to the middle of the nineteenth century to the year 1851. I want you to imagine if you can a windswept, stormy day in middle England. I know that's hard from the perspective of this glorious British summer! But I want you to imagine it's raining like it's never rained before. My story – and it's a true story – involves a girl called Annie who is 10 in this year. For several months she's been suffering from stomach cramps, headaches and dizziness. So one day in late March her father prises the tearful Annie from her mother's farewell and together with her sister Henrietta and their nurse, Fanny, they undertake the arduous journey by coach to Dr James Gully's famous water cure establishment in Malvern.

Her father's trust in the water cure is supreme. Only a few months previously he himself has been a patient in Malvern. What was wrong with him we're not entirely sure. Probably some kind of nervous dysfunction. Something that was treatable by a water cure. At any rate, he is so confident that a water cure will be effective that he heads back to London to get some work done (more on that later) leaving Annie in the care of her nurse and the good Dr Gully.

Two weeks later, he was summoned back to Malvern. Annie had taken a turn for the worse. Charles – the father's name was Charles – took up a constant vigil by Annie's bedside, and wrote every day to his wife Emma to report on the almost hourly 'struggle between life & death' that Annie endured.

By the morning of Wednesday the 23<sup>rd</sup> April, the girl lay motionless on her bed, wasted but tranquil, as the storm clouds gathered outside. Her father sat by the window, staring into the dull grey Malvern hills, weeping quietly, waiting for the inevitable. A little time later, as his biographers describe the scene:

The wind picked up. Charles and Fanny moved closer to the bed. Annie lay still, unconscious. It was just twelve o'clock midday. Thunder began to sound, great peals far above them – the mighty knell of Nature. They edged nearer and heard the breathing stop. She was dead.

The story of Annie's death is one of ordinary human tragedy. An unhappy but not uncommon tale; certainly not in the mid-nineteenth century; or even today, when a child dies through poverty every three seconds and almost every single human life is crossed at some point by personal tragedy. Annie's death also serves to illustrate the subject matter of this talk.

Theodicy, in a very personal and quite precise way, was the challenge facing Charles and Emma in the aftermath of Annie's death. As a devout Christian, Emma turned to her faith for support, hoping to 'attain some feeling of submission to the will of Heaven'. For Charles, Annie's death achieved an almost cosmological significance. Hours after the death, he was found still by the bedside, weeping inconsolably. What he later described as an 'insufferable grief' served to shatter his belief in a moral and just universe and convince him of the underlying cruelty of nature. In the wake of her death, he threw himself with ever greater fervour into his life's work: the formulation of one of the most influential scientific theories of the last two hundred years; a theory in which suffering and cruelty became the engine of evolutionary progress; a theory in which, as some latter-day philosophers have declared, there was no longer any room for God.

The world after Darwin – yes, you've guessed it, the girl's father was Charles Darwin – became an increasingly secular place. God was dead, trumpeted Nietzsche; religion was 'knocked to pieces', said George Bernard Shaw: 'and where there had been God, a cause, a faith that the universe was ordered, and therefore a sense of moral responsibility as part of that order, there was now an utter void. Chaos had come again. The effect at first was exhilarating,' wrote Shaw. 'We had the runaway child's sense of freedom before it gets hungry and lonely and frightened...' And in those words lie the question... the same question I started with. Where on Earth will it end?

The demise of God left open the question of meaning, the function of theodicy, in the modern world. The argument I want to explore here is that some part of this function has become 'internalised'

within consumerism itself. My starting point lies in a broadly sociological view, in which religion plays several key roles in 'world maintenance'. In particular religion allows us to make sense of our existence in relation to a higher 'sacred' order (cognitive meaning). It also provides a framework for moral governance (moral meaning). Finally, by offering a transcendent reality, it allows us to confront the question of our own mortality and the loss of those we love (emotional meaning). Berger called this overarching framework of meaning a 'sacred canopy'. And he suggested that this sacred canopy was a vital function in every kind of society.

## Consumerism has become a kind of secular theodicy.

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Central to the task of world maintenance is the question of theodicy. Religious theodicy was for a long time associated quite precisely with the need to reconcile belief in an omnipotent and benevolent god with the existence of evil and suffering in the world. But theodicy can be framed in non-theological terms. Berger defined theodicy as the (religious) legitimation of 'anomic' phenomena – that is to say, as the attempt to defend the existing *nomos* or world view against the ever-present threats to meaning that assault it.

In ordinary lay terms, theodicy can be construed as the attempt to 'make sense of' our lives. Faced with persistent injustice, the prosperity of ill-doers, the persecution of the righteous, how should we seek to live? What kind of morality are we to live by? Confronted with our own mortality, the persistence of suffering, the sorrow of bereavement, where should we turn for solace? How are we to protect the authority of compassion and the promise of love? Where, in short, are we to find meaning in our lives?

To be effective in its role of sense-making, a theodicy must possess certain key characteristics. I want to distinguish six inter-related aspects of theodicy:

- justice
- reward
- consolation
- 'ontological security'
- transcendence
- eschatology

Eschatology is the study of last or final things. In fact it's concerned quite precisely with my opening question, with 'how things turn out in the end'. Together these functions defend us against anomie and protect the sacred canopy. First, they have to demonstrate that the sacred order does not discriminate arbitrarily between different individuals

(justice). They have to offer a mechanism which dispenses compensation (reward) consistently in relation to 'good' and 'bad' behaviours.

This compensatory mechanism is challenged by the often arbitrary incursions of suffering and loss in our lives. These have two specific forms: one is related to the loss of our loved ones; the second arises from our awareness of our own mortality. So a credible theodicy must offer plausible compensatory mechanisms in the face of bereavement and suffering



(consolation). It must also provide us with a working defence against the pervasive anxiety engendered by awareness of our own mortality (ontological security). Some of the compensatory mechanisms established through theodicy may operate within the constraints of this world. But

the challenge of providing an entirely secular compensatory mechanism is immense. So most theodicies draw on compensatory mechanisms which operate in some other (transcendental) realm, perhaps at some future point in time (eschatology).

How do these functions work in practice? A response from a participant in a study carried out at the University of Surrey illustrates how theodical functions operate even on a day-to-day level for religious people:

You know, sometimes, something that really opened my eyes the other day driving on the M3 motorway. Traffic terrible, and my husband is not going to go this Sunday to church, or my eldest daughter baptise my grandchildren, and that makes me very, very sad, very unhappy. And on the motorway near Winchester, going past and these grey skies, a horrible time, raining. And there is this little bit of light, and there on the motorway there is a cross somewhere on a hill, and the light was shining on this cross and I was sitting down there under the rain, I have a meeting at nine o'clock, and I am sitting down there watching and this light shining on this cross and I say, yes you are there. – *Female, Roman Catholic, 50s*

This response incorporates a number of theodical functions. For instance, it suggests access to consolation for life's woes. The curious other-worldly quality of the light on the cross has elements of transcendence; and the symbolism of the cross as a metaphor for the redemption and future salvation of ordinary sinners also evokes a kind of eschatology.

But if religion in general, and theodicy in particular, are so vital to world maintenance it is an obvious question to ask: what happens to these functions in a secular society? How does consumer society establish cognitive, moral and emotional meaning in the world? And how are these meanings legitimated in the face of suffering and loss? In other words: is there a consumerist theodicy?

## At first, the idea that material commodities play some quasi-religious functions is an odd one.

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I want to argue that modern society has internalised a number of specific functions of world maintenance within the dynamics and organisation of consumerism. At first, the idea that material commodities play some quasi-religious functions is an odd one. One thinks of material goods mainly as fulfilling certain essential physical or physiological tasks in the world. Psychological and social tasks are more obviously construed in terms of less material constructs: thoughts, conversations, norms, institutions perhaps. How is it that goods themselves can be asked to do this work?

This is one of the key lessons that has emerged from the sociology of consumption. Material things are deeply implicated in the social and psychological aspects of our lives. This role depends heavily on the human tendency to imbue material artefacts with symbolic values. And this ability of sheer stuff to take on symbolic meaning provides an extremely influential 'osmosis' between the physical and the cultural world, between material and 'non-material' aspects of our lives.

