

*All Change*



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

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

*sfia* does not think wisdom is dispensed supernaturally from on high, but that it can only be pursued by humans at home on Earth and is inseparable from human kindness.

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

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

# All Change

Easter and Spring are both early this year in England. This March issue of *Sofia* is about 'newness of life' and called *All Change*.

From their distinct but overlapping points of view our first four writers discuss what is changing and what needs to change in humanity.

Don Cupitt, as a philosopher with a keen interest in the history of ideas, succinctly describes a vital shift he says has taken place. Until the late seventeenth century, 'the really-important knowledge that people lived by all came down to them from God.' Since then there has been 'a progressive transfer of powers from God to man'. Thus 'revealed Divine Law was gradually replaced by a new ethic based upon sympathetic human fellow-feeling.' He describes this as 'an extraordinary event which Christianity itself foresaw and described as the *kenosis* of God.' The Christian doctrines of 'Incarnation and Trinity foresaw what has now happened. As St Paul once put it: "all things are yours." This is inspiring, tantalisingly brief, and incidentally, programmatic for one of the most exciting challenges to those who regard religion as a human creation: being literate in traditional theology, to mull over old themes and teachings for their human richness, in order – to use another Pauline term – to 'recapitulate' (*anakephalaioisathai*: Eph. 1:10) them in non-supernatural, human terms.

'To live is to change,' says Dominic Kirkham. Resistance to change is associated with fundamentalism – the desire to go back to authoritative figures of the past for guidance. The irony, as he points out, is that such figures, including Jesus, were invariably prime examples of agents of change in their own times. He then discusses the way in which he thinks our attitude must change, if the 'twilight of the gods' is not to become merely a prelude to the 'twilight of humanity'.

From El Salvador, liberation theologian Jon Sobrino describes 'a very sick world', in which vast wealth lives shamelessly side by side with the most wretched poverty. Quoting Karl Rahner, he says: 'It can't be like this!' It has got to change.

That demand is echoed, from Bradford, in the Church of England, by Graham Carey, an active member of their diocesan synods. He criticises his 'diminished and faltering church' for its supine attitudes to grave problems. He is disgusted at the

'cruel flaunting of wealth, in the eyes of the despairing homeless, on programmes such as *Relocation, Relocation*,' that dominate prime time television. Especially as Bradford, he says, 'has the largest number of bankruptcies and almost the largest number of house repossessions in the country.' This morning the newspapers report that in 2007 in Britain 27,000 houses were repossessed, an anodyne term covering untold misery.

As a philosopher in the idealist – or as I heard it called recently 'idealist' – tradition, Cupitt focuses on the shift in *ideas*. Perhaps that is why his view of the state of the world is the rosier of these writers'. Jesuit Sobrino, who says he writes from the standpoint of 'materialist humanism lit by Christian inspiration', has a far bleaker view. However, they both agree on what *should* happen. Both want a new ethic based upon sympathetic human fellow-feeling. Though both are ordained Christian priests, neither of them says something must be done because it has 'come down from God'. Both have a humanist agenda. Sobrino's two major works of christology (which got him into trouble with the Vatican last year) are a prolonged meditation on the theology of the Incarnation, which has led – as Cupitt suggests in his article – to that humanist agenda.

There also seems to be agreement that there has been a vital shift. Cupitt's 'sympathetic human-fellow feeling' is echoed by writers adduced by Sobrino, such as René Girard who believes 'we are seeing the birth of a kinder humanity, that is more concerned for the victims: "No society has ever been as concerned about the victims as ours is." This is 'an unprecedented phenomenon. It could be something like what happened in the axial age, from the eighth to the sixth centuries BC.' Sobrino quotes Bishop Pedro Casaldàliga, who says that 'humanity is "on the move" and turning towards truth and justice.' Sobrino then goes on to describe the vast amount of 'catching up' with these humane trends that needs to happen in the reality of a suffering, 'very sick world'. So there is a common humanist agenda. It just needs to be carried out. And, as Kirkham stresses, carried out before we destroy our own world.



I was reading about the Levellers in the seventeenth-century English Revolution, that perhaps their vision of a just society without masters and servants and 'underlings' was impossible to realise at that time, because the technology was not there to have any kind of civilised society without servants. Today we do have the wealth and the technology to ensure a decent life for all; we merely need to make it happen.

