

s fia

No. 86 November 2007



Dangerous Religion

Dangerous Religion

Some kinds of religion do harm; some kill many people. They are dangerous.

In this issue, called *Dangerous Religion*, Dominic Kirkham writes about Christian and Islamic fundamentalism. Michael Northcott, Professor of Ethics at Edinburgh University and an Episcopalian priest, writes about the religion of America and Jennifer Jeynes, the Ethical Society librarian at Conway Hall, focuses mainly on religion in education in Britain.

Kirkham points out the similarities between fundamentalist Christianity and Islam that make them feel they 'have much to agree with about their common enemy: the West' and its secular values. He shows that 'this is not simply a conflict of the West versus Islam but something more complex.' What we have is 'a rather confused "quadrille" of uncertain "partners" – motivated by differing mentalities. There are those in both the West and East united in looking backward, but to differing pasts. Then there are those looking forward, but to something different from the present.'

Northcott suggests that the public religion of the United States is *America itself* and its totem the American flag. He argues that this religion is fed on the human sacrifice not only of enemies but also (and crucially) of America's own young people in wars. As he says, his thesis is controversial (and see Jason C. Bivins' review of Northcott's book on page 22). Nevertheless, Bush does believe that God told him to invade Iraq and that America has a sacred mission to 'rid the world of evil' in a holy War against Terror, for which there is no end in sight. Many US Christian fundamentalists share this vision of America as God's chosen instrument. For 'the sacred vision of America as standing in some crucial and exceptional sense at the end of history, as the first and last truly Biblical nation, has played a key role in the history of America.'

How, Northcott asks, has American Christianity ceded the public sphere to this murderous civil religion of America? He argues that 'a core part of the answer lies in the church-state relationship carved out by the Founding Fathers which left the churches in charge of the faith and religious experiences of Americans, and the State in charge of

their bodies.' The public cult of America grew out of Protestant Christianity and its *privatisation* of religion.

Rejecting religious persecution and the tyranny of a theocratic state, religious liberty in America was based on the idea that religion is a *private* matter between an individual and his or her god. But the price of that precious, hard-won freedom of conscience was a withdrawal from the *public* sphere, leaving a vacuum into which 'the civil religion of America' could rush. Indeed, there is a pact between the two, as churches of many denominations fly the American flag. This reminded me of the story of the 'seven worse devils' rushing into the house that had been left 'empty and swept' (Mt 12:43; Lk 11:24).

The liberation theologian Jon Sobrino defines an idol as 'a false god that demands and feeds on death'; his criterion for discerning these idols of death is a humanist one. In Northcott's analysis the cult of America with its totem flag is a form of idolatry because this 'America' demands and feeds on death. And by that definition, the god of the suicide bomber is also an idol. So what god is not an idol? In the 'apophatic' tradition of 'negative theology' *God is not that, not that, not that*, John of the Cross's *nada*. In the Christian story of incarnation God 'empties himself' into humanity. Of course in orthodox theology he does not thereby cease to be God, but perhaps that is an impossibility. Isn't creating supernatural beings to legitimise your values just a way of giving them clout? If religions are human creations, clergy will have no *divine* moral authority to put 'windows into men's souls' or women's wombs. Finally, the only appropriate place for humans to look for values is among, between human beings, one of whom was Jesus.

When we 'come down to the place just right', the human creation of a religion that is not dangerous must reject idols that demand and feed on death for the pursuit of a humanity that is wise and kind. In a human trinity recalling/reclaiming the traditional divine trinity, it will try to pour its energy into

wisdom and kindness, which will be regarded as inseparable. To avoid the 'seven worse devils', the pursuit must be both personal for each individual, and social for humanity as a whole species on Earth. Neither do wisdom and kindness come cheap. For example, Archbishop Romero's plea from his pulpit to 'Stop the killing!' was wise and kind, and it cost him his life.

There is the question of how we define 'religion'. The Ethical Society at Conway Hall had a long debate about changing one of its stated objects from 'cultivation of a rational religious sentiment' to 'the cultivation of a rational and humane way of life' precisely because the word religion was seen by some as too tainted with supernaturalism. In the end they did change their mission statement. On the other hand, if we start by taking it for granted that all religions are human creations, whether their objects of worship, their gods or idols, are regarded as supernatural or not, then perhaps religion – of one sort or another – will prove to be inevitable.

It becomes a matter of discernment. Sometimes some members of SoF speak as if getting rid of the supernatural and seeing religion as a human creation is an end in itself and solves the problem. Clearly this is not the case. In the last issue of *Sofia* Tim Jackson wrote about consumerism as a religion or 'theodicy', as he called it. There are all sorts of non-supernatural religions or those in which the 'natural' and 'supernatural' are inextricably tangled; some of them, at least, are harmful or foster illusions. Any religion that demands and feeds on death is idolatrous. The human pursuit of wisdom and kindness against the idols of death is of its nature a constant struggle, a constant conversation (a *social* activity) requiring humility, as in the great *kenosis* hymn Christ 'being found in human form, humbled himself' (Php 2:8.) And in that struggle, that conversation, the idea of religion as a 'smorgasbord' of privatised 'spiritualities' is woefully inadequate.

From 2008 the larger 28-page *Sofia* will become quarterly and will be published in March, June, September and December. Please note new Membership Secretary's address and send membership and magazine subscriptions, request for back issues and all related correspondence to him at: Membership Secretary, 9 Melbray Drive, Melton Mowbray LE13 1JS
peterstribblehill@btinternet.com

The Common Quest

At the closing session of the SoF 2006 Conference we sang John Andrew Storey's hymn *The Larger View*. In *Sofia* 81 the Editor asked readers to come up with two new verses for the hymn. David Paterson has responded, keeping Storey's words for the first and last verse and inserting his own new words in the middle as verses 2 and 3.

The Larger View

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

We evolved to fear the stranger,
Struggling to preserve our kind;
Now our conflicts lead to danger
For the whole of humankind.
Vast our task – the great reversal
Of the fear that fosters hate
Into deeds of universal
Caring for our planet's fate.

'God is love!' – and yet we, hating
Insights different from our own,
Live in fear as, unabating,
Power to fight and kill has grown.
Must we then demand rejection
Of all 'wisdom from above'?
Or make thoughtful, wise selection
From this search for truth and love.

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

John Andrew Storey
David Paterson

John Andrew Storey was a Unitarian Minister and hymn writer. This hymn is published in *The Common Quest: Selected Writings of John Andrew Storey*, edited by Charles Hughes and Sylvia Storey (Lindsey Press, London 2000). David Paterson is a SoF Trustee.

Against The West

Dominic Kirkham looks at how Islamic and Christian Fundamentalism came to share a common hostility to 'the West'.

The twenty-first century has been defined, so far, by an increasingly violent war on 'Terror'. At the current rate it promises to be the most murderous century yet. In the minds of many this conflict is polarised into a conflict between two amorphous entities, 'the West' and Islam. But in its most simplistic form this polarisation is misleading.

For one thing, neither are real entities. The West is not a place but a metaphor for a certain (equally vague) way of life – godless, materialistic and amoral. Against this secular entity is faced a faith-based world, the *dar ul-Islam* – 'the domain of faith': the land under *sharia* law wholly based on religious observation. Only this is more of an aspiration – or mirage – constantly beguiling religious zealots, but never quite achieved. For, if anywhere, this place, like El Dorado, exists in the imagination.

Rage and resentment further obscure these entities. Rage against the Western way of life came to characterise the writings, for example, of the founding father of Al Qaeda, Sayyid Qutb, and his many disciples. But so equally does it of many Christian fundamentalists. Whilst, in the name of Western values, George Bush pursues his 'War on Terror', as a declared born-again Christian he draws much support from a powerful Christian lobby which equally rages against the godless, materialistic and amoral society that is 'the West'. Other Churches feel likewise. This could not have been put more plainly than by the present pope, Benedict XVI, when, as head of the Holy Office, he said that, 'the most urgent task facing Christians is that of regaining the capacity of non-conformism... to oppose many developments of the surrounding culture.' That there was a need for 'confrontation' with the West!

The polarisation now becomes confused. What we find is similar elements in both fundamentalist

Christianity and Islam that make them feel they have much to agree with about their common enemy: Islam and Christianity ranged against the West and the rest. This situation was epitomised in the 1994 UN Conference on Population and Development held at Cairo. For the Vatican and various Islamic factions 'family planning', abortion and feminine rights were equally anathema so they secretly colluded to frustrate any resolutions at the conference. An example of 'non-conformism' at work!

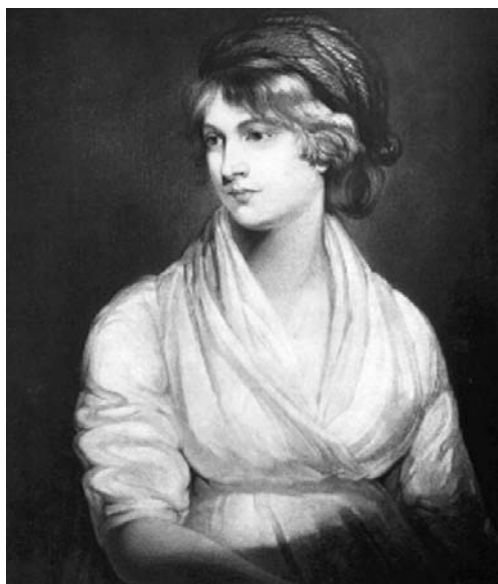
Reflecting on this situation the editor of *The Tablet*, John Wilkins, put the whole issue in its wider context, commenting, 'The conflict at Cairo is not simply over sexual ethics. It is over Western values, specifically the values of the European Enlightenment.' He added that Cardinal Ratzinger was 'explicit in his criticism of the Enlightenment.' The 'so called' Enlightenment (to use John Paul II's withering dismissal of this great cultural metamorphosis) and the modern secular society that emerged from it were problematic for the Church, Pope John Paul II bizarrely making it

responsible for fascism and likening the EU to a fascist organisation (cf. *Memory and Identity*).

It is not surprising, therefore, that it should be even more problematic for Muslims. For them the alien notions of the Enlightenment – with its concepts of integral human rights and a religiously neutral civil order – did not emerge from within the matrix of their faith. They were imported on the back of an oppressive imperialism. Thus, democracy could be seen as a *kufir* concept: if the Prophet had wanted it he would have thought of it. But then the same could be said for the telephone and motor-car... and it was said by the radical Wahhabi Ulema of Saudi Arabia. For them, in the quest of re-establishing a true Islamic identity and state of *dar ul-Islam*, accommodation was apostasy.



Tom Paine: 'The Rights of Man'.



Mary Wollstonecraft: 'The Rights of Woman'

However, such differences obscure some deeper convergences which emerged in the nineteenth century, as the West expanded into the domain of the Orient. As C.A. Bayly comments in his study of *The Birth of the Modern World*, 'Perhaps the most important point was that Asian religions rapidly took up Christian missionaries' methods of preaching and evangelization.' By aping the imperial powers, which liked dealing with organised bodies, religions like Islam began taking on more organised institutional forms, with religious leaders being expected to speak authoritatively for cohesive communities.

If tidy organisation pleased imperial bureaucrats it also had a more ominous side. The organisation of clandestine resistance to the West also began to accelerate. Its leaders also wanted a new kind of cohesive pan-Islamism with which to oppose imperialism. In his study of the roots of the modern *jihād*, Charles Allen, in *God's Terrorists*, charts how extremist Muslim groups in the nineteenth century anticipated in almost every detail the present activities of Al Qaeda as a new and radicalised Islam appeared: 'The end result was a seismic shift in the Sunni Islam of South Asia, which became increasingly conservative and introverted, less tolerant and far more inclined to look for political leadership to the *madrassah*.' We are now living with the consequences.

Throughout the nineteenth century, not only was there an increasing feeling that it was a religious duty to fight against Western influences but there was an accompanying sense of the need for a return to spiritual roots, the *salafi* – the 'following of the forefathers'. This was accompanied by a nostalgia for the glories of the past – of the Moguls and the Caliphate, particularly the kingdom of Andalusia (when Islam overawed Europe). All formed part of what Allen calls a 'great leap backwards', as Muslims

turned their backs on progress in favour of the past. It was eulogised in the influential poetry of Iqbal and expressed itself politically in parties such as the *Jamaat-I-Islam* (*Party of Islam*) and ultimately led to the creation of Pakistan. This would be, in Jinnah's thinking, a 'land of the pure': the necessary *dar ul-Islam* from which to confront the West. Its genesis revealed the deep antithesis that existed between Muslim and Western mentalities: the former looking backward and inward, the latter looking forward and outward.