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Consider this example from one of the respondents in Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton's delightful study on the construction of meaning through everyday domestic objects. It illustrates my point perfectly. The respondent, an 8 year old North American boy, is asked by the interviewer: 'What do all your special objects, taken together mean to you?'. He replies:

'They make me feel like I'm part of the world.'

'How do they do that?'

'Because when I look at them, I keep my eyes on them and I think what they mean. Like I have a bank from the First National, and when I look at it I think what it means. It means money for our cities and our country, it means tax for the government. My stuffed bunny reminds me of wildlife, all the rabbits and dogs and cats. That toy animal over there reminds me of circuses and the way they train animals so they don't get hurt. That's what I mean. All my special things make me feel like I'm part of the world.'

Material goods, as Mary Douglas has remarked, are deeply implicated in the task of building and maintaining the social world, in a psychological as much as in a physical sense. So how does the consumer society address the critical question of theodicy? In particular, can we find evidence in consumerism of the key functions that I identified above from religious theodicy?

Perhaps surprisingly, we find such evidence everywhere. For example, concern about justice runs like a constant refrain through consumer society. It is evident in the language of consumer sovereignty, of equal opportunity, of fair trade and freedom of choice. Evidence of the importance of fairness is also uncovered in qualitative studies of consumer attitudes. At the macro-economic level, the entire ethos of consumerism is 'legitimated' as former US President JFK once remarked, by allegiance to the idea that consumption growth is a 'rising tide' that will (eventually) 'raise all boats'.

The idea that consumerism offers to reward people for 'good' behaviour is also very widespread. A meritocratic society heralds high consumption lifestyles and celebrity status as the pinnacle of social achievement, as the following example from a North American respondent illustrates: 'My Cadillac has become to me a thing I deserve. I wonder if others say things. I've had comments: "You're rich," from customers. They may even resent it – I don't care. It shows you make so much more money. It represents my right to own something associated with successful people.'

Even those with religious backgrounds tend to use the metaphor of reward to legitimate consumption behaviour, as the following response from our qualitative study of religious groups illustrates: 'But I



*After 9/11 Bush urged Americans: 'Go shopping!'*

find myself standing in the middle of a shop and actually praying, having an argument with God, I really don't need that. No you don't need it, but you're allowed to treat yourself sometimes.'

The link between consumption and ontological security – the management of deep underlying uncertainties about mortality and our place in the world – is also well-supported by the evidence. 'The human animal is a beast that dies' said Big Daddy in Tennessee Williams's play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. 'And if he's got money he buys and buys and buys. And I think the reason he buys everything he can is that in the back of his mind, he has the crazy hope that one of his purchases will be life ever-lasting.'

There is even some fascinating scientific evidence of this link. Modern psychological experiments show that when people are exposed to cues that make them more aware of death they strive to enhance their own self-esteem and protect their cultural world view. In a consumer society, self-esteem striving typically has profoundly materialistic outcomes. Just like George Bush asked them to in the wake of the 9/11 tragedy, people 'go out shopping'. (Fascinatingly, there is also evidence to suggest that this 'urge to splurge' is moderated in people who possess some religious faith.)

Our apparent addiction to material things cannot entirely be construed in hedonistic or materialistic ways. Material goods also facilitate consolation. Sacred goods remind us of those we love, of dreams we hold, of our hopes for the future. At a more mundane level their seemingly endless availability consoles us for the temporary nature of our lives, for our disappointments and failures. It assures us that society holds out the promise of better lives (for us and for our descendants) in the future.

The endgame offered up by consumerism is one in which the ability to go on consuming for generation after generation is the ultimate goal. A kind of heaven on



Earth, if not for us, then for our descendants. Vincent Miller has argued that consumer desire has completely 'derailed' eschatology by allowing desire itself to become the object of human striving. 'Consumer anticipation,' he argues, 'is at heart a way of accommodating the endless repeat of the same, of finding pleasure in a world without hope.' The consumer eschatology in this view is a kind of anti-eschatology – a study in denial of the fear that things will ultimately turn out badly – for us, for our loved ones and perhaps even for the planet. But the point is this, that there is plenty of evidence to suggest that consumerism has appropriated at least some of the functions of theodicy through the role that material commodities play in our lives.

## Its conceptualisation of justice is tenuous, its framing and disbursement of rewards is iniquitous.

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As I've indicated, this theodicy is not entirely pathological. But it is clearly flawed. Its conceptualisation of justice is tenuous, its framing and disbursement of rewards is iniquitous, it is deeply but perhaps perversely seductive in offering a rather fleeting kind of ontological security, one that needs continually to be reinforced by engaging in yet more consumption. It does provide for a form of transcendence, but the degree to which this facilitates any real hope or consolation for our losses is suspect. Far from creating a credible eschatology, consumerism appears to be a continuous exercise in denial of our own mortality and of the widespread suffering in the world.

The implications of all this for the planet are quite profound. Consumerism may be destroying the planet, but in the final analysis, it's clear that it cannot be countered by simple exhortation, religious or otherwise. If consumption places such a vital role in our lives, then asking people to give up material commodities is asking them to risk a kind of social suicide. People will resist threats to identity. They will resist threats to meaning. They will ask quite legitimate questions of the motives of the moral persuaders.

So the task of countering consumerism must start with the building of alternative theodicies: the construction of meaning structures, communities of meaning (like Sea of Faith perhaps), that lie outside the realm of the market. This process must also entail a deep re-engagement with 'theodicy', with the 'problem of pain' in its wider sense. It demands credible answers to the deep foundational questions that continue to haunt us. Where on Earth will it end?

Interestingly, no one knows exactly what Annie died from. The most likely explanation is that she died (ironically) from consumption. It was a specific story. A personal tragedy. And our lives are full of those. The Buddhist obsession with suffering is of course profoundly distasteful to modern western attitudes. Which may be why we hear much more about the upside of Buddhism, about enlightenment. But the contemplation of death serves a very useful purpose. It emphasises the emptiness of consumer society, of consumerist lives. And it also serves to remind us that there's more at stake here. The suffering of others. Persistent poverty. The extinction of species. The health of the global climate. The fate of this 'disappearing world' still hangs in the balance, alongside our own more parochial concerns.

Whatever theodicy (secular or religious) we come up with – and let's hope we manage to – this probably has to be our starting point. For as Kenneth Surin has remarked: 'A theodicy is not worth heeding if it does not allow the screams of our society to be heard.'

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Tim Jackson is Professor of Sustainable Development at the University of Surrey. He edited *The Earthscan Reader on Sustainable Consumption* (Earthscan, London 2006). His latest radio play, based on a late Beethoven piano sonata, was broadcast on Radio 4 in March 2007.

### Blackthorn

Who has seen the blackthorn  
gift of the lengthening evenings?  
Pledging another spring  
it mantles the edge of the wood  
and white as the ghost of March  
flowers by the edge of the road.

Whose is the blackthorn blossom?  
Does it belong to the name at Lloyds  
who owns these woods and fields?  
Where among the shivering walls  
that have built the cardboard city  
could the blackthorn blossom flower?

The flower itself is a wall  
hiding that shameful city;  
its fires of invisible anguish  
are a white and burning bush.

Kathleen McPhilemy

This poem is taken from Kathleen McPhilemy's collection *A Tented Peace* (Katabasis, 1995). Her latest collection is *The Lion in the Forest* (Katabasis, 2004).

# Saving the Earth and Humankind

Jonathon Porritt spoke about the need for a spiritual vision as well as scientific expertise to deal with the problems facing us.

I do subscribe to the view that a better world is still available to us; I'll be asking the question how much longer it is going to be available to us, but I think it still is at the moment. But what is the ambition level? Is it anything other than a better world for every single human being on it? Is it anything less than a better world for most of the life forms with which we share it? Where do you draw the boundary condition about the good life for you personally, for your fellow human beings, for other life forms and so on? And, for me, it is very simple; it has to be for the whole of humankind. It is not possible, morally or pragmatically, to talk about creating a sustainable future for a segment of humankind. For the lucky one billion, if you like, who live like we do today, or perhaps the lucky two billion who will live like we do today in a few more years. It is not possible to do that any longer for reasons that I will explain.