Another Christian theme to be mulled over in non-supernatural terms is the 'kingdom of God' or 'kingdom of heaven', as Matthew also calls it. As has often been pointed out, a better way to translate 'kingdom' might be 'reign' or 'rule'.<sup>1</sup> For example, we might say 'the rule of law' does not operate in Guantánamo Bay – the prisoners there are not protected by the Geneva Convention; some are known to have been tortured.

At the beginning of his ministry Jesus goes into the synagogue at Nazareth and reads from the prophet Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
for he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.

The 'good news to the poor' is of the coming 'reign' in which those who are oppressed will be set free. Later in what has come to be known as Luke 'Sermon on the Plain' (Sermon on the Mount in Matthew), Jesus begins by saying:

Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

This kingdom or reign is first and foremost 'good news for the poor'. Poverty and injustice will be over. It is 'good news' because the poor won't be poor any more; they will have a decent life. That is a humanist agenda.

Jesus goes on to say: 'Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on Earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.' (Mt 6:19) The 'reign' of heaven is something that is going to happen on Earth. First and foremost 'good news for the poor', it is a just society where kindness rules.

Jesus preferred the poor and chose them first. He also said how hard it is for a rich man to enter this kingdom. 'It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.' (Mt 19:23). So the 'reign of heaven' is not only first and foremost 'good news for the poor' but something that it is very difficult for the rich to enter. The disciples were 'greatly astonished'

at this 'hard saying'. Indeed, nowadays the large Christian churches themselves are colossally rich, and in Dostoevsky's story the Grand Inquisitor tells the returning Christ that the Church no longer needs him.

It is a 'hard saying' for most of us too. Most of us don't 'sell what we have and give to the poor'. I haven't. Even to sustain the minimum, which is to support that humanist agenda, a decent life for all on Earth is a considerable ongoing commitment. Jesus' message is counter-cultural, especially in our world where wealth is worshipped. To say 'having enough is enough' is subversive. I think it's good to struggle to support our families, make a comfortable home and have some jolly times. I don't know if Jesus would agree. Of course, he himself got ticked off by Pharisees for being too convivial. But then we are encouraged to want more. And more. In a world where so many have no home, is it right for some to own not one house, but two or three or more, to 'add field to field'? The whole thrust of our society urges us to lay up treasure which thieves can break into and steal. There is talk of 'achieving' a second car or a 'property portfolio', as if multiple house owners were artists.

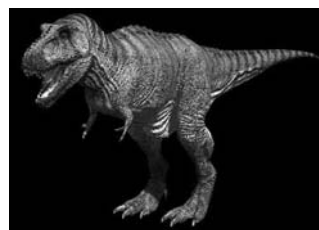
As Dominic Kirkham points out, some sense of moderation is even more urgent now that the Earth is in danger. Our cult of more and more has over-exploited the Earth and 'we are now confronted by a remarkable sense of apocalypse of our own making.' So: 'Our survival is now in our own hands and depends on the cultivation of a new attitude of regard for Life in all its forms.' He thinks that: 'In Western culture man (yes, it's always 'man'!) has traditionally defined himself *against* nature rather than as inseparable from it; a patriarchal view which regards the Earth as threateningly feminine.' This dualism has been reinforced by monotheistic supernaturalism. The idea of God as 'supernatural Top Man' has hindered a humanist agenda. God's *kenosis* is necessary and, Kirkham thinks, a *kenosis* of humanity is now also necessary 'in the face of potential disaster'. I don't agree with the idea that it would not matter if humanity became extinct as long as Life went on. I think of the Earth as one life, worded by humanity, its voice. If humanity became extinct there would be no one to articulate the songs and poems of the Earth. But I do agree that we need to take care of the Earth, as of ourselves. In the words of the great Philippians hymn, we don't have to regard ever more and more as 'a thing to be grasped'. It is a race against time, whether we destroy the Earth or whether the vision of 'kingdom come', a reign or rule of kindness which will be good news for the poor and for all of us will make it.

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<sup>1</sup> I agree with John Nurser (see review on page 22) in disliking the Jesus Seminar translation 'imperial domain'. Can they really talk like that in California?

# Talking With Dinosaurs

Don Cupitt offers his opening words in his recent debate with Brian Hebblethwaite as ‘a very short and simple statement of my current views’.