The difference is epitomised nowhere better than by the illustrated cover of Bacon's *Novum Organum* – with vessels sailing beyond the Pillars of Hercules seeking new treasures, both material and intellectual. Through the discovery of new worlds and the growth of an empirically based *scienza nuova* a technological whirlwind had been unleashed. A new secularised and industrialised civilization emerged which became 'the West' (as distinct from Christendom). The sense of newness and the pursuit of innovation was accompanied by a willingness to cast aside the past. Not that this new West was without its own 'non-conformists'. The Gothic revival became the powerful expression of a nostalgic counter-flow, paralleling what was happening in the Islamic world, whilst, as David Cannadine noted in his study of how the British saw their empire, *Ornamentalism*, the empire was promoted by romantics like Lawrence of Arabia (who fully supported the Wahhabite House of Saud), 'seeking to escape from the travails of industrialisation, democracy and big cities', so much so that Sir Edwin Lutyens said going to India made him feel very, 'pre-Tory Feudal.'

The conflict is about Western values, specifically the values of the European Enlightenment.

But, romanticising the past leads to a denial of history. The much vaunted caliphate (long held by the Ottoman Turks), and which zealots now wish to restore, was itself destroyed by the same brand of fanaticism (in alliance with Western powers during the Great War). This puritanical Wahhabism – which underpins all the radical Islamic movements from the eighteenth century down to Al Qaeda – set about consolidating the reign of God in a remarkably similar way to the Calvinist-inspired Christian fundamentalism of *sola Dei, sola scriptura*. The former resolutely destroyed any historical associations or customs vaguely associated with the Prophet – a policy continued by the Wahhabite Saudi Government. The parallel Christian fundamentalism

was equally iconoclastic of historical piety and dismissive of the record of reality revealed by biblical archaeology. If the imagined past did not quite coincide with the real past best then, in the interests of belief, better to destroy the evidence – if necessary by gunpowder!

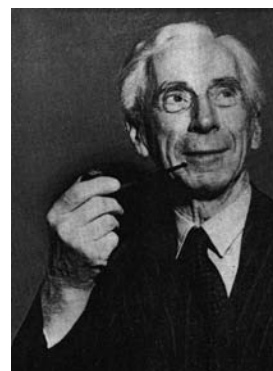
The ‘golden ages’ of these faiths ended not because of some external attack so much as from internal defect.

Yet, when we look for the reason the ‘golden ages’ of these faiths ended it was not because of some external attack so much as from internal defect. The Ages of Faith, both for Islam and Christianity, were ages of growing intolerance. The title of Gazali’s famous book, *Destruction of the Philosophers*, written in 1090, really says it all: it was an exercise in using reason against reason on behalf of religion, based on the assumption that faith should be obedience not knowledge. By the time of Gazali the use of independent reasoning (*ijtihad*) to interpret the laws of the *sharia* was deemed to be no longer necessary; everything that needed to be said had been said, henceforth ‘the gates of *ijtihad* were closed’ – all that remained was to obey. The consequent stultification of thought and creativity by religious dogmatism became increasingly apparent. But, as the distinguished Catholic philosopher Etienne Gilson noted (in *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*), it was ‘an attitude that is exactly analogous to that of a large group of later Christian theologians’. What the *ijma* did for Islam the Inquisition did for Christendom.

To the zealots of either faith none of this mattered. For both faiths were born of an apocalyptic mentality, in which the end was always imminent – so temporal inconvenience was irrelevant: remember the Branch Davidians of Waco! To the innumerable millenarian movements of Western Europe (including the crusades) the Final Coming was always at hand to usher in a better world. Similarly, the innumerable uprisings of various mahdis were forever anticipating the destruction of the infidels and a new order through the final jihad. Even in the interim, whilst the ‘born again’ await the Rapture, which (it is believed) will sweep the faithful up to heaven, the zealot-cum-terrorist proactively poses on the threshold of paradise.

In our own time the notion of a Final Conflict has taken on a new dimension. Whereas once crusaders

and jihadists used swords or muskets the weaponry is now nuclear. When Dr.A.Q.Khan stole the secrets of the atom bomb for Pakistan, he made it clear that this was to be the ‘Islamic bomb’, and promptly set up a clandestine network dedicated to passing these secrets on to other Islamic nations so as to be in a position to confront the West. Unlike in the West, where the nuclear ideology is one of deterrence fronted by pragmatic politicians, in the Muslim world it is one of defiance, of the defence of Islam fronted increasingly by intolerant clerics. So apocalyptic thinking becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy of imminent destruction.



The passionate sceptic

Yet the West and Islam are both oppositional and interactive. Within both there are those who would simply chose the traditional path dictated by religious revelation; equally, there are those who would reject this for the path of the Enlightenment. For example, amongst the most vociferous opponents of introducing the *sharia* to western states are Islamic women who came to the West to escape it. Similarly, the most likely victims of the traditional ideas of ‘honour’ are women who instead of tribal honour simply want a recognition of their human rights. In contrast to the religious fundamentalist – for whom everything is foreseen, full of hidden portents and providential significance – in the secular West the future is unstructured, undetermined and open to chance. A consequence is that genuinely new things and new ways become possible. An effervescent sense of ‘newness’ makes the West. For the religious fundamentalist renewal is simply a return to the past or it is nothing (the failure of the ‘renewal’ agenda of Vatican Council II clearly illustrates this), freedom to be found in submission (*aslama* /Islam).

What emerges from all this is not simply a conflict of the West versus Islam but something more complex. Not so much polarities as movements – a rather confused ‘quadrille’ of uncertain ‘partners’ – motivated by differing mentalities. There are those in both the West and East united in looking backward, but to differing pasts. Then there are those looking forward, but to something different from the present. Because it is different it is more difficult to discern and therefore more tenuous.

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

Toxic Religion in the American Empire

Michael Northcott argues that the dominant religion of the USA is the religion of America with its rituals of the *American* flag, demanding constant human sacrifice.

Few in Britain in the last six years have really understood the deeply religious character of the reaction of the United States to the events of September 11th, 2001. And this is because few in this country understand that the dominant religion in the United States is not historic Christianity but a civil religion in which God is the Father of the nation while the apparatus of the nation-state, including its omnipresent military, is the embodied presence of America as the new Chosen People in the world. Therefore the religion of the New World is not so much the anti-imperial Christianity of the founder, Jesus Christ, as it is a religion of America whose core values are more American than New Testament. As I show in more detail in my book *An Angel Directs the Storm: Apocalyptic Religion and American Empire* (reviewed on page 22) these values represent a curious combination of individual liberty and patriotism which requires individuals regularly to commit themselves and their children, and a substantial proportion of their taxes and their nation's resources, to war and preparations for war. This is why it was not hard for Bush to enlist so many American Christians, whose churches carry the flag in the sanctuary, in his neo-imperial crusade.

So strong are the demands of the American State on its citizens for their loyalty, and their preparedness to fight for America, that some suggest that the dominant religion in America is not the weekly attendance of Americans at their myriad churches and synagogues (and more recently temples and mosques) but the collective religion of *America* which some call civil religion, and others nationalism. It was civil religion, more than any particular Christian tradition or teaching, which paved the way for Bush's sacralisation of his war on terror and the larger neo-conservative imperial agenda. Jean Jacques Rousseau might be said to have originated the concept of civil religion when he suggested in his *The Social Contract* that there is 'a purely civil profession of faith of which the Sovereign should fix the articles, not exactly as religious dogmas, but as social sentiments without which a man cannot be a good citizen or a faithful subject'. Such a faith does not compete with other religions, but rather it is grounded



Coffins of US soldiers killed in Iraq

on tolerance of all religions 'so long as their dogmas contain nothing contrary to the duties of citizenship'. Civil religion of this kind was seen by Rousseau, as by the influential sociologist Emile Durkheim, as providing the ritual focus for citizen commitment to the new society, a kind of social cement for the new Republic.

Rousseau's ideas were embraced even more enthusiastically in America. While children in American public schools are not supposed to participate in public prayer, they do participate in a daily patriotic ritual before the American flag, in which they repeat a vow of allegiance to American values. Similarly would-be citizens must similarly salute the flag and profess that they own the values and beliefs that make a person an American. As Robert Bellah argues, Americans through their history have developed 'a collection of beliefs, symbols and rituals with respect to sacred things and institutionalised in a collectivity' which amounts to a civil religion: 'American civil religion has its own prophets and its own martyrs; its own sacred events and sacred places; its own solemn rituals and symbols. It is concerned that America be a society as perfectly in accord with the will of God as men can make it, and a light to all the nations.' In a very real sense America *is* a religion and participation in this religion is required of all American citizens to a lesser or greater extent depending on the kind of community they inhabit.

At the core of the religion which is America are the rituals of the American flag. In their book *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation* Carolyn Marvin and David Ingle argue that the flag is the primitive totem which lies at the heart of a sacrificial system that binds American citizens together as a nation. Drawing on the totemic theory of Durkheim they propose that the flag is 'the emblem of the group's agreement to be a group'. The flag is marked as magical and sacred by legal attempts to outlaw the burning of the flag, by rituals which require children to salute the flag in school, in uniformed organisations, and on camps, by its placement in the sanctuary of many churches as well as in all government and court buildings, and above all by its use to wrap the coffins of America's war dead, and its precise ritual folding and gifting to the parents or relatives of the slain as a lasting totemic reminder of the victim. The sacrificial system of which the flag is the totem is 'endlessly re-enacted in patriotic life and ritual' from the everyday ceremonial saluting of the flag to special events such as Presidential election campaigns sustained with masses of flag-waving supporters and images of the flag on hustings, and the use of the flag by America's military in America's wars. But while the structure of the mythic life of the nation which the flag rituals sustain is familiar to Americans, the secret that the totem conceals is that:

blood sacrifice preserves the nation. Nor is the sacrifice that counts that of our enemy. The totem secret, the collective group taboo, is the knowledge that society depends on the death of its own members, *at the hands of the group*'.

That the United States has at its heart a religion that requires the regular sacrificial death of the adult children of its older citizens in its numerous and regular wars is obscured by the mythology of American individualism. As the overt 'defining myth of America' individualism disguises the reality of blood sacrifice that the collective requires by identifying the victims of this violent blood letting as 'sacrificial heroes' who freely choose to give their lives in a heroic and virtuous fashion for the noble cause of America. The taboo which the enduring myth of American individualism helps to maintain is the totemic need for violence which is at the heart of American nationalism.

God is the Father of the nation and America the new Chosen People.

Of course Americans do not consciously see themselves as inhabiting such a sacred and sacrificial victim system. Blood sacrifice is seen as a feature of primitive societies – for example of Native American communities – rather than of the modern enlightened and

progressive society which is America. The anthropologist René Girard argues that violent sacrifice is at the core of all ritual systems such as those which surround the American flag as a magical object. According to Girard rituals with a sacrificial element – not all sacrificial rituals involve the death of a victim – are means that societies utilise to contain competition and rivalry, and to prohibit murder and violence outside of legally and ritually defined contexts. The individual who is chosen as the victim is in effect a scapegoat for the community. In order to deal with crises which seem to threaten the community's identity – sickness, climatic events, sibling or group rivalry – the scapegoat is burdened with the threats or shortcomings which the group experiences and is persecuted or cast out, shamed or killed. Moderns imagine that they no longer inhabit such ritual systems of victimage and killing, and that they have cleansed their societies of the need to identify and persecute scapegoats. But on the contrary Girard finds that such systems exist in almost all societies including the modern, and the combination of ritual victimage with science and technology is moreover particularly dangerous, because the existence of modern weapons of mass destruction threatens humanity not just with the occasional ritual slaughter of individuals, or even large numbers of individuals, but with complete annihilation.

In their account of blood sacrifice in America, Marvin and Ingle acknowledge their debt to Girard when they suggest that the 'collective victimage' associated with the American flag 'constructs American national identity'. And they identify an ambiguous relation between the denominational religions of America with this collective victimage system. Officially the United States gives freedom to all religious groups as denominations or sects but this freedom implies that there is no religious monopoly in America. But this is ironic because while denominationalism gives up the claim of religious monopoly to the State, it sustains the reality that the State in America is in effect the deity of American civil religion because only the State, and not the deity, is capable of demanding sacrifice. The State, and not the denomination, has the monopoly on violence and on killing:

The first principle of every religious system is that only the deity may kill. The State, which does kill, allows whoever accepts these terms to exist, to pursue their own beliefs and call themselves what they like in the process. In the broadest sense, the purpose of religion is to organise killing energy. This is how it accomplishes its social function of defining and organising the group. By this standard, nationalism is unquestionably the most powerful religion in the United States.