For the first time what might usually be described as 'an environmental issue' is suddenly seen to be much, much bigger than that characterisation would tell and much bigger than most of the challenges and dilemmas that we face in the world today. So David Milliband, our outgoing Secretary of State for DEFRA, before he became Foreign Secretary was very keen to stop anybody in DEFRA *ever* talking about climate change as 'just' an environmental problem; he wanted to get them into the bit of the political space that says that this is in fact about the future of society and about completely re-conceptualising the kind of economy that we need in the future to avoid the worst consequences of climate change.

## The good life has to be for the whole of humankind.

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Now this is a very lively debate in the scientific community. Some scientists think we've got a lot of time to get it sorted, not many, but there are some who actually think that the evidence to date gives us a sort of window of time of about twenty to thirty years to make the necessary changes to decarbonise, take the carbon out of our society. And there are a whole host of scientists who think exactly the opposite, who think we have either got very, very little time indeed or, especially if you subscribe to the



Heathrow Airport

views of the redoubtable Jim Lovelock, no time at all, because it is already too late. Jim Lovelock is firmly convinced that we have already crossed that threshold; we've put enough warming into the atmosphere to precipitate natural feedback loops in the system. For instance, to cause the permafrost across the whole of Siberia to melt so fast that all the methane trapped beneath it is released into the atmosphere. Methane is a much more powerful gas than CO<sub>2</sub>, twenty-one times more powerful than CO<sub>2</sub>, and if indeed we have put enough warming up there to cause that change in the natural system then you can begin to see how these systems could begin to run away, even if we wanted to do something about it. And in his most apocalyptic moments, Jim will stand in front of an audience like this and say, 'Look, you are all wonderfully good people, I can tell, just

by looking out at you; you're here after all, you must be wonderfully good, spending an afternoon like this doing this kind of stuff, but I want to just let you know in the interests of good science that it doesn't really matter what you do or what anyone else does in the world today, because even if we stopped burning fossil fuels tomorrow – a patent impossibility – it would still be too late.'

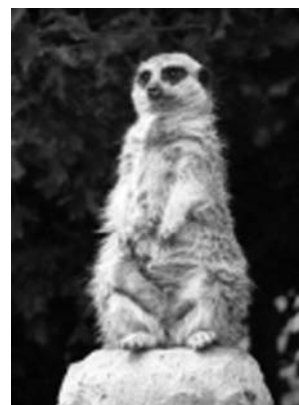
I don't know where you are on this debate. I hope you are not with Jim Lovelock, because I don't know quite how you would cheer yourself up if you were in the Jim Lovelock camp. I also hope you're not with those manic optimists who believe we have got decades to go and don't worry. I hope you're somewhere at the point which says, 'If we don't get moving very, very fast, we may well cross that threshold.' That was really the starting point for why I wrote this book *Capitalism As If The World Matters*, because I wanted to get to grips with the fact that we are totally dependent on making these solutions work in a capitalist economy; it's got to be done in ten – fifteen – twenty years. I am sure you would agree with me there isn't any other political, macro-economic system that is going to emerge in our midst suddenly, so we have to get it done through market-based capitalist systems. That's one hell of an ask. And that's really the conundrum that I tried to work out in that book.

## **We are totally dependent on making these solutions work in a capitalist economy.**

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So, that's one bit of my life as a sustainable development activist. The other bit is much more geared to what Fritz Schumacher splendidly described early on in his life as a sustainable development activist as 'the imperative for metaphysical reconstruction'. He wrote quite a lot about this in his life, including his last book, the wonderful *Guide For The Perplexed*. He said that unless we open up a different kind of discourse within society, one that goes beyond empiricism, beyond pragmatics, beyond the normality of what we do in our political lives as citizens, unless we open up a deeper discussion, it will actually be impossible to bring forward the right kind of solutions to the way we live in the world today. Although we now associate Fritz Schumacher with lots of very practical things to do with economics and technology and so on, actually he had this passionate belief that we need to dig a lot deeper to find any solutions to those problems. He was also the one, of

course, who said that we have to find a more transcendent story, a transcendent reality, in people's lives if we are going to be more effective in persuading them of the nature of the challenge and the change that we are now facing.



It was also of course Fritz Schumacher who taught me in the early days about the power of interconnection, about the difficulties of seeing everything in terms of segmented, compartmentalised, discrete realities that we choose to address each in its own right rather than to see them as parts of a connected whole. Many of the reasons why we are struggling with the reality of living sustainably on the planet is because we still deconstruct the world into these very narrow silos of meaning, silos of scientific interpretation, and because of that, we are pretty much incapable of understanding some of the deeper truths about interconnection and more importantly than that, interdependence.

Thomas Berry has also been a great inspiration to me, an enormously important writer whose book *The Great Story* is one of the most astonishing encapsulations about what we need to do in a more cosmological sense about re-interpreting the role of humankind in the world today; a beautifully elegant, passionate account of re-articulating the role of humankind.

Many writers have touched on this notion of interconnectedness. Jim Lovelock in his book about Gaia has gone a lot further and taken the concept of interconnectedness into a deeper analysis of interdependence. And I suppose if there is one huge construct that makes sense for me when trying to interpret the spiritual mysteries of this world it is this sense of absolute interdependence. Not just connectivity, not just links between us, but total dependency at every level, in each of the different systems of which we are a part.

We as a species have no lived reality of interdependence; we still carry around in our mind the inheritance of hundreds of years' worth of Judaeo-Christian Enlightenment thinking which allows us to maintain the seductive illusion that we are somehow different and separate from what it is that makes up life on Earth. One of the reasons why our civilisation is in such deep difficulties is because our history has essentially inculcated in us an utterly fallacious notion of superiority and separateness that



causes us to ignore that which makes life on Earth possible. And I am sorry about this, but the truth is that the history of Christianity tells us that for many, many centuries the Christian church exacerbated and worsened those fallacies and illusions about our separateness from, and independence of, the living systems on which we depend. We are paying a very, very high price today for that metaphysical ignorance; the ontological assumption of separateness is something that lies at the heart of the difficulties that we face today.

Now, I suppose it is fair to say, that this issue

## We need a deepening of those spiritual insights to get a more sustainable world.

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about interdependence could be construed in a purely secular way; you could take from the perspective of a good earth-system scientist looking at the carbon cycle, at the nitrogen cycle, at the hydrological cycle, at the way in which all of these cycles are dependent on each other and you could just say, well, there's nothing particularly mystifying or difficult about this. However, for many people that is not adequate. Many people find it important to tease out a deeper, more spiritual understanding of interdependence and interconnectedness. For me it has been a massively important personal resource in the life that I live, and when people ask me, thirty-five years on, how do you go on doing this stuff, what is it that allows you to get up in the morning and even still crack the occasional joke; the truth of it is, for me, I couldn't have done this without a sense of a very deep spiritual commitment to the process of change that I find myself involved in.

But I can't deny that it is also a very political issue. Go back to Schumacher's concept of metaphysical reconstruction. In his *Guide for the Perplexed* he talks about three big areas where we need to reconstruct our understanding of the relationship between humankind, the cosmos, the living planet, and so on.

The first of those and the one you will be most familiar with from a straight environmental perspective is re-configuring our relationship with the living world. This is a long, deep and very rich debate that has gone on in the environment movement for many, many years; do you take an instrumental approach to protecting the planet, an approach that says we need to look after the planet because that is the only way of looking after

ourselves, or do you take what is known as a more intrinsic value approach: we need to look after it because we have a moral, spiritual, religious obligation to look after it, in its own right, regardless of its value to us? For me, it is impossible to imagine how today's stripped down, narrow, instrumental environmentalism will ever get us to the point where we need to be, which is protecting and managing all of the resources and the life-support systems on which we depend with such skill, insight, intelligence that we really will create a sustainable future for nine billion people. That kind of instrumental, rational approach to environmental protection is always too little, too late in terms of what it offers humankind today. Religious and spiritual leaders have talked about the process of re-sacralising the Earth; bringing the sacred back into our understanding of what we owe the living planet and all life forms with which we share it – moving from that dried-up phrase 'respect for nature' to something much more akin to 'reverence for nature'. Unless we begin to see that happening in many parts of the world, personally, I don't think conventional environmentalism has a hope in hell of dragging people back from the abyss that now confronts us.