Until the late seventeenth century West Europeans still lived in a traditional culture. Their world-view was religious. The really-important knowledge that people lived by all came down to them from God, via Tradition, by divine Revelation, or by direct illumination of the mind. To receive knowledge you had to purify yourself so that you could become morally fit to receive it. As for secular, man-made knowledge, it did exist but it was not highly esteemed, and the Middle Ages have left us no books about how to build cathedrals or warships. Of course not: that kind of knowledge was simply refined craft-skill, as indeed it was in other similar civilizations.

## Divine Law was gradually replaced by a new ethic based upon sympathetic human fellow-feeling.

In the 1660s the last great literary works of the old Western Christian culture were published: the *Book of Common Prayer*, *Paradise Lost*, and *The Pilgrim's Progress*. In 1678 appeared Ralph Cudworth's *True Intellectual System of the Universe*, the last top-level attempt to defend the traditional Christian-Platonist philosophy of nature. Then in 1687 appeared Isaac Newton's *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*, and everything began to change. It was now beyond doubt that the Moderns had surpassed the Ancients, and that unaided human reason could produce a system of mathematical physics far superior to anything previously available. The old religious cosmology immediately began to die, and the thinkers of the Enlightenment reconstructed Western culture around the human subject and the new secular and critical type of thinking. Instead of everything being seen as coming down from God, everything was henceforth to be seen from the point of view of the individual human being who uses his senses, his reason, his critical judgment, his creative imagination, and (of course) his conversation with others to build and to test out his own knowledge of the world – and indeed of himself, as well.

The resulting changes were very far-reaching. For example, the old ethics of obedience to revealed Divine Law was gradually replaced by a new ethic based upon sympathetic human fellow-feeling. Ethics has become steadily more humanitarian. Similarly the old Politics of absolute Monarchy, which subjects us all to a Super-person who is exalted over us begins to be replaced by liberal democratic Politics, a new Quakerish kind of politics in

which Supreme Authority has come down from the world above and is dispersed into ordinary human beings. Gradually, the State itself has become humanitarian. In religious thought, God is increasingly replaced by human religious experience and the world religions are seen as local cultural formations. As it begins to be understood that we human beings have all by ourselves gradually developed our own language our own knowledge and our own world-view *from within*, and that we human beings are ourselves the only judges of truth, it begins to be possible to speak of the human mind as creative. We alone have made it all. We are the creators of our own world, we are the only judges. Where in the past God had been in effect the Lord of history, and therefore the only historical agent, human beings now begin especially after the French Revolution to see themselves as collectively the makers of their own history. We alone are responsible.

In these vast cultural changes we see a progressive transfer of powers from God to man, an extraordinary event which Christianity itself foresaw and described as the *kenosis* of God. God is content to become just mortal and human-in-the-world: God disperses himself into humans: God democratises himself. The Universe turns inside-out, and God dies into humankind. Thus the old Christian dogmas of the Incarnation and Trinity foresaw what has now happened. As St Paul once put it: ‘all things are yours.’

By today the upshot is this. Instead of a created Cosmos, made and upheld by God's own supremely powerful Word of command, we now have only *our* world, an evolving improvisation formed and continually growing within our human conversation. Objective reality, and indeed all the old ‘absolutes’ and ‘timeless verities’ that people once lived by, are now gone. We live by continual improvisation. We, our knowledge and our world are utterly transient, but life is still liveable on that basis, and our transient world is still beautiful.

In general philosophy we used to think in terms of three great entities, God, the World, and the human Soul. Today we need to give up that vocabulary and talk instead of only two great entities, Life and My Life. ‘Life’ is the going-on of things in the human life-world, which is an endless and outsideless (but of course finite) flowing process of exchange, exchange that is both physical and symbolic. Thus our world is a flowing process of energies-read-as-meanings. And within this process there is a cluster of goings-on that I identify as being me, my Life. I'm a chain of steps in the general dance of everything. I'm only small, but I can contribute something to the dance of the whole before I go.



*Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.*

Against this background the modern religious task is to forget the past, to learn to see and accept life for what it is, and to fling ourselves into the dance. This dance of language, all this, is all there is. As ordinary people nowadays put it, one should learn to live life to its fullest. And this new kind of religion is not quite as new as you may think because, according to the most recent reconstructions of his teaching, it was taught with admirable force and clarity by the original Jesus. The end of the old Christian metaphysics has helped to make possible the rediscovery of Jesus.