It is however taboo to admit that blood sacrifice is the organising principle of the United States, although this is the reality of America's successive engagement of its

young men, and more recently young women, in wars both at home and overseas. The extensive mobilisation of the flag in military institutions and rituals, including the complex death rituals which require the return of the bodies of American war dead to the soil of the United States shrouded in the flag, indicates the true proximity of the flag rituals of the stars and stripes to the enduring practice of bloody sacrifice.

At the core of the religion which is America are the rituals of the American flag.

There could be no more powerful illustration of the extent to which the flag is the transcendent symbol at the heart of the American victimage cult of nationalism than the mass mobilisation of the flag right across America after the events of September 11th. After 9/11 it was normal for householders to erect a large cloth Stars and Stripes in the grounds of their homes, so much so that those who chose not to do this were subjected to accusations of a lack of patriotism by their neighbours and friends. As cars and coat lapels were also used for flag display – George W. Bush and his team all began wearing flag badges on their clothing after 9/11 – the association between the violent death of Americans in New York and the Pentagon and patriotic displays of the stars and stripes has now become culturally ubiquitous in America post-September 11th.

The association of the flag with a mass out-pouring of patriotism which united the vast majority of Americans behind a formerly deeply unpopular President after September 11th indicates a central element in Marvin and Ingle's thesis, which is that it is the violent death of Americans and not of America's enemies which is the true sacrifice that is effective in uniting the nation around its totem flag. This insight may also indicate why Americans have been so quick to fall away in their support of the Bush administration in its decision to go to war in Iraq, because while there were many tens of thousands of Iraqi dead, there were, thanks to America's overwhelming technological superiority, less than one hundred killed in action before the formal phase of the war was declared over. According to Marvin and Ingle, 'not winning or losing but serious bloodletting is the important factor in ritual success.'

The argument that the civil religion of America is a totemic sacrificial system involving regular militarised conflict and death is obviously controversial. And yet it makes a great deal of sense of the extent to which America as a nation has been, and remains, prepared to commit so many of its people, and so much of its resources, to the military, and to weapons of killing. More than 6 million people served in the Korean war,

almost 9 million in the Vietnam War; half a million were engaged in the first Gulf War, and almost as many in the second Gulf War. In these four wars America had more than 110,000 war dead, and 250,000 wounded. None of these were wars involved any threat to the territorial integrity of the United States. But they served a larger purpose, in advancing the religion of America.



US Christians rally to the flag.

If this thesis is correct then the religion of America is truly a toxic and death-dealing religion. How is it that American Christianity has so thoroughly acceded the ground to the American nation state in the maintenance of this cult of blood sacrifice around its totem? A core part of the answer lies in the church-state relationship carved out by the Founding Fathers which left the churches in charge of the faith and religious experiences of Americans, and the State in charge of their bodies. This division of labour is legitimated by the extent to which churches have embraced the totem symbol of the flag, and the larger civil religion which surrounds it. The vast majority of churches and synagogues display the American flag in or around their church buildings, and many place it in the Sanctuary. Denominational religious services will include reference to such key civil religious festivals as Memorial Day, Thanksgiving, and the Fourth of July, and the more recently inaugurated Martin Luther King Day. American churches also participate in the American dream and celebrate the American way of life in a whole range of ways, from incorporating reference to consumer products in church magazines to celebrating in religious services the prosperity or career advancement of their members through public testimony to the blessing of God. The phenomenon of the megachurch takes this celebration to new heights when the church building becomes a mall surrounded like other malls by a massive car park and offering everything from sports and leisure facilities and shopping outlets to computer chat rooms, cafés and counselling and therapy rooms to its members, as well as a cinema-style worship auditorium where again the flag is typically prominently displayed.

The pervasive influence of the flag and civil religion on American Christians is indicated also by the role the churches played in the swell of patriotic feeling and national mourning which occurred after 9/11. It was particularly notable that President Bush used an address at the prayer service held on 14th September 2001 in the National Cathedral in Washington DC both to praise the fortitude of Americans in their response to the tragedy

and to indicate an intent to 'rid the world of evil', an intent to which not even Jesus Christ ever laid claim: 'Just three days removed from these events, Americans do not yet have the distance of history, but our responsibility to history is already clear: to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil.' This statement in this ritual context indicates that Bush goes much further than Ronald Reagan in a preparedness to mobilise American civil religion in garnering support to his sense of divine mission in taking up the battle against 'America's enemies'. Bush, like Reagan, believes that America alone stands fully and with strength against the evils of totalitarianism and tyranny. In just the same way conservative Christian evangelist Timothy LaHaye, head of the American Coalition for Traditional Values, argues that were it not for America 'our contemporary world would have completely lost the battle for the mind and would doubtless live in a totalitarian, one-world, humanistic state'.

The sacred vision of America as the first and last truly Biblical nation has played a key role in its history.

This contiguity between conservative Protestantism and civil religion indicates the roots of American civil religion in Protestant Christianity. But the dogmas of civil religion are significantly different from orthodox Christianity, neglecting as they do Trinitarian belief, and in particular the Incarnation of Jesus Christ who resists evil non-violently. But the dogmas of civil religion are significantly different and is put to death at the hands of Empire, and stressing instead the Deist account of a distant creator God who sets the world in motion, and whose divine purposes for human history, and in particular American history, are revealed as a kind of latent providence. America's God is not so much a God who stands in judgment over the nations, including an unfaithful Israel – the God of the Old Testament – nor the God of the New Testament who intervenes in human history on behalf of the poor and the oppressed in the midst of a decadent and all-powerful Roman empire. He (and it is really a he that is meant here) is rather a national deity, a kind of divine Father of the nation who prospers America and fights with America against her enemies, and who receives the bloody sacrifice of America's own with gratitude. As Robert Bellah argues in his classic essay on American civil religion, it seems to function most effectively when it appeals to a 'transcendent religious reality', a reality which is 'revealed through the experience of the American

people'. It is to this sense of the transcendent significance of the experience of being American that Bush appeals so often in his speeches. America's God is a God who acts on the world in and through America, and through America's military, and not *in* and *through* Jesus Christ and the Spirit who indwells his people.

The sacred vision of America as standing in some crucial and exceptional sense at the end of history, as the first and last truly Biblical nation, has played a key role in the history of America, for the idea that America is the Kingdom of God on Earth, that it stands at the beginning of the Biblically predicted millennium of peace has become deeply established in the American psyche. Bush drew on this imagery for his first inaugural address as President, and even more so in his announcement of an apocalyptic 'war on terror' in which those who were not with America were said to be against her. This sacralisation of a crusade against terrorism and America's enemies is not though simply some strange aberration from the secular drift of American liberalism. On the contrary it has profound and long-standing roots in the religious and political history of America.

Michael Northcott is Professor of Ethics at the University of Edinburgh and a priest in the Scottish Episcopal Church.

A fully referenced text of this article is available from the Editor.

Correction

Poet John Cornford was Darwin's great grandson, not Darwin's grandson as stated in *Sofia* 85. SoF member Bruce Nightingale wrote to ask where he could get hold of more of John Cornford's poems and told the Editor that the poet's son James Cornford 'is current chairman of the Dartington Hall Trust and achieving a great deal'.



John Cornford 1936

The poems are in print in *John Cornford: A Memoir* edited by Pat Sloan (first published by Borderline Press, Dunfermline 1938), available from the Marx Memorial Library shop, 37a Clerkenwell Green, London EC1R 0DU, (0207 253 1485) at £5 plus p&p. www.marx-memorial-library.

The Harm Done by Religion Today

Jennifer Jaynes focuses on religion in education in Britain.

Mr Justice Burton has recently been asked in the British High Court to assess whether the film on global warming produced by the former US presidential candidate and now Nobel Peace Prize winner, Al Gore, *An Inconvenient Truth*, was fit to be shown in our schools. His opinion was that the film is fit to be shown but has 'nine small errors' – statements that are 'not supported by the mainstream scientific consensus'. For instance, the extent of the potential threat of future sea level rises is 'possibly exaggerated'.

When a headmaster in the north east requested to be a 'secular school', education officials told him that is not possible.

Most people would, of course think it matters that pupils in schools are taught verifiable facts. As far as global warming is concerned, it seems to be generally agreed that there is such a phenomenon as global warming induced by human behaviour but there is disagreement as to how soon a catastrophe may occur without remedial human behaviour such as energy saving. Such a film must not frighten children unduly.

Yes, most people would think it matters that pupils are taught verifiable facts – but as far as religion goes any number of totally unverifiable statements may be given as true and the government insists that taxpayers subsidise the practice. That is, taxpayers pay most of the costs of the voluntary-aided Church of England, Roman Catholic, Jewish, Sikh and increasingly, Muslim schools. These schools not only discriminate against accepting local children whose parents are not of that religion but then can teach their doctrines as fact.

It is sometimes thought that these 'faith' schools contrast with state or non-faith schools. Yet *all* state schools have a legal obligation to perform an act of broadly Christian worship every day. Sometimes the

more enlightened schools 'forget' or camouflage it or stress a different religion but OFSTED will actually remove points in their school inspections if this happens. As education officials recently said when a headmaster in the north east requested to be a 'secular' school – this is not possible as religion is so firmly embedded in the educational system.

This becomes a particular problem in teaching about the theory of evolution in science classes if children are also told that the Genesis 'creation in six days six to ten thousand years ago' story is literally true in RE classes such as in Vardy Academies. Teachers have now been given permission to discuss 'creationism' in science lessons. New government guidance says that pupils should be able to ask questions about the theory provided teachers emphasise it has 'no underpinning scientific principles'. However, teachers must also 'respond positively and educationally' to such questions and be 'respectful of students' views, religious or otherwise'. The document, drawn up to clarify the rules after Christian academics challenged the teaching of Darwinism in GCSE biology also says that such beliefs are not 'scientifically testable' and are not valid scientific theories. This teaching depends very much on whether teachers wish to indoctrinate pupils with their own religious views and is very likely to be confusing for the average child. Good teachers of course would not indoctrinate but there is much scope for those who wish to proselytise with a 'nod and a wink'.

The National Secular Society recently gained exemption for sixth formers to exclude themselves from worship. This took a major effort in parliament. So here there is a logical contradiction that such sixth formers will have worked out for themselves: Anglicans are confirmed at the age of about 14 often. Yet students who decide at 16 when they reach the sixth form or before that they see no evidence for the existence of any one of the various deities that have been put before them and are therefore atheists, are treated as incapable of such clarity of opinion. It is rather insulting to them.

Teachers in primary schools are anyway struggling to balance 'inclusiveness' with respect for different faiths and cultures according to the report, *Community Soundings* by Cambridge University's Primary Review Group. The report found 'Religion is an inescapable element in the current cultural melting pot. Jewish, Muslim and Christian religious leaders stated, as is obvious, to them faith was a fact of cultural life and a necessary part of education.' The Cambridge review called for recognition in schools that 'faith of one kind or another is intrinsic to culture and that it needs to be respected, whatever form it takes.' Teachers should emphasise the common ground between the major faiths, in particular the monotheistic ones. It is very unlikely, unfortunately, they will include Sigmund Freud's cogent analysis of Judaism, Christianity and Islam: monotheistic religions. He pointed out that they are all patriarchal, in that they involve a projected father figure. He further says they all have aspects of obsessional neurosis and hence are anxiety-reducing. Just think of rosary beads and the repetitive nature of the words of weekly or daily services.

'Multi-culturalism' often means that the less culturally advanced parts of a religion have not been not criticised enough.

Kate and Gerry McCann constantly attend RC services to pray for the return of their daughter Madeleine. I wonder what they actually believe 'God' will do. Is he/she/it amenable to persuasion?

Will he return the child if they have been 'good'? Will he change the laws of physics and physiology? To put it in these terms highlights the contradictions for the McCanns, both intelligent people whose minds are still in straitjackets. What is clear is they are receiving social support from friends and neighbours at the church services and that is no doubt very helpful for them.