The second area that Schumacher talked about was the need for empathy at every point in our lives when looking out at every other human being with whom we share this planet and every other life form; for him, of course, empathy was a very powerful social justice construct. And then lastly and perhaps most importantly Schumacher also said that the only opportunity to move people away from the kind of rampant consumerist materialism that now dominates our lives is by celebrating the power of enoughness – not an elegant English word – there are many other words that capture the idea: frugality, voluntary simplicity, modesty. I am watching politicians struggle with the power of rampant consumerism in the world today; they honestly are completely baffled as to how to bring people back from a sense in their own lives that their future depends entirely on access to yet more consumption, increased purchasing power and all of those things that go with it. Will politicians ever come up with a sufficiently convincing antidote to the seductive appeal of consumerism?

So on all three of those things, seeing and feeling the world very differently, seeing and feeling the world of other people very differently from a more empathetic point of view and seeing and feeling our own role in that world as citizens very differently, it seems to me very difficult to imagine an entirely secular route to a sustainable world. Now, of course, saying that here in the UK is a little bit difficult; if you

lived practically anywhere else in the world that would be blindingly obvious, our world is still an intensely religious world. Out of 6.4 billion people of that world today at least 5.5 billion, depending on how you construct religious practice in China, would officially be said to be adherents of or members of one faith or religious community or another. So it's an overwhelmingly religious world in which we live; overwhelmingly religious and yet what for me is so absolutely fascinating is that when we talk about constructing these enormous solutions to achieve a sustainable world for 9 billion people, I don't hear anybody talk about the role of the world religions in making that journey.

If we do ever hear about it, we often hear the things we don't want to hear about, in terms of the fundamentalism, intolerance and bigotry that is still there in all the world's major faith systems to such an extent that many people feel very turned off by them. I was astonished to be sent recently a summary of a conference organised by the Vatican, with the support of the Holy Father himself, the Pope, organised by Cardinal Martino, for those of you who follow the politics of the Catholic Church today will know that he is the primary fixer for our new pope today, who organised this conference under the pontifical council to reconsider issues to do with global warming, paganism and population reduction and I am going to give you a quote from the final resumé of this conference – just in case you still think the Christian Church, the Church of England or Catholicism, has got it sorted and are bound to be on the side of the angels when it comes to all of these things. Not quite. So here is Cardinal Martino in all his great glory:

Man has an indisputable superiority within and over all the rest of creation and in virtue of his being a person endowed with an immortal soul cannot ever be held to be equal to other living beings nor considered at any point to be a disturbing element in the natural ecological balance of the world today. The social doctrine of the church must deal with many current forms of idolatry of nature, worship of nature, pagan idiosyncrasies which lose sight of the superiority of man. Such ecologies often emerge from the debate on population and the relationship between population, paganism and the environment.

Then the conference went on to trash today's consensus on climate change, the scientific, as having no proper validity. So, whenever I am advocating a slightly more spiritual approach to these matters, it is invariably the case that someone will say to me, 'Have you looked at what the world's major religions are doing out there?' I wish I could stand up and say,



'I feel so proud about what is being done by Christians today in defence of God's Earth.' But I honestly can't. I look out there and see an immensely troubled church, excessively and, to me mystifyingly, preoccupied with issues of human sexuality. A church which has spent twenty years working out that women are fully-fledged human beings and another twenty years, it seems, that all gay men and women are also fully-fledged human beings in their own right. Twenty years for each of these issues; precisely the forty years when the church needed to be militant in defence of God's creation. When people come to write the history of Christianity, assuming we are still able to write the history of Christianity in forty or fifty years' time, this will be seen as one of the periods in church history which makes for the biggest indictment of leadership, of collective failure, of any other point in history.

So, I haven't talked much about religion because I actually don't think that our religion has a great deal to offer at the moment in terms of what now needs to be done to come to the defence of planet Earth and its people. I'm in this really paradoxical position, speaking personally, where I know that I couldn't do the work that I do without the spiritual practice that lies behind it. I know that we are going to need a deepening of those spiritual insights in order to get us to this more sustainable world that we all, I imagine, aspire after, and yet I look out on a religious scene that seems at every point to act as a block and impediment to these changed world views and behaviours that we really need.

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Jonathon Porritt is Co-founder and Programme Director of Forum for the Future. His book *Capitalism as if the World Matters* was published by Earthscan (London) in 2005. This is a shortened, edited version of a live recording of his talk given to the SoF Conference in Leicester in July 2007. Recording and Transcription: Oliver Essame.

# Threading a Camel through the Eye of a Needle

Stephanie Dowrick's talk focused on happiness and attitude of mind.

It may not be immediately obvious what *Tatler* and Mike Apted's movie, *Amazing Grace*, have in common. But reading one and viewing the other as I flew to *The Good Life?* conference I was struck by a couple of things. In *Tatler* I found a long complaint about how being rich and British is no longer enough. All kinds of super-rich foreigners are apparently buying up what's most desirable, driving the rest of 'us' – unselfconscious entitlement was quite evident here – to settle for second-best. Apted's film, by contrast, is a bio-pic of William Wilberforce, the evangelical Christian who campaigned to end slave trading 200 years ago. The film dramatically shows what horrors emerge when human beings become mere economic units. It also shows how reluctant Wilberforce's fellow MPs were to see the slaves as fully human because that would have a direct effect on the wealth of the British Empire – as well as their own personal spending power.

## Acknowledging our interdependence with others is at the heart of a 'good life'.

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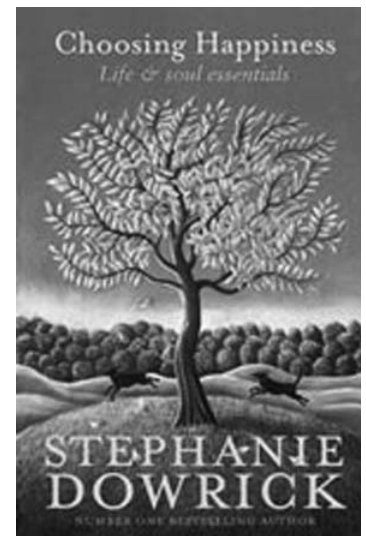
It is much easier to talk about theories of a good life or to deconstruct the idea of 'goodness' than to look bravely and simply at life itself. The reason for this is not sinister. We are conditioned to privilege ideas over personal experience. Discussing social or economic theories is often far less confronting than asking ourselves how we are 'spending' our own lives. Yet we can't talk about the good life without also thinking about ourselves – living such a life (or not); without thinking about 'good people', good humour, good will and even a 'good death'. Those categories are difficult to define. Nevertheless, we do know when life feels good, and that's not always when things are going especially well.

We also know when someone is 'good'. I don't mean perfect and I am certainly not being moralistic. Nevertheless, in the company of a good woman or man we are likely to feel expansive, accepted, trusting. We especially trust that the good person is capable of thinking about other

people's needs and interests. Unselfconsciously lifting our spirits, they are also lifting their own. 'Goodness' very quickly moves from the 'goods' that one can acquire to attitudes, behaviour and the sense of life's meaning that they express.

Constant daily choices are creating the person we are becoming. Buddhists talk about 'coming awake', waking up to the freedom most of us have to make choices positively *for the common good as well as our own*. Acknowledging our interdependence with others is at the heart of a 'good life'. So is utilising our power to affect other people's lives positively. The quality of our everyday connections and communications will determine more than any other single factor whether or not we regard life as 'good'. Yet our choices are not made in a vacuum. Inner resources – like outer ones – are not shared equally. Illness, hardship and especially mental and emotional suffering make the proverbial playing field very uneven indeed.

Structural changes towards a more just and humane outer world absolutely matter. In fact, the degree to which they matter becomes increasingly evident as people wake up to how their choices affect others as well as create the person they are becoming.