I conclude this lightning summary by saying that under today's conditions it is still possible to live one's life in the way that Jesus introduced, indeed, it's better than that, because in many respects modern society is much more Christian than ever it was in the so-called 'ages of faith'. Think of everyday institutions like the National Health Service, or the United Nations Organisation. Think of our worldwide humanitarian aid, and our concern for human rights. To a remarkable degree, the Christian ethic and spirituality – a spirituality of stringent self-examination and perpetual reform, and an ethic that seeks immediate commitment to life and to one's fellow-humans – is still alive and still developing in Western culture.

So the world is much more Christian than it was in the past, but the situation of the Church is less happy. It is still stuck in a premodern, precritical world, living in denial and in rapid decline. This has happened for the reason that Dostoyevsky gives in his famous chapter in which Christ comes to Rome and is rejected by the Grand Inquisitor. The Church has forgotten that it was only a temporary formation and is intended to yield, when the time comes, to the greater reality that it is preparing us for. The Church has made an idol of itself, its way to salvation, and its own structures. It does not know how to let go – even though its own members know in their hearts that the Church's vision of the cosmos and its entire doctrine-system is now a write-off. Blustering, embittered, living in denial and retreating into fundamentalism, the Church simply has not got the strength any more to be honest with itself.

Here is one example of the galloping collapse of traditional faith that is now going on: in the last twenty years funerals and memorial services in our culture have entirely given up the traditional Four Last Things: Death, Judgement, Heaven and Hell. The laity have largely taken over the design and the content of funerary rites, and have re-described them as a 'Thanksgiving for the life' and a 'Celebration of the life' of the dead person. The whole occasion has thus been transformed into the ritual closure of a life. And that is all. So it is that every funeral we attend now confirms that the disappearance of the supernatural world has already taken place. The clergy, and in particular the Bishops, haven't had the strength, or even the will, to stop it.

In my travels I have seen how around the world people in many cultures try to cling to a few shreds and tatters of their traditional beliefs alongside the advancing global culture that they cannot resist. I have experienced for example in China the way bits and pieces of the traditional herbal medicine are still kept going in corners where they won't do much harm, alongside the new science-based Western medicine. We in the West ourselves do the same. We can scarcely deny the overwhelming superiority of real, science-based Western medicine, but we somehow want to keep little bits of magical, pre-scientific 'alternative' medicine as well. It is a thoroughly inconsistent and silly thing to do, but most of us Westerners do something like that. It was we who gave birth to modern culture: it is our child, but somehow even we cannot yet bring ourselves to love it.

## Transfer of powers from God to man, which Christianity itself foresaw and described as the *kenosis* of God.

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Such is the position that Brian Hebblethwaite is in. He is a (sort-of) modern. But he's living in denial, fighting to keep alive a vision of the world that died over 300 years ago, and that now doesn't work at all. I can't say he's flatly wrong, because on my view there is no objective truth. People can, and undoubtedly do, live in and by all sorts of strange visions of the world. But I do say that if the conversation goes on long enough my vision of the human condition will eventually be found to be far more intellectually consistent and far more productive of lasting human happiness. If there goes on being a human race at all, I'll eventually be found to be in the right. But Brian and I will both of us be long gone by then, so we personally will never know which of us was right.

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Don Cupitt made the original BBC 1984 television series *Sea of Faith*, from which SoF Network takes its name. He has published many books, the latest of which is *Impossible Loves* (Polebridge, USA 2007), reviewed on page 19.



# All Change!

## Dominic Kirkham asks what comes after Religious Fundamentalism?

'To live is to change'. These memorable words of Cardinal Newman have come to epitomise the basic reality of our age. Transience is everything. Substantial works have analysed how cultural and scientific change takes place; a whole industry has grown up around how to manage change. But while leaders look forward to new horizons the groundswell of dissent prefers to look back to the familiar. This resistance to change and preference for looking back is associated with fundamentalism, a word perceptively restructured as 'founder-mentality' – the desire to go back to authoritative figures of the past for guidance in the modern age: Moses, Jesus, Mohamed, Nanak. Look no further: their teachings were enough.