State schools must teach six of the major religions in RE. Teachers should lay out the basic tenets and practices. At least children realise it is very hard to 'know' that any particular one is absolutely true when all the others have devoted adherents. It can be upsetting however. I heard a secular Hindu father on Radio 4 saying his daughter had been taught at school about the caste system. She knew her father had been in a particular one and it was one of the



lower ones. She found this very difficult to take in. Some Muslim children are under more pressure than most because many attend madrassas, or religious schools as well as the primary schools.

Britain has tried to be very tolerant, under the banner of multi-culturalism. Yet this often means that the less culturally advanced parts of a religion have not been not criticised enough. For instance, the physical punishment used by some Afro-Caribbean evangelical communities, even considering children to harbour evil spirits which need thrashing out, as seen in cases that come to public notice eventually such as Victoria Climbié's. Some Asian families insist their daughters enter forced marriages and take them abroad pretending to go on holiday. This is gradually being outlawed but is taking a long time. FGM or female genital mutilation is now technically illegal but it still goes on and some girls are taken abroad to undergo it.

The word 'education' is derived from the Latin *e-ducere*, to lead out, to think for themselves. Schools should be eager to teach pupils to think for themselves and not take received 'wisdom' based on the efforts of people many centuries ago to make sense of the world, on trust. How can this happen of course when many teachers have not gained intellectual maturity and are still suffering from their own childhood indoctrination? It's not only indoctrination children may suffer from. I was very struck (so to speak) by the following account by Prof. Laurie Taylor when I read it recently:

'Corporal punishment at my Catholic boarding school had a mathematical precision. A small misdemeanour in class, a failure to remember the middle line of a poem or the correct answer to a catechism question earned a single slap of the cane. But these small misdemeanours were aggregated and when they reached a total of six, the deviant would

be sent to see the headmaster for more thorough and extended punishment...

In this ritual, the headmaster always stood slightly across the front of your body so that he could grasp your arm with one of his hands and thus prevent you dropping it down to your side as if filled with pain. He then drew the cane back over his head with the other hand and brought it down towards you in a perfect arc, giving a final accelerated swish at the very end which made you think for a second.

Each of the twelve strokes was identical. No words were said. His ability to dispense pain and your ability to accept pain created a perverse mutuality. At the end, as you were dismissed, you felt that you had been part of a scene from a play, a scene in which both participants knew their lines and their moves. Is this really the way to teach morality and good behaviour?

Quite often, people casually refer to Britain as a democracy. In my opinion, this is a very loose use of the term. Apart from the lack of an elected head of state and an elected second chamber which a modern democracy would possess, we have an established church. The Queen is the Supreme Governor of the Church of England and 26 Anglican Bishops hold seats in the House of Lords. This is actually an outrage – it is the only Western democracy that possesses religious persons in the legislature by nature of their office. Also, sittings of the Houses of Parliament start with prayers and up till now, the prime minister has wasted time he should spend governing, deciding which bishops to appoint. The church should be disestablished and as in the USA and France, there should be separation of church and state. Thanks to Charles Bradlaugh, who founded the National Secular Society in 1866 and his exhausting work in the late C19, at least new MPs can affirm instead of swearing on the bible though they still have to swear allegiance to the queen and her heirs rather than promising to work for the good of the country and their constituents.

Technically the queen is queen of everybody. She should rule over everyone equally, Her church, however, sees a portion of the population as intrinsically inferior. I refer of course to that 5-10% that is homosexual. Women are a bit inferior (if they are not royal) but at least they are now allowed to act as priests themselves (should they want to spend their time in a misogynistic institution) if not become bishops yet. Dawn French has said that when *The Vicar of Dibley* began, the TV programme wherein she plays a female vicar, she received a great deal of very

unpleasant correspondence from Christian gentlemen. She seemed a bit surprised but in my experience the religious can become very nasty when their prejudices are laid raw.

The Church of England acts as if its leaders are moral exemplars – and yet they are on the verge of splitting over the issue of gay priests and bishops. Not only that, the EU has sent out a working directive that insists that gays are treated equally in the workplace – this is clearly a civilised move. Yet the Church of England got itself opt outs, so that it can legally discriminate against homosexuals in its churches and schools. We – everybody else, can't legally – not that I imagine we would want to; but the Church of England is allowed to behave in this appallingly immoral way and still expects to be treated with reverence by everyone else. A recent report notes that some gay adolescents in Catholic and Anglican schools are bullied a great deal.

The Church of England was aided and abetted in this by Tony Blair's government. He flaunts his Anglo-Catholicism but seemed unaware that when he was following George Bush to an illegal war in Iraq, his prayers were answered by a different god than the Catholic and the Anglican one. Their gods were both telling their leaders on earth that attacking Iraq would be wrong. This is a prime example of the religious managing to find their deity happening to agree with what they want.

Religious people have to use quite a lot of defence mechanisms to try and force their intelligence and education into sustaining a belief in the incredible. I would like to end by quoting Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury from a recent speech he gave at Swansea University on 14th October. He said that religion could not be viewed from a scientific point of view because belief in God was unconditional. I think he is worried about the recent upsurge of support for the writings of authors such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens. For someone who prides himself on being an Oxford academic, this amounts to a distortion of his intellect and a refusal to engage with the real issues. It is only by viewing religion from a scientific point of view that humanists and rationalists have been able to counter its worst attacks on a civilised way of life and harm for the human rights of all humans. This work will clearly need to continue for some time to come.

Jennifer Jaynes is the Ethical Society Librarian at the Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL.



Please send your letters to:

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

Thank you

Dear Editor,

At this year's Conference, members of the Network kindly presented me with some very acceptable bottles of wine, and a pair of fine wine glasses. Only when I got home and unpacked them did I see that they are engraved with the SoF logo. This is just to say a heartfelt general thank you: the friendship and support of other members over the years has meant as much to me as to anyone. We have done well to reach and pass our twentieth anniversary.

*Yours ever
 Don Cupitt
 Emmanuel College, Cambridge*

Not liberal!

Dear Editor

I was very grateful for Penny Mawdsley's review of my book *Doing Theology in Altah Ali Park*. However, I was a bit alarmed that she assumed I was a liberal. I have never been a liberal either theologically or politically. I have always been an orthodox Catholic and a socialist. If I gave the impression of being a liberal, I apologise.

*Yours
 Ken Leech
 89 Manchester Road, Mossley OL5 9LZ*

A secular theodicy

Dear Editor,

It has often struck me that the task of finding an 'alternative theodicy' (Tim Jackson) or a spirituality which 're-sacralises the earth' (Jonathon Porritt) is the key challenge facing the post-religious. To anyone having grown up under the 'sacred canopy' of religious meaning the spiritual emptiness that lies beyond, or 'with-out' it, must seem unbearable. Yet, as one who has made this transition, the answer is that this is not so.

A better metaphor than 'canopy' would be 'conveyor belt': once one has had the courage to step off the grand Judaeo-Christian (and, one must add, Islamic) conveyor of predestined purposefulness, with its busy anticipatory activity, the immediate impact is not one of emptiness but 'earthiness' – a coming down to earth, to a calmer awareness of the present moment; that this is it, everything. This sense is not without precedents in religious

spirituality: one thinks of the 'quietism' of De Caussade and, further a-field, Buddha, whose greatest sermon was simply to point to the lotus flower. For me

earth spirituality now has three main strands: *the aesthetic impact* of the natural world in its awesome presence – time to savour what nature presents; *the conceptual understanding of the evolutionary processes* that have brought us to the present moment – time to understand nature's genesis; *the ontological (or existential) individuality of entities* which now stand before us in the unique depth of inviolable otherness or wildness – time to defer to what nature is.

In contrast to the religious fantasies of transcendence, the earth/nature confronts us with the mystery of complexity – of which we are a part, not as masters of the world but its tenants. As such, our life is a gift handed on through the profligacy of nature, and it is only from this perspective that we can make sense of it; not through consuming but through giving – not primarily of materials but of our self, our time, talents, skills, knowledge and affections; not for any purpose or merit but as its own mode of satisfaction.

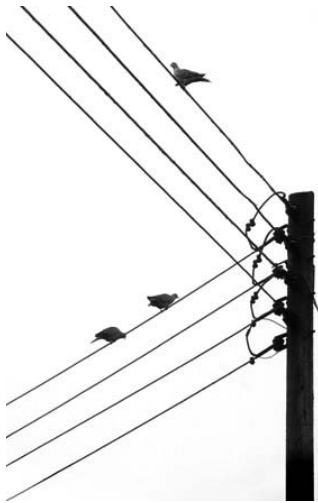
All this has been said better by Don Cupitt and others, which itself illustrates why we need a Sea of Faith spirituality. This need is not just as a novel response to environmental challenges, though this gives added urgency, but because of how we now can best understand reality and the inadequacy of traditional religious theodicies.

*Yours
 Dominic Kirkham
 94 Clarendon Road, Manchester M34 5SE*

A Shibboleth of SoF?

Dear Editor

Most members of Sea of Faith would probably pride themselves on disdaining other people's shibboleths, but maybe they tend not to notice their own. This seemed very evident to me in the September issue of *Sofia*. Jonathan Porritt writes of 'bringing the sacred back into our understanding of what we owe the living planet and all life forms with which we share it.' I do not think that we owe anything to the smallpox virus, and hope that we have in fact caused its extinction. If viruses are too small to count as a life form in this sense, there are plenty of larger pathogenic parasites that I would be equally pleased to see extinct. And I would have considerable sympathy with an Indian villager with a gun whose village is menaced by a man-eating tiger. So Cardinal Martino cannot be entirely wrong in according priority to mankind. The use of a picture of two giraffes caressing each other has a big 'aagh factor', and although one



would not want to see giraffes become extinct, nevertheless they are part of an ecological system that on a geological time scale can only be temporary. Doubtless it would have been equally possible to drool about two dinosaurs caressing one another. To worry unduly about species extinctions could even lead to doubts

about St Patrick's green credentials for freeing the Emerald Isle from snakes!

The over-riding problem is our attitude to time. Stephanie Dowrick refers to a saying of Epictetus: 'human beings are not disturbed by events (or things), but by the view we take of them'. People seem to have a horror of the idea of anything coming to an end. Jonathan Porritt is horrified by the idea of Jim Lovelock that it is already too late to do anything about global warming. But maybe it has always been impracticable to avert it since the start of the industrial revolution! And even if there is still time to do anything about global warming, there must be some other geo-catastrophe that will bring to an end the present phase of the biosphere, as it must end some-time. Ever since my conception it has been too late to prevent my death. What matters is not that things come to an end, but what is their quality during their lifetime. Eternal life does not consist of living for an infinite number of years (a horrid idea really); it is a quality of life here and now. 'This is life eternal that they should know thee the one true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent'.

Eric Whittaker

60 Exeter Road, Kidlington, Oxon OX5 2DZ

What is human?

Dear Editor,

The Humanist David Warden wonders what is meant by 'religion'. I wondered what is meant by 'human' and I think (at least, at this time of writing) that though we share a great deal with other animals there are some characteristics which make us distinctly human. Firstly, we humans like to see structures and patterns in things and events. In fact we do not seem to be comfortable with experiencing one event after another as purely random events. We like to see expected reactions to our actions. In the family home if a child does something which they have been told not to do, they like to have the expected punishment and if there is no consistent reaction to the misdeed a child becomes very confused. If an adult breaks the tribal or national rules, taboos, norms, legislation, they know they have done so and unpleasant consequences will (or should) follow.

Logical reasoning is then applied to our apparent need to see that unpleasant effects should be consequent upon misbehaviour, so if an unpleasant occurrence happens randomly our pattern is spoiled and somehow needs to be mentally corrected – hence we have developed notions of karma or divine powers who will get us in the end (or get our offspring). What human justice cannot effect is then replaced by supra-human forms of justice. This is done by a god or gods, by the fates or the world's design or the very laws of nature under which we all live. So here is, I think, one strand of what is meant by the term religion.

We humans have other strings to our bows: firstly, we have empathy as part of our natures. Empathy is, I think, a very basic instinct. It is the one which makes a parent respond to the cry of their young. In fact, some mothers will experience pain if they try to resist the cry of their baby. Empathy is the instinct which makes one person cry or smile if another is hurt or happy. Without this instinct survival would be precarious. At this very basic level I am sure animals possess empathy too. But we humans learn to control and harness many of our instincts for logical and cultural reasons and we certainly control our empathetic responses to some people or some situations – sometimes not always for their good. I suspect that an animal never seeks to control its instinctive empathy.