*As long as we are on this Earth, each of us will need a sense of belonging; a sharing in the Earth's wondrous beauty; aesthetic and sensual pleasures; work and social connections and the giving and receiving of love.*

Quite correctly we are looking with urgency at environmental issues. Spiritual degradation, however, may be more fundamental still. The way we treat the planet starkly expresses how we treat or 'use up' one another. George Fox's maxim is familiar: 'Walk lightly on this earth, answering that of God in everyone.' 'That of God' may be a loaded phrase for some (not for me!). Yet the meaning such an attitude gives to life is strikingly different from: 'Use other people before you are used by them.'

Meaning, by the way, may not reveal purpose or 'sense'. 'The eye goes blind,' said the Sufi poet Rumi, 'when it only wants to see *why*.' Retrieving meaning is often far more subtle. A story to demonstrate this comes from Viktor Frankl, not from the concentration camp experiences that he describes in *Man's Search for Meaning* but from later in his life as an analyst:

An old man came to see Frankl crushed by the grief he felt following the death of his wife. Frankl gently asked how would it have been had he died first and his wife had been left alone. The old man burst out, 'She would not have been able to bear it.' And Frankl said, 'You were able to spare her that.'

Frankl didn't change the facts. The *facts* could not be changed. What he did change was the meaning the old man now gave to death, life and love. A compassionate view of suffering is also a choice.

'Choice' is restricted by our emotional health and wellbeing (one more reason to take them seriously) – but rather less by external circumstances than many of us might think. Choice is also conditioned by our habits, some so familiar we tell ourselves they are entirely natural. No matter how thoughtful we are, it may take a jolt to recognise *how* we are making choices and how they are shaping the way we see and especially respond to the world around us. A banal example. You are standing in a slow-moving queue and boiling with injustice. For all your fuming, the queue moves no faster. Or – you are standing in that same queue and you are not pleased, but you use the time to meditate or plan your holiday in Cumbria. And the queue moves no more slowly.

As you progress in the queue, your emotions are leaking out, affecting those around you. And within yourself? Is your blood pressure rising dangerously?

Or are you refuelling? This is small example. But our lives are made up of countless small moments that don't pass in a vacuum – which invites thoughts not only about choice but also about freedom.

Freedom is at the heart of a good life and a happy one. It offers a priceless sense of inner spaciousness and it cannot depend solely on external circumstances. *It must depend largely on what we make of those circumstances.* The familiar story of the second mile in Matthew's gospel gives an example. Jews couldn't refuse to carry the bags of a Roman soldier for a mile. But in Matthew 5:41 we see them urged to do this for two miles not one – a psychological exercise in personal power: one mile because you must, the second mile because you can.

## **By 2020 depression will be the greatest cause of illness globally.**

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In the West, life is often seen to be something that happens to us, good or bad, lucky or unlucky. We are often uneasy about our inner world and quick to belittle it. But that makes us less powerful and resilient than we could be, and certainly less effective in the world of affairs outside ourselves. Our inner levels of development are shaping not just how we see the world, but what we are literally responding to and also *causing*.

None of this is new. Epictetus, as just one example, had this to say: 'Human beings are not disturbed by events (or things), but by the view they take of them.' Which leads me rather neatly to the camel and the needle. Without your glasses, can you take your camel and thread it gently through the eye of a needle, thinking about heaven or the riches of life as you do so? Even imagining this can delight the mind, and delighting the mind is also part of a good life. The human mind is a blazing mix of the conscious, the barely conscious, and the unconscious. It loves tricks and challenges. Boredom, staleness and a lack of creativity and freshness harm the mind and spirit. They are literally depressing. So even if you cannot quite visualise a camel and needle you already know that your mind can take you places. And more. Each of us has about 50,000 thoughts a day. On a bad day, we may feel that we have the same thought 50,000 times. What we pay attention to *matters*.

'With our thoughts,' the *Dhammapada* tells us, 'we create the world. What we are today comes from our thoughts of yesterday... our life is the creation of our mind... Even as rain breaks through a poorly thatched house, dangerous emotions will break through a poorly guarded mind.' A 'poorly guarded mind' is not awake to its freedom to make choices. The camel and needle story demonstrates the power of thought and imagination (and also humour – surely part of a good life?). But the second gift the story offers is no less valuable. It is about 'clinging' and especially what we choose to cling to.

We live in a world of *things*. We imbue things with magical powers and 'cling' not so much to them but to the emotions we associate with them. Experience tells us otherwise, but don't we at least sometimes tell ourselves that one more 'something' will finally land us in the land of happiness? The envy that surrounds the cult of celebrity is not about talent; often there is no talent. It is about the purchasing power that makes a 'no one' into 'some one'. Yet we live in times that are curiously anhedonic.

In 1996 the World Health Organisation identified clinical depression as among the top five conditions affecting disability and reduced life expectancy. Now it is predicted that by 2020 depression will be the greatest cause of illness globally. We have never been richer. Yet gratitude, satisfaction and contentment continue to be precarious. Don't get me wrong. Money *can* buy some necessary and marvellous things. Poverty *is* crushing. But after even significant leaps in purchasing power, alarmingly quickly your happiness 'set-point' will drift to its customary level. Your happiness set point, by the way, depends about 50% on genes, and about 15% on social circumstances. That leaves lots of room for your own attitudes and behaviour. And it is attitude that you can most significantly change, sometimes in a single moment.

A reliable sense that life is good – despite the suffering that is also part of transient existence – can be achieved only through a change of heart as well as mind. That shift may reflect the kind of religious expression which Don Cupitt describes as a 'universal, non-fixated... love for life, for our world, and for one's fellow human' so passionate that one should, to use Don's word, 'burn'. (*The Way to Happiness*, p24) This calls for change from the inside out, in how we value life itself – not our status, marketability or possessions. Which takes us back to the camel and needle.

That familiar story is not saying that rich people's lives are intrinsically of less value. It pushes all of us to notice what we value life *for*. In a world where external wealth is worshipped and spiritual wealth is often belittled, it is all too easy to fix our gaze in the wrong direction. In 21st-century life money matters every bit as much as it did when Wilberforce was seeking to end slavery. So it's a nice irony that the key ingredients of a good life cannot be bought or sold and that a genuinely good life is likely also to be happy. Treating other people well whether or not they are 'useful', believing in something greater than yourself, cultivating good humour, doing some things for joy rather than profit, shielding the vulnerable, cherishing connections and tolerating differences, resolving conflict rather than accelerating it, recognising your interdependence with all life forms: these small daily choices can seem ludicrously unimportant. Yet they are among the key factors that determine life as 'good'. They will lift your spirits and those of everyone around you. They will positively affect the society we are collectively creating.



Two tiny stories to finish:

A few years ago I was in Ahmedabad visiting the ashram of Mahatma Gandhi and found in a large blow-up in Gandhi's own handwriting this truth: *My life is my message.*

The other story is from my book *Forgiveness and Other Acts of Love*. It's about three stonecutters employed on the building of a cathedral in medieval times. When the first was asked what he was doing he said, angrily, 'As you see, I am cutting stones.' The second man was asked the same question. His reply was, 'I am earning a living for my family.' The third man took time before answering the same question, then, humbly and with deep gratitude, he said, 'I am building a great cathedral.'

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Stephanie Dowrick is an interfaith minister in Sydney, Australia. Her most recent book *Choosing Happiness: Life & Soul Essentials* was published in Britain by Rider (Random House, London) in 2006. A complete version of this article will be available at [www.stephaniedowrick.com](http://www.stephaniedowrick.com)

# Right to Be Suspicious

William Gumede warns that climate change cannot be tackled if existing injustices in global politics are overlooked.

Post-G8 (Summit Meeting at Heiligendamm June 6-8th 2007) report cards are for the most part judging that the emphasis in Germany was on climate change, with the fight against poverty in Africa and the developing world taking a back seat. In truth, however, the two are so closely intertwined that they cannot be considered separately. Just as skewed global trade and political systems stack the deck against developing countries struggling to escape the poverty trap, they also limit these countries' scope for effective action on climate change.

Progressive efforts to tackle climate change in Africa and the developing world are almost invariably hamstrung by global political, trade and finance rules and realities. Attempts to crack down on energy leakage are too often stymied simply because the mostly international corporations affected can threaten to pack up and move. Poor countries are desperately dependent on investments and jobs from these western companies.