The irony here is that such figures were invariably prime examples of agents of change in their own times. An early criticism of Christian radicalism (by the pagan philosopher Celsus) was of its novelty. We don't have to be paid-up Marxists to concede that economics and social change promote changes of understanding – Marxism itself was the product of such change. Similarly with the discovery of new or anomalous facts: as the economist J.M. Keynes once said, 'When the facts change I change my mind.' A once discarded stone can become a corner stone of a new edifice of belief. This Pauline metaphor exemplifies the true 'founder-mentality'; of looking into the depths of things and being prepared to reshape one's identity.

If opening up to change is refreshing it can also be portrayed more threateningly as betrayal. Ever since Zarathustra – perhaps the first truly innovative religious thinker – was stabbed in the back by a member of the traditionalist hierarchy things have never been easy for the reformer. The standard criticism of the convert is one of untrustworthiness – why trust someone who got it wrong before: having changed once he will change again. Both St Paul and Newman were subject to such criticism. Yet, if anything, it disguises a deeper illusion: that to have changed once is sufficient. Had St Paul owned up to the fact that his newly coined eschatology was wrong (there would be no Second Coming in his life time), his ethical precepts would have been more realistic; had Newman perceived that his doctrine of development failed to grasp the real meaning of

evolution, his theology would have become more radical. In a nutshell, their failure was in that having changed they failed to change further.

Perhaps the role model that religious institutions most lack is of the founder who changed again; of the founder who lives on the move, for whom there are no final solutions. The inspirational pope, John XXIII became such a person, as his famous death-bed testimony shows. St. Augustine – a man who had undergone much change – gave some inkling of it in his exhortation, 'Linger not by the way, always press on, always advance.' Such a view is not dissimilar to the idea of the Church as a 'pilgrim people'. But the implication here is of a clear goal, to which there is but one road. The change of which we are speaking has neither goal nor road: rather it's the art of the surfer, breasting the resurgent waves. A transience that leaves no trace.

This is an altogether more alarming notion – a dizziness, hovering on the brink of chaos. The idea of primeval chaos is a threatening, chthonic darkness against which the light of religious reason (or revelation) has always defined its cosmologies. Today we understand things differently. Chaos is now viewed positively, as the underlying feature of complex systems. The science of complexity – of which Chaos Theory is a part – shows how very small random changes lead to new systems, totally disproportionate to their origins and organised in a state of dynamic equilibrium. Everything is marvellously balanced on the edge of chaos, but constantly reordering and renewing itself – like the ecological systems of the Earth.

This is how we have come to understand reality. As cosmologist John Barrow writes, 'The science of how complex systems organise themselves is currently one of the great frontiers of scientific research' (*Theories of Everything*). It has implications for everything about us: economics, ecological balances, weather systems, even the workings of the human mind. Life has taken on the aspect of an emergent, self-organising drama that embraces the universe. Thanks to the work of modern cosmologists, we can now see that the elements of life are common to our part of the universe in its current phase, and could only have appeared after the collapse of a previous generation of stars.

But if life itself has such a vast and arbitrary context the theological pre-eminence of humanity in the universe also begins to look arbitrary. Soteriology (theories of redemption) centred on ourselves and our own rather insignificant planet, look rather parochial. The great religious and ethical systems as we now know them have all assumed, rather innocuously, the centrality of humanity in their grand theandric dramas, just as pre-Copernican man assumed the centrality of the earth in the cosmic order. In this scheme of things nature provided the peripheral backdrop, or (as the Franciscan theology of St. Bonaventure) the amphitheatre, of a divine drama.

The idea of a created cosmic order has long been closely tied to the concept of a stable, comprehensible and unique universe. When this concept first arose amongst the Ionian thinkers of ancient Greece, it was seen as seditious. Monistic thinking – as with its surrogate, monotheism – gained ascendancy at first only as a superior type of gnosis, held by elites in the face of popular incomprehension and hostility. It could be life-threatening to those who voiced it in the face of well established public deities, as Greek philosophers and Biblical prophets found out. But now, far from being a superior idea, it looks like a distinctly beleaguered one. Even the very concept of a *uni*-verse has become problematic; beliefs such as that of the great Jehovah and Allah mere staging posts on a wider exploration.