We humans and other animals have instinctive empathy not only with other people or animals, but with the environment around us so that we find pleasure or fear in it. This of course is developed in a variety of ways, according to our cultures, our time in history, etc – hence the variations in the arts across the globe. But unlike other animals we make connections in our logical, pattern-making minds between our empathy and our notions of justice, rewards, punishment and divine or supra-human forces. And it is this human combination of instincts and logical reasoning which produces part of what is called religion. I suspect that no animal has a notion of religion, whereas humans the world over have a sense of the logical need for an extra dimension to their worlds. Religion is a human-only way of approaching the world and understanding our lives within it. We have other important parts to our nature, such as sympathy and language which both clearly exist among other animals but are far less developed in them than they are in us.

Children are born with the latent ability to sympathise, just as they have latent within them an ability to speak. But these abilities need time and support to develop. One of the tests of childhood development is to see whether or not they are able to stand in another person's shoes and see things from a different perspective. That is, sympathy needs encouragement to develop fully. To a large extent sympathy has variations which are culturally based. I guess that a child brought up five hundred years ago in Britain would have been encouraged to help his fellow Britons but probably taught to regard other races as non-human. Sympathy for them would be seen as a lack of proper patriotism at least, and probably worse. I surmise, most animals lack sympathy for those different from themselves but it is a skill which they cannot acquire however hard any human tried to encourage it.

The connection of sympathy with the notion of justice then produces versions of morality – and for many people the next logical connection has to be with their religious ideas. Hence full-blown religion as a force in the lives of many humans. My conclusion is that although we humans are clearly animals it is the connections inside our brains which produce some really interesting differences between us and all the rest of the animal kingdom, and the biggest difference is actually religion – I cannot see any evidence that any animal has any made any connection between their instinctive response to the world around them and a sense of the necessity for morality and ultimate justice to exist.

*Yours faithfully
Joanna Clark*

2 Coopers Court, Sherborne, Dorset DT9 4HU

A Second and Final Letter From God

Dear Humans,

God here again (and again, as always, via one of you). In my first letter, I asked you to stop trying to contact me and instead, to contact one another. The result was encouraging and it increased my faith in your ability to change. Thank you for your understanding and effort. If you would like to have a far better ‘prop’ than I could ever be, then look to the best thoughts, your own and others’, which you may be able to use to do some good. As this will be my final letter to you, I thought I would ask you to try to make some more changes.

You all know that you are but one of the many thousands of different animals living on the earth, but what many of you may not have realised is that, of all the animals, you have been (and are), the most destructive. Ever since you evolved into humans, much of your behaviour has saddened me. If some of you are saying, ‘Yes, we have behaved badly at times but what about the synagogues, cathedrals, mosques, temples, churches and meeting houses we have built in which to worship you, and what about the wonderful music and hymns we have composed in order to glorify you?’ my reply would be, ‘You have done all of those things for the benefit of yourselves. My cathedral (mosque, temple or whatever) is the whole of the universe and my music comes from the earth’s thrushes, cicadas, frogs, donkeys, etc. and should I want more volume, I can always listen to thunder, monsoon rain, a volcanic eruption or a hurricane.’

I know that many of you have done some wonderful things, both as individuals and in cooperation with others. However, you need to spend much more of your time working to bring to an end your appalling history of torturing, maiming and killing one another and the destruction of one another’s lands and buildings. Add to that, the increasing human population and the polluting of the earth’s air, water and soil, and you have some idea of the range of your problems; problems which can be dealt with by you alone. I say ‘you alone’ because I have never helped you in the past and nor will I in the future; a decision I wisely made for your own good. You must surely have noticed that all the other animals have learnt

to rely entirely on themselves and on one another; they have never sought help from me and so their world is entirely within them and all around them.

As I don’t believe in miracles (and I hope you don’t), I will wait patiently for any sign of a lasting change. Do not forget that I have an infinite amount of time but you do not. Once again, yours sincerely and I hope, helpfully,

*God
via Peter Mavromatis*

Are we the Universe taking a peek at itself?

Dear Editor,

In previous editions of the magazine Anthony Freeman has written much about consciousness and mystical experience. Sometimes the impression is given that he would secretly rather like to be able to rediscover that some aspects of this experience could actually be given the name ‘God’, suitably demythologised.

The discussion about what people’s consciousness actually is and what it reveals reminds me of a phrase from a book by Alan Watts, called, I think, ‘This Is It’, which I read as a theological student back in the 1970’s. He describes various aspects of religious experience, especially from the point of view of the then emerging interest in Zen Buddhism.

At one point Watts refers to the awareness or insights gained in contemplative meditation as something along the lines of ‘the Universe taking a peek at itself’.

Maybe we humans are in the very early stages of, at least potentially, developing a supra personal consciousness analogous to what Buddhism calls Enlightenment.

*Nicholas Smith
Maussane Les Alpilles, France*

For copies and more
information about

THE FOUR GOSPELS AND OTHER TEXTS

A Critical Handbook of the New Testament

by Sea of Faith member Dick Butler

published by the Barbican Press and
reviewed in the July issue of *Sofia* by Kit
Widdows

go to

www.the-four-gospels.co.uk

Copies cost £10 each incl. packing & postage

Current Affair

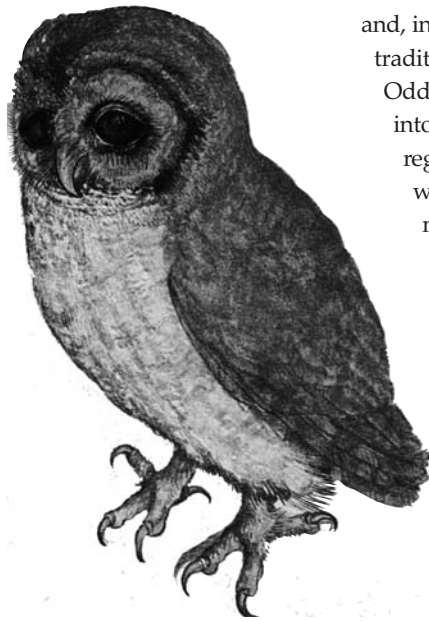
Comment by Owl

SoF Conference 2007 was at the cutting edge not least in offering a late-night viewing of Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* before it hit the British headlines as an educational hot potato. Adult reaction this side of the pond has been, on the whole, balanced and restrained. Most people (even those who appreciated Rory Bremner's brilliantly funny satire on the film) are willing to give Al the time of day on the major issues, while spluttering 'Hey, wait a minute!' when the slickness of the presentation seems to be allowing wave upon wave of 'scientific' data to pass unexamined. The 'poor little rich boy' leitmotif, though nauseating, can also be tolerated, it appears, if the goal is to alert those blinkered Americans to the enormity of practically everything about their polar-bear threatening lives.

In her article in this issue Jennifer Jeynes reminds us what happened next. Our great and good in education bought the film in bulk, prescribing it for school viewing. A British parent brought the matter to court, outraged at the risk of having his child 'brainwashed'. The judge ruled that the film could still be shown, but only with accompanying notes to explain it was expressing one point of view. Then the 'high-minded' parent was discovered to have been financed by some anti-green agency with murky vested interests. So far so depressing.

Even more sinister from a SoF perspective, however, is that the flood-gates are now open to flat-earthers who want class-time for reference to creationism and 'intelligent design', on the basis that all our non-creationist biology, archaeology, astronomy – indeed all of our science post-Descartes and post-Darwin – is based on 'one point of view'. We can turn purple and point out that slavery and the subjection of women are similarly supported by one point of view, but that might not get us anywhere. What's to be done? *Can* anything be done? Owl, who's eaves-dropped on quite a few class-rooms, is not sanguine, but not totally without hope either.

For one thing, newspapers always assume that school lessons are 'delivered' – in the same way that the newspaper itself is delivered: pushed through a slot by one person and picked up by another. But just because every social and political function (health care, policing etc, as well as education) is currently described in terms of delivery or non-delivery doesn't mean we have to accept this model as normative. Our debate should concentrate not on what gets government imprimatur and can therefore be 'delivered', but once more on the education of teachers themselves, allowing



them to reclaim the academic authority of 'masters' and, in consequence, the autonomy which was traditionally the hallmark of a profession.

Oddballs and weirdos did sometimes wander into the classrooms of the past, but a self-regulating body was in a strong position to weed them out. In terms of literacy, numeracy, and general knowledge about the world, 'failing schools' were unheard of.

Another happy thought: the bolshie young are naturally sceptical, good at arguing, quick to realise that all ideas and opinions are not equally tenable. The teachers' job is to foster logical thinking, and the critical faculty that is vital especially in dealing with (blatantly or covertly) polemical material. The current grip of loopy religion on large patches of America is certainly a cause for alarm, however. We know it's catching. How strong will our British immunity prove to be? Though a 'monkey trial' here is unlikely, the fictional reference to that American incident reminds us starkly that 'those who cause trouble in their house' are doomed to 'inherit the wind.' 'Trouble' can be fomented actively, but may also arise from apathy, or lack of awareness of the signs of the times.

On Guy Fawkes Day Jim White in the Daily Telegraph has alerted us to *Jesus Camp*, a new documentary, 'a scary movie that should frighten us all'. Somewhere in the American Midwest, a bunch of normal teenagers arriving for summer fun are 'subjected to weeks of systematic brainwashing', which 'could not be more fundamentalist if it were taking place in Finsbury Park and featuring a mad mullah.' Democracy, voting – these are useless, since only the Bible has the answers. 'This is sharia law by another name.'

America is vast, of course, and (apart from the matter of their reverence for Old Glory) it's hard to frame any sentence beginning 'Americans . . .' or even 'Most Americans . . .' that's even half-way accurate. One of Owl's fledglings, arriving to begin an Arts course in a Florida university, faced a hefty compulsory component called 'Western Heritage' – the history of ideas from Plato to Marx – taught, not 'delivered'. Embarrassing title? Wouldn't sell here? If not, why not?

A reader enquired if Owl was the Editor. Owl is not the Editor. To wit Owl is independent.

Tom Rubens reviews

Debating Humanism

edited by Dolan Cummings,

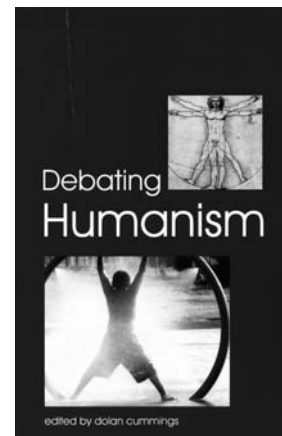
Imprint Academic (Exeter). 2006. 124 pages. £8.95. ISBN: 1845400690.

As is implied by the title of this collection of essays, humanism is seen by humanists as a position constantly open to discussion, revision, amendment and exchange of viewpoint. In the words of the collection's editor, Dolan Cummings, 'Without continuing debate and reflection, humanism cannot survive as a way of understanding and engaging with the world.' Hence humanism cannot be dogmatic, as Frank Furedi emphasises in 'The Legacy of Humanism', but should be, as Furedi adds, 'an open-ended perspective that seeks to grasp the truth through human experience.' Such a perspective clearly couples humanism with genuine scientific procedure. This is stressed by A.C. Grayling in 'Humanism, Religion and Ethics'; he defines the humanist world-view as one which 'proportions theory to evidence, waits on experiment, and is undogmatic and professionally ready to be refuted by countervailing evidence'. Similarly, Daphne Patai, in 'The Fading Face of Humanism', numbers among the defining characteristics of humanism 'reasoned discourse, evidence instead of dogma, and self-correction in place of doctrinal rigidity'.

However, this book provides much more than affirmations of humanism's rational and scientific temper. Given the emphasis on debate, it openly explores issues and problems which confront the present-day humanist. One of these problems is the general loss of confidence in mankind, evident in a good deal of recent thought. Once more, Furedi is a main commentator, noting the growth of misanthropy, of deep misgivings about where society is going, and of a preoccupation with human weakness and perversity. Furedi's response is to call for a re-assertion of humanity's great achievements of both past and present, and for a general accentuation of the positive, which includes constructively learning from mistakes.

The issue of lack of confidence is also taken up by Dennis Hayes in 'Re-humanising Education,' where he discusses the waning faith, in Britain, in the efficacy of education, and in relation to all social classes. This attitude, he argues, has led to a narrowing of educational methods, in line with a reduction in educational expectations. As a remedy, he advocates a capacious liberal education for all.