Many developing countries have high levels of carbon emissions because they use so-called dirty fuel such as coal to generate the bulk of their energy. These countries worry about the cost of rapidly turning to sustainable energy, when they have massive social obligations to their poor citizens. More than 25% of households in South Africa, for example, do not have access to affordable energy, let alone clean energy. The conversion from dirty to clean fuel is expensive. And here there is a telling echo of struggles for antiviral drugs in Africa: countries pursuing new technology to produce cleaner energy affordably often face battles with western companies and governments over intellectual property rights issues.

The people of Africa and the developing world understandably worry that they will find themselves left bearing the brunt of climate change, just as they have regarding health issues. The latest reports from the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change have identified Africa as the continent likely be hardest hit by climate change, thanks to plummeting food production and water shortages. And yet the industrialised countries are disproportionately responsible for global warming. The big developing countries – China, India and Brazil – are not blameless, but the western track record is hardly an example to follow.

After the G8 meeting, many welcomed the news that the United States had agreed that a future deal on the environment would be cobbled together under the auspices of the United Nations. However, the UN is viewed by many in Africa with distrust, especially following its apparent manipulation by the US and 'coalition of the willing' in the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq. There is little confidence that a fair deal will be agreed. At the UN-sponsored Africa climate change event in Kenya last year, Africans were watching powerlessly from the margins, as they were excluded from discussions that concerned them most.

If the G8 is serious about climate change in Africa and the developing world, one proposal is to refocus the World Bank to help poor nations overcome the cost of shifting to clean energy. Only the G8 nations have the power to achieve that. It is no wonder that the large developing countries are suspicious of western attempts so far to persuade them to opt for a greener, and more costly, option to catch up with the west. Indeed, some developing countries perceive the clamour over climate change as an attempt by the west to dominate the world's depleting energy sources. Others, such as China, India and Brazil, suspect an ulterior motive on the part of a western world anxious about their high growth rates. These positions may be wrong, but they are certainly understandable.

Global warming has a disproportionate impact on poor countries, but it is, almost by definition, a pressing issue everywhere and for everyone. It cannot, however, be tackled in isolation, divorced from the other problems facing Africa and the developing world. Rich nations would be foolish to imagine that the fight against poverty can be postponed in favour of a focus on climate change. The solution to both demands an equitable partnership in decision-making and restoration of trust between the west and the developing world, and that must begin with genuine efforts to change the inequitable global trade, political and financial systems.

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**Sailing the Same Sea**

Dear Editor

I was saddened to learn that Sea of Faith is losing money and members, and may have to scale down its activities. I very much enjoy the magazine, finding it challenging and interesting, but I fear part of the problem is that both the magazine's articles and the level of debate in Sea of Faith itself are too highbrow for many people to engage with. Frankly, terms like 'non-realist' probably don't mean much to many spiritual seekers out there.

My middle-of-the-road Anglican church has recently started a discussion group which looks at being a Christian in a post-modern age. It deals with many of the issues Sea of Faith discusses. The group is extremely well attended, and the views expressed show clearly that many churchgoers do not believe in the bible or the creeds as literally true at all. In fact, nobody in the group is a traditional believer, and we have people from eighteen to eighty. Topics the group is considering include the bible, sexuality, and heaven & hell. Obviously, we're only one church, but the success of the group, and its direction, suggest there's a large constituency out there that would find Sea of Faith useful, especially if its magazine articles and its general debates were made more accessible.

I wonder if Sea of Faith members who are churchgoers assume that other members of their congregations are less liberal than they actually are. I was taken by surprise when our group started, and I now intend taking copies of *Sofia* to the next meeting. I think if Sea of Faith is to survive, members need to take a risk and take the message to their own churches or temples: evangelise! Maybe members could consider starting a group like ours in their own church. It doesn't have to be called 'Sea of Faith', but it would give people struggling with belief and/or staying in the church a forum to discuss the issues that matter to them. After all, isn't this what Sea of Faith was originally for?

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**Sailing the Same Sea Too**

Towards the end of his fascinating description of Dorset Humanism (*Message in a Bottle*, *Sofia* 84), David Warden asks: 'Are Dorset Humanists exploring religion as a human creation?' As a founder member of Sea of Faith, I have never seen the network as a credal organisation. The statement 'Exploring and promoting religious faith as a human creation' is not therefore a statement of credal belief but the defining boundary of its discussion. There are many places to begin discussing religious faith. Some, like Dawkins *et al.*, begin with the existence God and whether such belief is a delusion. So often this leads to predictably sterile and fruitless arguments.



We begin our discussion by looking at faith as a human creation. This has the advantage of bringing people together. Even the most enthusiastic evangelical will recognise the human and creative aspects of faith. Together we can also appreciate the way in which faith, like other human and creative activity, is affected by and affects our behaviour. Of course, we discover differences. But when these differences are embedded in a common ground and mutual respect, new light is shed on them and they often come to be seen as making little difference in practice.

I too believe Dorset Humanists are sailing the same sea not because of the meaning they give to the word religion but because of the starting point and spirit in which they are undertaking their voyage.

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**Does God Exist if we Create and Worship Her?**

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

Don Cupitt writes in *Radicals and the Future of the Church* that we need a church, because: 'It is a theatre in which we solemnly enact our deepest feelings.' The theatre analogy points to how non-realism could work in real churches. When we go to the theatre, we usually suspend disbelief naturally and easily to enter into the world of the actors who by speech and action evoke in us in turn actions, feelings, experiences and thoughts. So, likewise, during a religious service we may also suspend disbelief, and have religious feelings and experiences. We create the play of and about God and perform our creation for ourselves and others who also are creators and performers. Then, God, who, in the words of the old prayer, only lives if we manifest God by our life and conversation, can appear again: this time in our play, both as playwright and performer. Of course, to encourage God's appearance in our post-modern production, we would do well to enter the hermeneutic circle that Paul Ricoeur describes in *The Symbolism of Evil*. He suggests that we moderns, having lost our immediacy of belief, can aim at a second, post-critical naïveté in and through critical thinking. By interpreting, we can hear again. In hermeneutics, the symbol's gift of meaning and the endeavour to understand by deciphering are knotted together. In the circle: 'We must understand in order to believe, but we must believe in order to understand.'

But where does our belief come from? As Aidan Kavanagh, in *On Liturgical Theology*, reminds us, worship produces belief. In the phrasing of Prosper of Aquitaine (c. 390 – 465), it is the law of worship which founds or establishes the law of belief. Thus, behaviour, e.g., worship produces feelings, as psychology is showing. In his new book, *Feelings*, James D. Laird argues that feelings do not cause behaviour, but rather follow from behaviour, and are, in fact, the way that we know about our own bodily states and behaviours. Charles Darwin, in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872) contended that human emotions are expressed by two kinds of muscular action: facial expression and bodily movement. We communicate these emotions to others often quite involuntarily as the result of instinct, rather than by learned behaviour. Everyone worldwide recognises and 'reads' them similarly. Thus, we and those observing us may sense particular emotions while performing particular actions in worship, and, as Joseph Ledoux writes *The Emotional Brain*, emotions can produce conscious feelings, which, in turn, can lead to belief.

A hallmark of belief is the meaning it provides to our lives. God can be the name and the marker for the meaning we find together in worship, where God, as meaning, appears horizontally among worshippers. We understand that God, in the vertical, supernatural direction, is an exciting special effect produced as we together find faith in God in our church of non-realism, in our theatre of feelings.

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## How Much Time Have We Really Got?

With reference to David Boulton's article *Where have All the Babies Gone?* (July issue), may I suggest an imaginary exam question?

Create a table with two columns, estimating a) the number of years and b) the number of popes required to complete the following stages:

1. Abolish Purgatory
2. Abolish Hell
3. Abolish Heaven
4. Abolish God

Total the years' column and also the popes' column.

Now estimate the likelihood of completion of the whole project before whichever of the following occurs first:

1. Demise of the Roman Catholic Church
2. Extinction of the human race by ecological catastrophe or nuclear conflagration
3. Burnout of the sun

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## Heart of the Heartless World

Heart of the heartless word,  
Dear heart, the thought of you  
Is the pain at my side,  
The shadow that chills my view.