## ‘When the facts change I change my mind.’

The challenge now facing us is to move out of our previously ideological camps to give priority to Life, the matrix of everything that is – not just human life. This entails a new exodus into the unknown, with its as yet uncharted thinking. In Western culture man (yes, it’s always ‘man’!) has traditionally defined himself against nature rather than as inseparable from it; a patriarchal view which regards the earth as threateningly feminine. This dualism has been reinforced by Monotheistic ‘super’-naturalism. The matter could not have been better put than by Vatican apparatchik Cardinal Martino when he recently stated, ‘Man has an indisputable superiority within and over all the rest of creation...a person endowed with an immortal soul cannot ever be held equal to other living beings.’ The alternative view, expressed by eminent scientist James Lovelock, is that it is exactly this kind of thinking – which see humanity as



One Life: Robin's Oak in Sherwood Forest 1000+ years old

stewards, lording it over creation – that is at the root of our problem: ‘The idea that humans are yet intelligent enough to serve as stewards of the Earth is amongst the most hubristic ever’ (*The Revenge of Gaia*). We generally find it difficult enough to organise our own personal affairs properly, let alone those of the planet.

As a result we are now confronted by a remarkable sense of apocalypse of our own making. The ‘revenge’ of Gaia (Earth) is aimed precisely at us humans; a case of reality reasserting itself. Our survival is now in our own hands and depends on the cultivation of a new attitude of regard for Life in all its forms: what has been called by the naturalist E.O.Wilson ‘biophilia’. We must change. In a religious context the *kenosis* (self emptying) must now be that of humanity in the face of potential disaster, becoming a simulacrum of that putative cosmic drama of redemption described by St. Paul (*Letter to the Philippians*). We who shaped that great theandric drama to have such a humbling dénouement must now be even more imaginative and reshape our own. Radical new perspectives in thinking and acting are required – what may be called an ‘apocalyptic naturalism’.

Amongst others, the philosopher George Santayana presciently grappled with this challenge. Though he recognised there was something in man that led him constantly to rebel against naturalism in favour of some kind of eternal ideal, he also recognised that hankering after the ‘denatured’ forms of old beliefs was to be like Don Quixote, tinkering with obsolete armour. For him ‘the word nature is poetical enough’ (*Scepticism and Animal Faith*). Modern science reveals that, outside the human sphere, all is chaotic and beyond our control: ‘no doubt the spirit and energy of the world is what is acting in us, as the sea that rises in every little wave. Our privilege is to have perceived it as it moved’ (*Life of Reason*).



Though the extra-human area is chaotic and purposeless, humanity can still act in the human arena to create order and satisfaction. This was also the conclusion of psychotherapist Viktor Frankl, who survived the most extreme inhumanity imaginable in Auschwitz. Whereas once we may have sought to build the meaning of life around some grandiose sense of destiny or election, the perspective has now been reversed: 'Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather he must recognise that it is he who is asked' (*Man's Search for Meaning*). Meaning is to be found in the changing challenges made upon us; each has its opportunities which demand a response – an affirmation of life, a creative act, a kind deed. A failure of nerve, or just plain hubris, will ensure that 'the twilight of the gods' merely anticipated the twilight of humanity – our own *Gotterdammerung*.

## The supernatural narrative of monotheism is now replaced by the natural narrative of monozoism, one life.

From a necessary kenotic humbling follows a whole new way of living, centred not on rights but respect, of a willingness to curtail our rights (of reproduction, consumption and comfort) out of respect for the natural order of things our recklessness has brought to the point of destruction. The supernatural narrative of monotheism is now replaced by the natural narrative of monozoism, one life. Whatever religious beliefs humanity may choose to retain in the future will no doubt continue to have social and decorative value: cultural attributes derived from past traditions. But the test of their acceptability will be the measure of compatibility with the survival of the great web of Life, of which we are but a part. Life embraces all that is changing, evolving, evanescent. To complete the words of Newman, 'To have lived long is to have changed much.'

Dominic Kirkham is an interested follower of SoF and writes regularly for *Renew* (Catholics for a Changing Church). He was formerly a history teacher, then a religious and RC Priest for 25 years, he is now in his third reincarnation as a provider of home maintenance services for elderly people.

## The Irrelevance of God

You look and you listen and feel and love  
till your God-given brain tells you in sorrow  
there is no God,  
and it tells you there is no second chance,  
and no time to lose.