A closely related problem – mankind's wholesale alienation from itself – is examined by Josie Appleton in 'Recentring Humanity'. This alienation has again been manifest in recent thought, especially in ethical, environmental and ecological studies, with the down-playing of human concerns in favour of those for other animals and the non-human world in general. Appleton urges a return to focussing on human standpoints, values and aspirations, in all their complexity and poignancy.



reviews

Yet another issue, discussed by Daphne Patai (q.v.), and by Kenan Malik in 'Multiculturalism and the Politics of Identity,' is the

growth of identity politics. The latter, it is argued, seeks to subsume personhood under a group definition of some kind: religious, racial, ethnic, national. Such thinking threatens the intellectual integrity and autonomy of the individual, which have always been pivotal components in humanist thinking. Also, because it is separatist, it undermines the universalist and integrative values on which humanism is traditionally based. A further objection, made by Malik, is that it impedes political progress, since its conception of social solidarity is unconnected with goals for changing the existing political system.

Partly in response to the above problems, a number of political recommendations are made. Appleton sees the task of politics as that of combating mankind's feeling of self-estrangement; while Malik hopes that political commitment to ending poverty and injustice will prevail over separatist forms of cultural attachment. Also, Bob Brecher in 'The Politics of Humanism,' argues that an effective humanism cannot escape being political and that the political outlook most appropriate to it is socialism.

Aside from politics, there are references to religion. Grayling is largely negative in his comments, seeing religious doctrines as intellectually misleading. But Dylan Evans, in 'Secular Fundamentalism' is more accommodating, claiming that religions have value as works of art, as 'human creations that give wonderful testimony to the remarkable creativity and inventiveness of their creator'. Simon Blackburn, in 'Humanism and the Transcendental,' makes virtually the same point: one, incidentally, that is actually quite traditional in atheistic philosophy expressed by Schopenhauer in the 19th century and Santayana in the early 20th.

All in all, the collection is an impressively wide-ranging treatment of its subject. Despite the various pressures it is under, humanism emerges as basically stalwart and steadfast. It is, avers Grayling, the project of 'trying to understand human nature and the human condition, and on that basis to identify the good for the human being, and to act to bring it about for himself and others.'

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

Philip Knight reviews

Philosophy as Cultural Politics: Philosophical Papers Vol 4

by Richard Rorty

Cambridge University Press. 2007. Pbk. £15.99. ISBN: 0521698359.

On June 8th 2007 the Sea of Faith Movement lost an important philosophical ally with the death of the American neo-pragmatist, Richard Rorty. Here I want to express my own appreciation of his work through a brief account of the key idea that animated it and make reference to his recent writings about religion. I hope I create sufficient curiosity that readers will wish to explore Rorty's works for themselves.

The key idea for which Rorty is famous is anti-representationalism, an idea akin to Don Cupitt's non-realism. Rorty claims that human knowledge is not to be understood as finding the right mental or linguistic representation by which to depict or describe the non-mental and the non-linguistic world. The mind and language are not like mirrors reflecting or representing the world for our inspection. The view that they are, with its correspondence theory of truth and its various philosophical distinctions such as appearance-reality, subject-object, value-fact, and emotional-rational has held Western philosophical culture captive for far too long. For Rorty, anti-realism, idealism and a coherence theory of truth are equally unwelcome consequences of representational thinking. Indeed, his view that it is unhelpful to consider language as providing knowledge by representing non-linguistic reality, does not mean that language can break free of the causal impacts made by people and things. Yet, of course, people and things are always contextualised and re-contextualised in language. It is, however, only thinking representationally that would lead one to suppose that there is a gap between causal impacts and contextualisation. Rorty's anti-representationalist sees no such gap. For her, Rorty writes, in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics: Philosophical Papers Vol 4* published just before his death, nothing can 'put us in relation to an object different than that of simply talking about that object in sentences whose truth we have taken into our lives.' (p. 139).

This is not the place to discuss the debates that have forged a Rortyan take on the question of truth but his take on truth exemplifies his anti-

representationalist position well. He is clear that, 'Everybody

knows that the difference between true and false beliefs is as important as that between nourishing and poisonous food' (p. 89) However, for 'the man who killed truth', as Rorty has been described, it is important that we refuse the representationalist view of truth. To fail to do so is to see truth as something non-human, a surrogate for the position once held by God, something about which it makes sense to talk about getting closer to, a non-human reality behind the appearances which has been waiting for the correct language to come along and describe. Rather, anti-representationalists translate such 'truth talk' as 'the love of reaching intersubjective agreement, the love of getting mastery over a recalcitrant set of data, the love of winning arguments, and the love of synthesising little theories into big ones.' (p. 35) Instead of speaking of progress, for example, in terms of getting closer to the realist's 'redemptive truth', Rorty suggests that we understand progress as individuals and communities coming up with new and imaginative ways of solving problems and creating greater human solidarity and more human happiness. The only uses of 'truth' worth talking about are those everyday uses which endorse or commend beliefs and caution against other beliefs (a belief being simply a rule for action) in the process of inferential justification present in everyday conversation. 'Information [and hence knowledge that can be either true or false] came into the universe,' Rorty writes, 'when the first hominids began to justify their actions to one another by making assertions and backing up those assertions with further assertions.' (p. 113) For an anti-representationalist it does not much matter whether we talk of a true belief or a belief that we can justify to a given audience. 'The ability to wield the concept of 'true belief', notes Rorty, 'is a necessary condition for being a user of language.' (p. 89). It is not a warrant of access to the really real as representationalists might have us believe.



reviews

Rorty urges us to try out an anti-representational way of thinking simply because of the benefits it produces, ridding us of philosophical problems and distinctions that have become more trouble than they are worth. However, 'If one's heart leads one toward realism,' Rorty writes, 'then one will take representationalism... seriously.' (p. 144) Emotional attractiveness rather than knock-down argument carries the weight of the decision between representationalism and anti-representationalism. The same, Rorty argues, goes for whether one continues to be religious or not.

One reason for discussing Rorty's *Philosophy as Cultural Politics* here is that the opening section of this, his last book, brings together two of his recent writings on religion. Rorty reiterates his earlier claim that people have a right to hold religious beliefs as long as they do so in private. He notes that, 'It is never an objection to a religious belief that there is no evidence for it. The only possible objection to it can be that it intrudes an individual project into a social and cooperative project, and thereby offends against ... one's responsibility to cooperate with other human beings.' (p 35) For an anti-representationalist, any expression, even those of the religious realist, can have a sense if you give it one but some expressions complicate the narratives which presently enable us to achieve the social purposes we currently have. That is not to deny that a narrative about God has served human purposes usefully in the past but now it is a relic we can do without, given our current need for social co-operation.

For Rorty, religious belief remains a possibility for private devotion but we are better off understanding it, like every other set of beliefs, as a feature of cultural politics rather than a variety of ontological speculation, for there are no neutral social norms that would allow us to regulate discussion about questions such as 'Does God exist?' as if a really real God required to be talked about in a specific way still to be decided. This is an idea that does not work for anti-representationalists because, for them, we only know the items we do (including God) through the language we use to talk about them. All such language is a human social affair belonging to the realm of cultural politics and within which any religious language game can be played with its own internal criteria of truth and falsity but without ontological implications beyond the language game being played.

This is an argument Rorty develops in perhaps his most important essay on religious belief, 'Cultural Politics and the Question of the Existence of God' (pp. 3-26). Here, Rorty offers a concise introduction to the thought of Robert Brandom, which Rorty sees as an extension of his own anti-representationalism, and places his account of religious belief within it. In this context, we cut ourselves off from all varieties of realist God-talk 'not because of an ontological fact about... God [i.e. that God does not exist after all] but because of sociological facts about the unavailability of norms to regulate discussion.' (p. 23) Without such social norms realist religious belief must remain a private affair. But, in my view, this leaves entirely open the extent to which a non-realist outlook which shares Rorty's anti-representationalism might attempt to re-weave a religious narrative into the socio-political fabric of human life.



Richard Rorty

Anyone who has already read some of Rorty's work will know that he writes with a lucid and often playful style. They will know that he is at home discussing the range of issues that interest philosophical culture and that he slides effortlessly across the analytic-continental philosophical divide. If you are someone who thinks that knowledge has no non-human foundation, that creating human solidarity is more important than knowledge of something non-human and that such solidarity is best served by persuading the emotions to allow us to consider ever wider groups of people as 'part of us' then you will be grateful to Rorty for providing a clear articulation of this position. Like me, your gratitude will be equally evident if you are someone who wishes to clear the religious garden of its metaphysical and ontological weeds in order to allow its non-realist flowers to bloom. Just as there are many varieties of orchid, much loved by Rorty, so there are many ways in which Rorty has contributed to the general conversation of humankind. Assisting the religious non-realist gardener is just one such contribution for which many of us are deeply thankful.

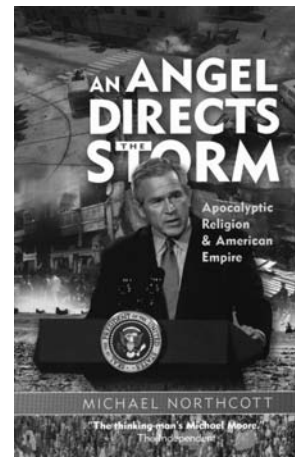
Dr. Philip Knight, who wrote his PhD on Rorty and *Sea of Faith Non-Realism*, teaches Religious Education in Canterbury. For a more detailed discussion of Rorty's account of truth see my chapter 'Religious Belief without Representational Truth' in *Time and Tide: Sea of Faith Beyond the Millennium* (O Books, 2001).

Jason C. Bivins reviews

An Angel Directs the Storm: Apocalyptic Religion and American Empire

by Michael Northcott

SCM Press (London).2007. £12. 99. 200 pages. ISBN: 978033404116.



reviews

Americans are often uninterested in exploring the languages and concepts used uncritically to explain and justify our actions. Michael Northcott's book describes the consequences of such lack of interest, combining polemic and theology to argue that American public religion 'rests upon a tragic deformation of true Christianity' (12). His is criticism in the voice of practitioner rather than dispassionate observer, calling for 'a new Exodus of Christians in America' (12). As a writer about American religion and politics, and as an American who is (along with many millions of others) outraged over Bush Inc.'s anti-democratic thuggery, I find Northcott's book to be bracing. To a lesser extent, the book is also flawed.

One recurring problem is Northcott's tendency to conflate disparate phenomena. There is no denying that an apocalyptic tone has become ascendant in certain quarters of American Christianity, that this vision partly shapes public life, and that Bush's presidency is a loathsome, at times imperial one. Indeed, dozens of books have made such claims. Northcott's contribution is his suggestion that this current predicament is the natural culmination of long-standing historical processes. He generates a laundry list of villains, leaving an impression that every category, individual, committee, or corporation named here – and positioned on the 'wrong' side of the religio-political divide – partakes and participates in a singular force whose momentum can only be explained by the term 'apocalyptic religion.' Well, no.

We know that Bush flaunts his piety, and that religious conservatives have influenced his policies. Yet we know just as surely that the oft-discussed 'neo-cons' (11) – like Wolfowitz, Perle, and Rumsfeld – are, however dastardly, mostly uninterested in the actual beliefs of the Christian Right.¹ Apocalyptic religion has a powerful role, but the myriad wrongdoings of the Bush administration – the No Child Left Behind act, 'permanent' tax cuts, or the suspension of *habeas corpus* – cannot be adduced to this influence alone. Perhaps Northcott makes such claims because he tends to see Southern and conservative Protestantism as monolithic (he often refers to Southern Baptists, 'conservative churches,' and 'mega-churches' as if they were coterminous and uniformly pro-Bush, pro-war). I live in a so-called red state in the American South, and this is simply not the case (thank God).

The point is not that Northcott is wholly wrong but that he sometimes overstates his case by trampling over important distinctions and complexities in American religion and politics. This culture is made up not just of

fundaments but of fault lines, not just of zealots but of tortured consciences.

Consider another example among many: Northcott rails against the purported joint influence of unregulated market theory and dispensationalism on Bush's politics (82). I do not disagree with Northcott that these influences are lamentable; yet while F.W. Hayek may mingle with John Nelson Darby in the very deepest pools of cultural influence, those espousing neoconservative economics are largely dismissive of dispensationalism (other than as expedient, which is not Northcott's point). In other words, not all the pieces fit together so easily, not all dots connect inexorably; such perfect coherence cannot explain our American mess.