The wind rises in the evening,  
Reminds that autumn is near.  
I am afraid to lose you,  
I am afraid of my fear.

On the last mile to Huesca,  
The last fence for our pride,  
Think so kindly, dear, that I  
Sense you at my side.

And if bad luck should lay my strength  
Into the shallow grave,  
Remember all the good you can;  
Don't forget my love.

John Cornford

John Cornford, grandson of Charles Darwin, was killed fighting the fascists in Spain at El Calvario, just outside Madrid, on 29th December 1936. The poem is dedicated to Margot Heinemann.

# Current Affair



## Comment by Owl

Do you have a Swiss Card? Owl was presented with one by a student after joking that he, being Swiss, must be carrying a Swiss Army knife. He was. The gift, a credit-card-sized flat version, ingeniously incorporates miniaturised useful tools: toothpick, tweezers, pen, scissors, and a sharp knife, excellent for peeling an apple in inconvenient circumstances. On the plastic casing are mini-rulers by which the knife blade can be measured: 4cm or 1<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>ins. The Card fits snugly into my wallet, the one in my hand-luggage. Oops! Yet disturbingly Owl's Card has travelled undetected on baggage checks, flight after international flight. So full marks to Ryanair, who presented the ultimatum: 'that knife, those mini-scissors – in the hold, or in the bin'.

What then about the *kirpan*, the symbolic curved blade worn as an article of faith by observant Sikhs? Googling *kirpan airport security* certainly opens a fat can of worms, currently the subject of more and deeper debate, not to mention litigation, than jewellery crosses or adolescent 'chastity' rings. One earlier entry was spot on the topic: The *Panthic Weekly* reported that on 13th March 2005 the Director of United Sikhs, Mejjindarpal Kaur, was prevented from wearing her *kirpan* when travelling by Eurostar from Brussels, whereas in London she'd had no problem with this 'ceremonial' item. Cruelly, the official who detained her remarked in a throwaway moment that the Swiss Army knife (real, not the card version) was allowed on Eurostar by the Belgians, 'because of the way it's made' – though Victorinox, the manufacturer, is also authorised to make *kirpan*s.

'Symbol' is a concept found in every analysis of human behaviour, but we're used to symbols sitting about quietly, happy to be pinned on, emblazoned, waved or celebrated in song. Even two-dimensional symbols can, of course, spell danger, as history has proved. Seeing the original of Dali's *The Discovery of America by Christopher Columbus* has made me uneasy ever since about singing *Lift High the Cross*, even with the purest of intent. The combination of flying fears and the Sikh sword, however, is exercising rule-makers and rule-observers worldwide in an unprecedented way. Some Sikhs are willing to compromise by packing their 'normal' *kirpan* in their suitcase and wearing a miniature 'travel' version. But how small is safe? Authorities can't agree.

I daren't google 'fetish' in case the morals police ever find my computer. But Conference-goers will recall that grandfather Don Cupitt reflected interestingly the other day on the sheer power of the comfort-blanket, or the snot-covered toy dog, from which the child will not be parted. Perhaps as adults we currently face a moral imperative to cut back on our symbols, just as we're exhorted to cut back on our attachment to and consumption of 'real' materials. An odd thought. We realise we have to economise on the luxury of symbols in times of war, flood, any crisis. Our holy objects get packed away. So how much do we really need them? Devoid of symbols, by necessity or choice, we fall back on the 'performative utterance'. It is perfectly possible to say: 'With absolutely nothing I thee wed' and still be married, maybe even to be baptised without water or flame. 'In the name of . . .' – the spoken formula – should do it. Yet people, 'spiritual' people, still cling to things.

As we go to press, poor Shambo, the consumptive bullock, sad-eyed symbol of something profound to his mourners, wrested from them, rests in peace, no longer a perceived threat to man or beast. Words fail?

## Grassroots Resurrection

The floor has never been so far away  
The end so near, the fear so grand  
The hand of fate dealing with its customary cruelty  
Prevents me reaching for the cornflakes on the kitchen shelf  
Collect my underwear discarded on the bathroom floor.  
Out in the street the bus stop might as well be on the moon  
Too late I try to reach the beginning of my journey  
And have you tried in McDonald's to handle their tray  
With walking stick in other hand?  
And all because the doctor said  
The proteins in your blood have got some para  
Shooting from the hip to stop you  
Yes, stop you from touching your sacred toes.  
But I will – perhaps with my nose.

Ken Smith

Ken Smith is *Sofia* Letters Editor and Editor of *Partholes*. He read the poem at the close of a Conference workshop on 'Who Owns Easter?', followed by a Mozart alleluia.



Patti Whaley reviews

## *Jesus for the Non-Religious: Recovering the Divine at the Heart of the Human*

by John Shelby Spong

HarperCollins (San Francisco). 2007. 336 pages. £14.99. ISBN: 978-0-06-076207-0

Jack Spong's latest book, *Jesus for the Non-Religious*, ranks with great religious classics such as *The Divine Comedy* and *The Brothers Karamazov* in at least one way: all three promise that the long, arduous journey will have been worthwhile, and all three prove disappointing. The *Inferno* is infinitely more interesting than the *Paradiso*; Ivan and Dmitri are much more compelling than Alyosha; and it's a lot more fun to pull the Jesus myth apart than it is to put it together again.

*Jesus* is divided into three main sections. Part 1 seeks to demonstrate how many facets of the Jesus story are mythological, including not only the usual birth and miracle stories, but also most of the information about Jesus' parents, the existence of a well-defined group of twelve disciples, the betrayal by Judas Iscariot, and most of the details of the passion. I would have been glad for more clarity about how much of this material is Spong's own and how much is borrowed from other New Testament scholars, but Spong provides a clear and well-argued summary of this material.

Part 2 demonstrates that the overriding structures and images of the gospels derive from Jewish liturgy and Hebrew scripture. Not only do the Gospel writers draw heavily on Passover, Yom Kippur, Second Isaiah and Second Zechariah to give shape and resonance to Jesus, but they even organise their material to provide a set of readings to fit the seasonal feasts of the synagogue year. Christians are accustomed to the idea that the Christian liturgical year is structured to fit the events of Jesus' life; what they don't realise is that Jesus' life was itself structured to fit the Jewish liturgical year.

Again, most of this is well-argued, but the occasional reversals of logic can be disconcerting. Throughout the book Spong asserts that many events in the gospels did not really happen, but were gleaned from earlier Hebrew scriptures and used to construct a story that would recall and fulfil the prophecies. Using this logic he argues that there was no disciple named Judas Iscariot, no betrayal by one of the disciples and no thirty pieces of silver. There was no gambling away of Jesus' clothes, and no thieves on either side of the cross. But when he comes to Mark's story of how the disciples fled when Jesus was betrayed, he suddenly takes the opposite tack. Mark has Jesus predict the disciples' flight by quoting Zechariah 13:7: 'You will all fall away; for it is written, "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered".' Spong concludes that the desertion by the disciples is historical, because 'One does not provide so perfect a "divine justifying explanation" for something that never occurred.' Hold on – if that is the case, shouldn't all those earlier bits be reinstated?

Part 3 paints the new human Jesus whom even the non-religious can follow.

Spong's Jesus has three main attributes: he breaks down tribal boundaries, he rises above all prejudices and stereotypes, and he breaks through religious rules and boundaries to call all people to become fully human. This new Jesus requires no belief in supernatural doctrine. Spong does not seek to explain the resurrection, or even to explain why the gospel writers chose resurrection as the central symbol of the Jesus experience. He simply asserts that 'The first-century experience of Jesus was quite simply that people met God in him...because life, love and being flowed through the fullness of his humanity.'

One can't really argue with this, but it sounds a lot more like a Jesus well-calibrated both to support long-standing interests of Jack Spong, and to be completely acceptable to a liberal secular audience, than a well-argued portrait of the experience of first-century Christians. We see this most clearly when we realise that nowhere in this book does Spong mention eschatology. The extent to which John the Baptist, Jesus, or Jesus' followers expected a literal coming of the Kingdom of God, and the impact of this expectation on the Gospel writers, is totally ignored. It's not clear whether Spong finds these aspects of the Jesus story troublesome, inconvenient, or simply not useful; what is clear is that this Jesus is shaped more by the themes and concerns of Spong's life than by the experience of the first-century Christians.