A related problem is Northcott's occasional misrepresentation of American religion and politics. He gets more right than wrong yet he also indulges in overblown rhetoric and sloppy history, undercutting the force of his claims. Northcott finds it revealing that Bush uses language deriving from Puritan millennialists like John Winthrop. Yet such imagery is so ubiquitous in American public life, I can scarcely imagine any President failing to use it in the aftermath of 9/11. Northcott's history careens between Puritan commonwealths, nineteenth-century revivals, and the 'War on Terror' as if their similarities were self-evident. Yet shared language alone does not make for much substantive connection between these different eras, and many of Northcott's assertions obscure more than they illuminate. We are told further that Americans are now at war with 'the Muslims,' a conflict consistent with the 'millenarian beliefs . . . [that are] a dominant feature of the modern American evangelical and fundamentalist imaginary.' Such statements are off-base and overly general. Evangelicalism and fundamentalism are different, with – especially with the former – a good deal of variance on socio-political issues.

Such sloppiness is frustrating because Northcott does capture the interplay between a certain kind of patriotism, sacrificial themes, and apocalyptic imagery in American culture. Yet his insights are sullied by his zeal to force too many disparate phenomena into this framework. It may be, for example, that American culture is more replete with tropes of fear and destruction than others, but these claims are too often simply asserted and left without proper substantiation and development. Instead, Northcott seems frequently

content with potshots suggesting American apocalyptic believers are 'like Osama bin Laden' (10). Of course it is true that the Bush administration is reckless and imperialist, but this kind of claim is beneath a writer of Northcott's intelligence. Not all religious imaginings of violence are equivalent, and only someone unconcerned with the nuances of different religious traditions would make the inflammatory claim that American apocalyptic Christianity is 'remarkably reminiscent' to Wahabbist Islam and Al Qaeda. Comparisons between the two may be illuminating; but to indulge in such over-statement is, as we say in the U.S., bush league.

Thankfully, there is quite a good deal more than this. Northcott deftly observes how American cultural pessimism parallels the shift between Jonathan Edwards' optimistic millennialism and Darby's doom-saying (88). He makes thoughtful observations suggesting that American understandings of freedom cannot resist imperialism since they hew too closely to negative rather than positive conceptions of liberty (109). Northcott adeptly captures the way in which a certain kind of conservative self-imagining has no time for stubborn reality, using the canopy of sacred violence as motivation, consolation, and explanatory force alike. As social criticism, this is forceful stuff and tough to fault, for Northcott is surely right to call attention to the dangers lurking when consumerism, historical amnesia, and violent visions of divine redemption combine. Yet when making political and theological claims this bold – and worth supporting, as Northcott's are – it is important to get the details right. This is true not only in an obvious sense, but also so that one might reasonably identify those areas in American culture where these claims might help stir resistance and alternate religio-political sensibilities. There are, after all, cracks in the hull of empire.

It's difficult to argue for more nuance in a position like Northcott's without simultaneously giving comfort to thugs. The reason I press these claims, however, is because in his occasionally broad-brush characterisations and in his tendency to homologise somewhat too quickly, Northcott may be directing our attention away from the very sources of religious progressivism he rightly seeks to counter the darkness of this moment. With such an expanded vision, Northcott's claims would only resonate more powerfully, and he might join with me and other Americans in echoing Thomas Jefferson's 1798 letter to John Taylor: 'A little patience, and we shall see the reign of witches pass over, their spells dissolve, and the people, recovering their true sight, restore the government to its true principles.'

¹ See David Kuo's *Tempting Faith* (Free Press, 2006).

² See Frank Furedi's *Politics of Fear* (Continuum, 2005) and my forthcoming *The Religion of Fear* (Oxford, 2008) on the former point.

Jason C. Bivins is Associate Professor and Associate Head of the Department of Philosophy and Religion at North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC, USA.

Moveable Feasts

Guy Fawkes wheels around in tandem with Diwali, Festival of Lights, obscure to this 60s Glasgow child; Bonfire Night our big, noisy, bright-edged party, *Remember, Remember, the 5th of November.*

In primary school we chanted that doggerel, thinking a Catholic plot against the English great stuff till our neighbours made it clear it was our treason and plot we were singing; then in 1968 the Scottish Nationalists started ranting about deporting the lot of us by force.

We sang 'Hail Glorious Saint Patrick', learnt nothing about our heritage or history, our buried roots a blank space on the map; nothing about the long march of our ancestors who brought fire, wheel, sword, music, left them everywhere they settled, from the Western edge of the Chinese Empire to the West coast of Ireland, many gods, many names, one gesture, one giving, the worst sin to stamp out a hearth fire.

Now I hear fireworks days before Guy Fawkes, not careless hooligans but pious Hindus, Diwali moves in parallel with Britain's pagan/Christian hybrid, along the old path, to hold light against our darkness, to say the tribe is here round the fire with food, drink, and chant, to tell our gods we walk towards the turn of the year, we do not forget you, we take you with us, lit by the fire that gives us our lives.

Brian Docherty

Brian Docherty was born and grew up in Glasgow. His poetry collection *Armchair Theatre* was published by Hearing Eye (London) in 1999.

Ruth Scott reviews

After the Church: Divine Encounter in a Sexual Age

by Claire Henderson Davis

Canterbury Press (London) 2007. £8.99. 79 pages. ISBN: 9781853117367.

How refreshing! A book that sees the dynamics of sex as a positive analogy for how human beings in all their diversity can love each other in a world where *all* people are loved equally by God. Christians through the centuries who have seen sex as a threat to spiritual growth will be turning in their graves. Long may that continue!

Claire Henderson Davis is one of a growing number of women and men struggling to counteract the harmful effects on humanity resulting from the dualism that sees the worlds of body and spirit as mutually exclusive. She explores what divine encounter might look like in a 'sexual age'. For Claire the goal of a sexual structure is 'to create a common space, a single body formed through the coming together of different bodies.' She suggests we might become much more compassionate people if we read the teachings of Jesus, 'not primarily in a parent to child voice, but in the adult to adult voice of a good sex guide.' In so doing, her conclusions expose the failure of the Church to live truly the role of servant. Although sex is a key analogy in this book, it is about much more than sex. Using autobiography, imaginative exploration of biblical stories, the insights of psychology, sociology and politics, Claire leads us from the Garden of Eden, via the Tower of Babel and Pentecost, Abraham and Isaac, Incarnation, the Trinity, and the Body of Christ, to a possible expression of faith today that resonates with adults who have had enough of infantile forms of religious expression. The journey takes us through three forms of 'worship' which might be described as a progression from infancy to adulthood, but Claire notes that each form is repeated every time a new stage in the story of an individual or community unfolds.

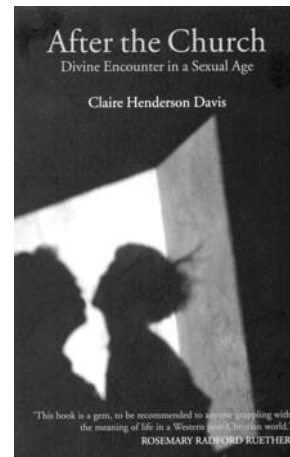
The first form is that of sacrifice, 'the powerful outward projection of internal realities, both individual and collective, onto an object in the external world, who is made to carry the burden of what properly belongs to us.' The second form, obeying the law, is that part in the process where we begin to do for ourselves what we thought previously only another could do for us. 'The law is a demystification of sacrifice.' The third form is sex, where 'an individual formed by the law relates to the law, no longer as an obedient child, but as an equal,

and through a process of encounter, new possibilities arise.

Here, also, is the encounter of different laws, the meeting of adults who all possess language, and must converse in order to create common space.'

Claire writes beautifully. Her thoughtful honesty about her own experience reveals a warm humanity, and roots her reflections in authentic experience. I appreciated her clear sense of archetypal imagery in Biblical stories. Her insights into familiar texts, such as that of the Good Samaritan, Jesus washing the feet of the disciples or Matthew's story of the sheep and the goats, of those who do or don't inherit the kingdom, opened up new avenues of thought for me. I hope Claire will develop further the ideas she expresses in this book. She is saying something that needs to be taken seriously in the Church. Her book also highlights a tension that I recognise in my own wrestling with faith. In the Introduction Claire writes, 'In the West, the downfall of public narrative is Church control. The world moves on while religion loses touch with language, gets wedded to archaic forms.' Yet in seeking out a new language Claire uses some of those archaic forms, namely, ancient Biblical stories. Occasionally I felt the gulf between present experience and this past mythology was almost too great to support the connections Claire made, but despite their limitations we continue to turn to ancient myths, not only because they contain rich seams to be explored, if we are prepared to dig deep enough, but also because it is hard to find modern myths that hold all the wisdom we can uncover in ancient epic tales. Who is writing or telling the stories that will take the place of archaic forms when they have truly passed their sell-by date? Will we recognise them in the making? Claire has opened up the search for a new language, but we have a long way to go if it is to be one that can truly sustain us 'after the Church'.

Ruth Scott is an Anglican priest, writer and broadcaster. Her second book, *Slipstreams for Healing Souls*, was published by SPCK in 2006. In her spare time she eats fire.



reviews

Anne Sutcliffe visits

Andy Goldsworthy's Project The Beauty of Creation

at Bretton Hall Sculpture Park.

Bretton Hall with grounds by Capability Brown was acquired after World War II by the then West Riding Education authority led by Alec Clegg, for use as a college of education specialising in visual arts, drama and music. This was Sir Alec's great vision. He had the silly idea that Arts Education might be a good thing. The College has now gone and he'll be turning in his grave.

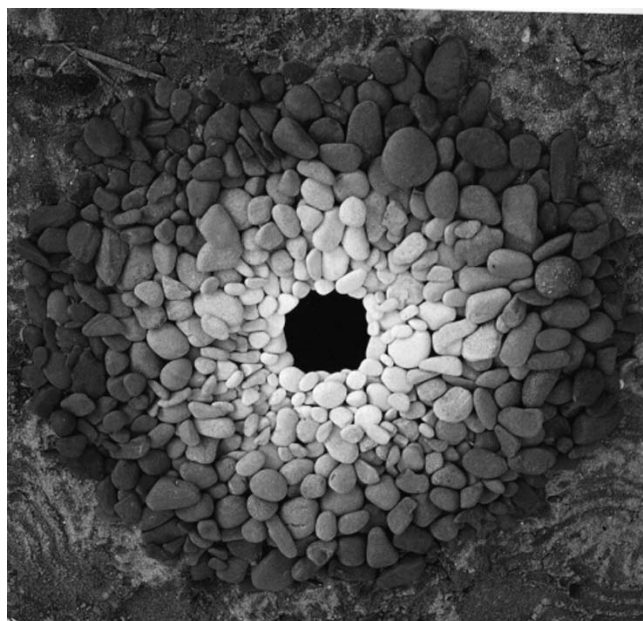
I had occasion to go there often in the past, as an assessor. The other day as evening came on, the park around the house seemed eerie and ghostly. However, the internationally famous Sculpture Park, forever associated with the name of Peter Murray, survives and thrives, currently home to the Goldsworthy Project. I have thought that, given the recent topic, Sofers might benefit from a visit. I have had to wait for a lift. This raises an interesting point. Lack of mobility, lately much discouraged in the interests of carbon restriction, can result in inexperience, ignorance, provincialism, all too convenient for some. Think about it.

A Northerner born in Cheshire, raised in Leeds, educated in Bradford and Preston, Goldsworthy has for long been a luminary of so-called Earth Art (see also the work of Richard Long and Anselm Kiefer). Going into wildernesses various the artist, using only what was there, made interventions that had a sort of Man Friday footprint effect, affording the frisson we get when the intentionality of the human begins to intrude upon the wild.

Goldsworthy's quintessential work (for me) will be his leaf-tapestry made from leaves turning in Autumn, pinned by their own stems, or in some cases by thorns. These things, especially the snow structures, are ephemeral and preserved by film and photography. The new show will not in itself survive. The core of it consists of several great 'rooms' featuring wood, clay and twigs. There are also monumental constructions in stone and brick which to my mind are less essentially Goldsworthy. Before I went I had thought that 'room' was just a word for 'gallery space' – not so. Those spaces are indeed rooms with all that the word connotes of human possibility.

The wood room has a domed roof made of boughs doing what they can do in the way of weaving and plaiting. This artist works on the drystone wall, snow igloo or beehive tomb principle in that the structure is always only what the material will do. Empty but for its structural members, the place made me think of Hunding's hut in Act 1 of Wagner's *Die Walküre*. Perhaps I might see, briefly, the ghost of Siegmund sprawled on the floor – all very northern. This is the way I am. There is no hint that the artist intends any such interpretation.

The clay room is simply wall surfaces 'plastered' with local clay mixed with hair, some human, a technique traditionally used in cob building. This has been allowed to



Pebble Circle

develop a natural craquelure, no other decoration. This room had a southern feel – Mycenae perhaps, precipitating for me other ghostly figures covered with red ochre. The real inhabitant was a crawling baby. Clad only in her nappy, she plainly love this space. The sound of her palms gently patting the smooth, matt floor is the sound of the show for me. All the children seemed to love the stuff. 'Why do we have to go?' a little boy said.

The twig room? Well: the suspended translucent hanging of delicate twigs pinned with thorns is very beautiful, gives rather a bridal chamber effect. It is also very chic. (I haven't heard that 'chic' is a quality much prized by the deep Greenies.) Goldsworthy has been criticised for being too exquisite, even pretty, and those are qualities that frighten the daylights out of some people, some critics. You certainly couldn't accuse Richard Long, for instance, of these things.

Goldsworthy is a true wilderness freak. Some of his images are about blood and blood-letting. One work (photographed) is about a cluster of rocks containing deposits of iron ore. The artist has ground some of this to make the effect of pools of blood amongst the stones. Iron, he comments, is also responsible for the colour of blood.

But this is a project of great sophistication and civilisation, and, I venture, well in the modernist tradition. The artist commands major commissions, needing many assistants. The provenance of all the materials is given. It is maybe the piquant contrast, paradox even, that makes the work special.

Andy Goldsworthy's Project is at Bretton Hall Sculpture Park, West Bretton, near Wakefield, West Yorkshire until January 6th.

Anna Sutcliffe was an art teacher at various levels, latterly at Leeds Polytechnic. She has been a professional artist for 10 years. She is a long-standing member of SoF.

Christopher Truman reviews

The Meanest Flower

by Mimi Khalvati

Carcanet Press (Manchester) 2007. £9.95 ISBN:978857548686.

This may be one of Khalvati's most interesting books, replete with some major if paradoxical developments. It has to be said that at first, I thought Khalvati had passed through the abstruse, metaphysical heart of the work represented by *Mirrorwork* and *Entries on Light* merely to return to earlier preoccupations. I began to miss the world of 'Interiors' with 'the play of parallels...the verticals of harmonies, horizontals of melody and inbetween' and of poems one could happily spend hours deciphering; and I began to miss the ever-vanishing horizons of entering light. Had a complex vision been abandoned? Was an evocation of an alignment with Wordsworth, the 'meanest flower' being what was left after the daffodils and the visionary gleam had withered, or fled, a sign of this? Worse still, finding the title poem and a parallel long poem shockingly easy to read, I wondered had Khalvati sold out to 'easy access' propagandists?

Was this the end of an 'interesting' Khalvati, to be replaced by a simple 'populist'? Indeed, the brief summary on the jacket refers to a book of lyrics, elegies, songs and ghazals, to a poet who is 'unapologetically Romantic', to the 'true voice of feeling'; this is, *sui generis*, a 'poet with a heart'. The opening, title poem deals with a 'love of childhood' and 'the garden in the garden. The garden is timeless'; the subsequent long poem 'The Mediterranean of the Mind' in *memoriam Michael Donaghy*, set in Spain, is indeed heart-wrenching. Otherwise, there are some animal poems and no less piercing family poems; and there are the ghazals, with an interesting exposition of the form. This is the *materiel* of the generalist collection, not the world of J.H. Prynne; despite the title poem, 'presences' behind the book are the Antonio Machado of 'Los Olivos', set in Andalusia, as well as Lorca, quoted in the poem in memory of Michael Donaghy.

A central, driving paradox makes *The Meanest Flower* unusually interesting. On the one hand, key long poems invoke a hermeticism. In the title poem, there is reference to 'Wordsworth's hermit in the woods' (from 'Tintern Abbey') who is implicitly surrounded by a family of flowers; there is confession by Khalvati of an 'inability / to imagine a larger world and one too sick'. In the elegiac (and perhaps best poem) 'The Mediterranean of the Mind' there is eulogy for 'a Mediterranean of the mind / where, like the white *ermita* / culminating in open ground, some white and holy destination / hoves into view.' On the other hand, the alternately chilling and thrilling songs and invocations in the early long poem 'Plant Care' which

have evolved excitingly into the ghazals in this book reach out to a kind of universal music, to the impersonal personal, to the general hurt, to archetypal song, to a territory abandoned by poetry.

We read a poet for what is particular, peculiar to them, and for their evolution. *The Meanest Flower* thrives on a paradox. It blooms out of earlier work. Largely ignored by reviewers, even by the venerable *TLS*, the key poem in Khalvati's first book *In White Ink* was the defiant 'Plant Care', printed at the end of the book. It is a poem of intricately detailed childhood, full of troubling stories in which 'Every act is metaphysical', a poem of impending aunts and 'the devil in the garden'; Khalvati's 'hair is root and rush' and 'Cacti need little water'. It is interesting to read the new title poem and 'Plant Care' one after the other: it is as if one poem draws on, and then regenerates, the world of the other. We see (sic) a return to particular roots; in 'Plant Care', the most interesting things are unromantic, unnerving, quasi-archaic, quasi-archetypal, the distorted nursery rhyme-type songs with a trace of Louis MacNeice.

I am thinking of his 'Bagpipe Music'. 'It's no go the merrygoround, it's no go the rickshaw, / All we want is a limousine and a ticket for the peepshow' and the mad jig, the hallucinating invocation, the moving the chairs as the devil circles. For Khalvati: 'You can drive the devil out of your garden, you can scold him away like a loon...'

(Perhaps Khalvati had also studied fruitfully Machado's 'Proverbios y cantares' and Lorca's *Poema del Cante Jondo*.) Intriguingly, in the 'Ghazal: It's Heartache' and the first line: 'When you wake to jitters every day, it's heartache' you can start to hear the W.H. Auden of 'Five Songs': 'What's in your mind, my dove, my coney;' or 'The Witnesses'. (1932). Khalvati is continuing to strive for some greater form of 'essential English eloquence' and of 'complex song.' She improves on Auden; with a better ear than his.

The Meanest Flower is shortlisted for the T.S. Eliot prize.

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



reviews

Cicely Herbert visits

The First Emperor: China's Terracotta Army at the British Museum

A visit to the Qin Dynasty exhibition at the British Museum is a reminder of how strong is the human urge to have one's existence acknowledged and remembered. The content of this unique archaeological find is thrilling, and its display, in a specially created area beneath the tranquil, turquoise, domed ceiling of the old British Library, is exemplary. The space is filled with ghosts, and visiting it raises questions about our own mortality and the afterlife, that tease but cannot yet be answered.

The wish to discover an elixir of life has been the inspiration for many works of art and brings to mind Janacek's opera *The Makropulos Case* or Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray*. A recent newspaper article reports that 'by contemplating the replacement of our body parts as they fail, we are changing the definition of death, and may eventually break down the concept altogether.' Until such time, in our desire to become immortal, we mere humans will continue to create extraordinary artefacts, structures, and objects of art, in the belief that our lives will thus be acknowledged and survive in the memory of future generations.

The First Emperor of China was born in 259 BC, and became King of Qin when he was just thirteen. Over succeeding years his huge armies defeated the other six main States of the land, which then became the land that is now China, 'the oldest political entity in the world.' Qin had himself declared the 'King of Qin Shihuangdi: First Divine Emperor of the Qin.' The young Emperor seems to have been possessed of an overriding ambition, combined with extraordinary powers of organisation, and control, and he masterminded the building of the original structures forming what was later to become the Great Wall of China. According to the information on display, the young Emperor is known to have taken 'special pills' in an attempt to prolong his life indefinitely. Above all, he wished to join the immortals and in doing so, created an entire alternative underworld over which he would continue to reign after his death, and which was to be guarded by a replica life-size army, musicians and acrobats, fabulous birds and animals, including horses and chariots, and all fashioned by an army of slaves and artists. These figures were once painted in brilliant colours, but those that have been disinterred are now pale as ghosts after centuries under the Earth. Among recent finds are the figures of two musicians who play silent music for the bronze birds, which, it is suggested, may, in real time, have been trained to dance as entertainment for the Emperor in the afterlife.

This exhibition stirs and disturbs the imagination in a way that I cannot remember having experienced before. The Emperor himself died in 210 BC and his whereabouts remained unknown until the first terracotta warriors were accidentally discovered by a farmer digging his land in 1974. The excavation of the site, continues, painstakingly. The Emperor's own central burial mound remains undisturbed and will almost certainly not be excavated during our own lifetime. So our imaginations are free to wander by the seas and rivers of mercury, and, like Keats' Endymion in the underworld, beneath a jewel-studded heaven. Meanwhile the warriors, artists and creatures the Emperor once ruled over, dance eternally to his ghostly

bidding. Perhaps we will also be moved to remember the many thousands of slaves, warriors, and artists who suffered and died in the creation of one of the most breath taking discoveries of human history.



The *First Emperor* exhibition is on at the British Museum until 6th April 2008.

Flying

If it were not for birds
how could we have concocted
that dream of air?
So effortless! – as though
from tree to ridge tile were
a step any one of us might take today
or at least tomorrow.

If it were not for hawks
and upside down blue tits
and of course butterflies
and admittedly the wasps
we wouldn't be Icarus
with all those nightmares, daydreams,
gliders and star wars.

How do they, why do they make it look so easy?
Did angels – I mean those strong rebellious ones
equip these fliers to contradict the earth,
set up a counter creation?
If it were not for wings
we shouldn't resent our feet.

If it were not for flight
maybe we wouldn't – knowing
how in the end we have to lie down flat –
project our fantasies of afterlife.

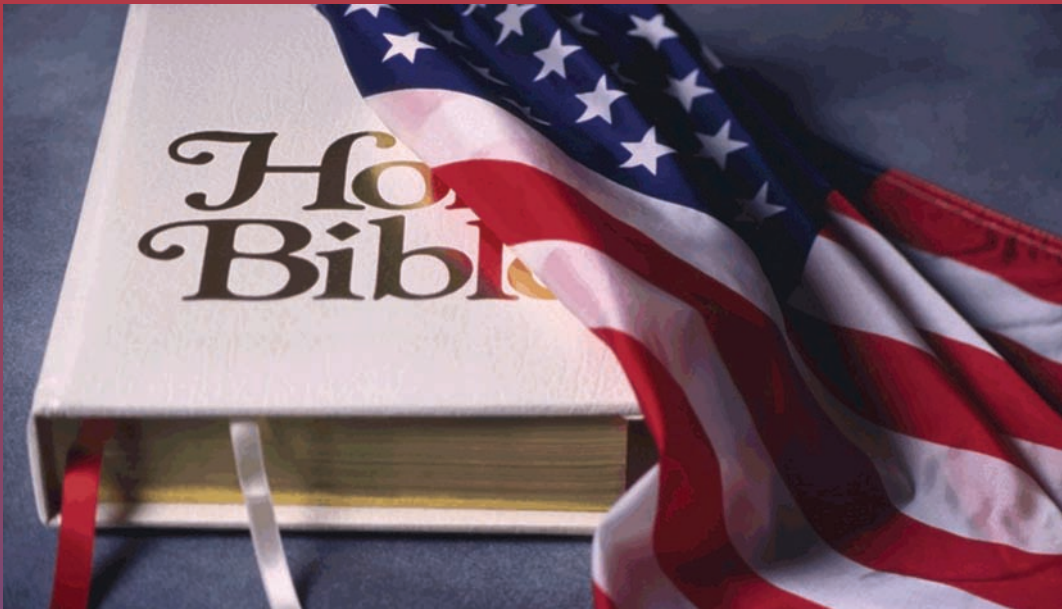
Anne Ashworth

Acknowledgment: *Flying first* appeared in *The Rialto*.
It was dedicated to, and sent to, the then imprisoned
poet Irina Ratushinskaya.

Anne Ashworth has been a librarian, editor and poet.
Among other publications, her poem-sequence *The
Verb To Be is Everywhere Irregular* was produced by SoF,
and her prose-and-poetry treatise, *The Oblique Light:
poetry and peak experience*, by the Quaker Universalist
Group.



Baghdad. Operation *Shock and Awe* 'to rid the world of evil'.



London. Suicide bomb in Tavistock Square