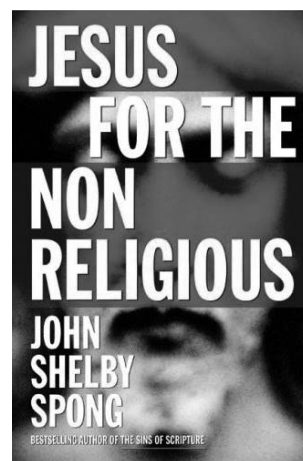
Will this book change anyone's mind? Liberal Christians who already want to follow Jesus without having to believe the unbelievable will find this book accessible, reassuring and possibly even inspiring. Liberal secularists who have already bought into the need to rise above tribal boundaries, prejudices and religious sectarianism may well ask what further need they have for this Jesus; it's not really clear how life with this Jesus differs from the life of a secular liberal humanist. Can Spong's new Jesus draw the non-religious back into a new and revitalised experience of God? Regrettably, I don't think so.

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Patti Whaley is a former SoF Chair and currently its Treasurer.

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The book is available from [amazon.co.uk](http://amazon.co.uk) for £10.49.



reviews

Penny Mawdsley reviews

## *Doing Theology in Altab Ali Park*

by Kenneth Leech

Darton, Longman and Todd (London). 2006. 288 pages. £19.95. ISBN: 978-0232525717

It was with some trepidation that I set about reading this book. How would I, as a renegade Anglican lay-person turned BHA member – albeit having spent the first 5 years of my life in S.E. London – relate to a scholarly account of urban ministry in Whitechapel?

I need not have worried. Kenneth Leech held my attention from the first with well-chosen quotations, good writing and a full appreciation of the historical context in and about which he was writing. The book is, I am persuaded, not only an exceptionally honest, open and self-critical account of his work based at St. Botolph's between 1990 and 2004 but also a particularly fine example of modern contextual theology.

The team ministry described happened in 'a small inner city area, yet an area which is profoundly global, housing both the financial centre of the city, and the largest Bengali community in the world outside of the Indian subcontinent.' The work followed very much in the Anglo-Catholic Socialist tradition and it seems to have been effective to a point, especially in the early years. Leech portrays a project whose underlying passion was the furtherance of political and social justice in the East End. Using the invaluable resource of a meticulously kept diary during the period, Leech details his progress and setbacks along the way. This man is thoroughly steeped in liberal Anglican theology and one is left in no doubt that this is the lens through which Leech views the world. From my personal angle I was surprised to find so much with which to identify. It was only with parts of chapters 7 and 9 that I felt particularly at variance with Leech when he stresses the paramount importance of a strong sacramental and prayer life.

During the period described Leech was genuinely living and working at the heart of the communities to which he was ministering. His accommodation was provided rent-free by the Diocese of London, but otherwise the St. Botolph's Project and the Jubilee Group with which he was involved received no funding from either the C.of E. or the Government. Leech thus enjoyed an enviable freedom and flexibility to respond to diverse and changing social needs. Leech comes across variously as a sensitive, caring and deeply reflective social observer who also

enjoys meeting people and learning from them. He portrays himself as a good listener who is widely

read and well-informed. His approach to inter-faith dialogue seems to display the same practicality as his approach to mental health problems and matters of bureaucracy, social, economic and political injustice. He states (pp.126-7):

...understanding between one faith and another depends on the ability to make an 'analogy' between something in one's own tradition and something in that of 'the other'. If this cannot occur, mutual understanding fails. It follows that rootedness in and fidelity to, one's own tradition is a necessary prelude to, not *per se* an obstacle to, 'dialogue with the other'. It may well be that the future of Christian-Muslim dialogue lies in the willingness of 'conservative' Christians to engage in it. 'The other' may be a person of different faith, or a person of no faith, a secular person. We need to engage with the *saeculum* but *sub specie aeternitatis*, to engage with this age according to the perspective of the eternal. For Christian theology is not a 'religious dimension' or a 'department' but a way of looking at the world as a whole.

Although there is little evidence in the book to show that Leech ever stepped outside the 'safe zone' and dared to talk theology with his contacts from other faiths and it is clear that Leech would not regard his Christianity as a wholly 'human creation', I admit that by the time I finished the book I had come to admire the author for his committed and sustained work at St. Botolph's – without, it seems, having displayed undue and overt missionary zeal. Indeed, I found myself wondering how a theologically radical attempt to work for social justice in such circumstances would differ in practice from the liberal one such as Kenneth Leech so effectively describes.



reviews

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Penny Mawdsley was SoF Chair for 2006-7.

Cicely Herbert reviews

## St Joan

at the National Theatre in London

A great ash tree stands in my garden and for more than 40 years I've watched it through the changing seasons. Each summer squirrels chase around its trunk; foxes build dens under the tree's shelter and sally forth to stalk the more vulnerable creatures; whilst their cubs, a new generation year by year, emerge from somewhere beneath the ground to play in the dawn light. Pale young leaves unfurl, to give renewed shelter or shade from the summer's heat. Occasionally, during a storm, a great branch will crash down from the tree, causing mayhem in the garden. Seeds spin to earth to be reborn as saplings. Leaf-mould enriches the soil. And so our shared memory of those who have lived before us will provide enrichment for future generations.

We know much of what our predecessors thought, about their fears, hopes and ambitions, through reading their letters, from family stories, war diaries and reminiscences, and there are some people whose lives were so extraordinary that we seem to know them, almost instinctively, through the legends held in our collective memory. Such a person was Jehanne D'Arc, born in 1412, who led the French to defeat the English army in 1429, was tied to a stake and burned to death as a heretic in 1431, declared innocent in 1456 and canonised as a saint as recently as 1920.

George Bernard Shaw's greatest play, *St. Joan*, written when he was in his sixties, is revived this summer at the National Theatre in London. These performances at the National are, quite simply, theatre at its most thrilling. My own, somewhat waning, faith in the power of actors to move and excite an audience, has been restored after some years of increasing doubt and disappointment. The play's young director, Marianne Elliott, seems to have an innate sense of what risks to take, and of what will work on stage. Her production is perfectly paced, from the high comedy of the scenes with the Dauphin, to moments of thrilling skill and excitement, where actors tumble, scenery swirls, and the music, by Joss Pook, insinuates or pounds out,



with the beautiful voice of Melanie Pappenheim contributing an unearthly quality to the drama. There are scenes of almost unbearable poignancy, as when Joan realises that, even after her recantation, she will not be set free, but, instead, is condemned to 'eat the bread of sorrow and drink the water of affliction' to the end of her earthly days 'in perpetual imprisonment.'

This was one of those rare but wonderful moments in a theatre when the audience becomes as one, united by the powerful emotion engendered by events on stage. The role of Joan is taken by Anne-Marie Duff, and I cannot imagine anyone better in the role. The various representatives of church and state are played by the members of the National Theatre Company with complete conviction and all are, praise be, audibly spoken. Oliver Ford Davies, fine here as the Grand Inquisitor, seems to make a career of portraying religious heavies, having played the Cardinal Inquisitor in the recent National Theatre production of *Galileo*. Paul Ready

is very funny as a neurotic and petulant Dauphin, whilst Angus Wright, as the Earl of Warwick, reminded me of one of those ex-public school army officers one sometimes hears being interviewed by John Humphrys on Radio 4's *Today* Programme, confident men of war, who must attempt to justify the British presence in Iraq.

Joan, of course, recanted her earlier 'confession' and rather than suffer life-long imprisonment, chose, instead, to be burned at the stake as a heretic. The human struggle to achieve a state of grace continues, but whatever our religious, agnostic or humanist belief, we can only acknowledge that we are still, five hundred years later, far from achieving that goal.

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Cicely Herbert is one of the trio who founded and continue to run *Poems on the Underground*.





Where on Earth will it End?  
Tim Jackson  
SoF Conference  
Leicester, July 2007