And now you can take up your lifelong task  
of finding, shaping, deserving a purpose,  
but it is a long slow backsliding task,  
and stable structures cunningly constructed  
are tested to destruction,  
and there is distraction, deception, despair.

When time runs out  
and only dimming memories remain,  
manipulation,  
excuses,  
you may be able to summon the strength  
to die.  
Or you may embrace the exhaustion  
that makes death more desirable  
than life.

Doubt not those with faith and no faith alike  
will find nothing.  
You will behave as do your friends with faith,  
who also have no second chance.

Digby Hartridge

## REMINDER

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# A Very Sick World

Jon Sobrino insists we must change the world and that another world is not only necessary but possible.

On 6 November 1989 Ignacio Ellacuría<sup>1</sup> gave a speech in Barcelona, which turned out to be the last speech he ever made: 'Together with all the poor and oppressed people in the world, we need utopian hope to encourage us to believe we can change the course of history.' That was nearly twenty years ago. What about today?

Certainly, history has brought about important new developments. From a historical viewpoint, René Girard<sup>2</sup> thinks that we are seeing the birth of a kinder humanity, that is more concerned for the victims: 'No society has ever been as concerned about the victims as ours is.' However, he believes this is 'really only a show of concern'; he does not want to 'call the world we live in blameless'. But he does insist that 'it is an unprecedented phenomenon'. It could be something like what happened in the axial age, from the eighth to the sixth centuries BC, as described by Jaspers. And, despite his strong criticism, which we quote below, Bishop Pedro Casaldáliga says that 'humanity is "on the move" and turning towards truth and justice. There is a lot of utopian hope and a lot of commitment on this sad planet.' Nevertheless, today we are still deep in a *capital-civilisation*, which causes extreme want, dehumanises and attacks the human family: it excludes and impoverishes people and divides the world into winners and losers. Our civilisation continues to be 'very sick'. As Jean Ziegler<sup>3</sup> puts it, its life – both its material and spiritual life – is 'under threat of death'.

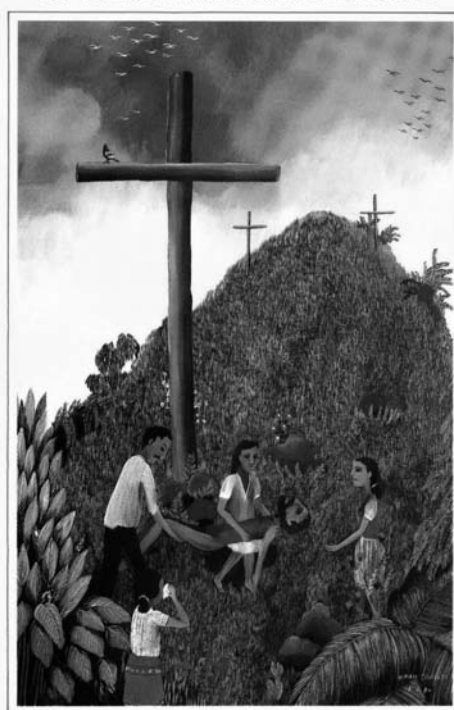
## The Wrongs suffered by the Majority: injustice, cruelty and death

There is more wealth on Earth, but also more injustice. Africa has been called 'the world's dungeon', a continental *Shoah*. According to the FAO, 2,500 million people survive on Earth on less than two euros a day, and every day 25,000 people die of hunger. Desertification threatens the lives of 1,200 million people in about hundred different countries. (Bishop Pedro Casaldáliga)

Sometimes we hear that our present globalised world offers new life chances to poor peoples, through migration. We should not rule this out or deny that migration may alleviate some evils, when people are driven to it by necessity. But today migration is not a simple readjustment of the human species – which has occurred throughout history and can be potentially enriching. Migrations today are particularly cruel because of how and why they happen. Let us quote Casaldáliga again:

## Companions of Jesus

### THE MURDER AND MARTYRDOM OF THE SALVADOREAN JESUITS



Jon Sobrino SJ

Immigrants are denied human fellowship and even the ground on which to stand. The United States is building a 1,500 kilometre wall against Latin America; while Europe is putting up a barrier against Africa in the south of Spain. As well as being iniquitous, this is all part of a programme. In a horrifying letter, written 'behind separating walls', one African immigrant warns: 'I beg you not to think that it is normal for us to live this way; because in fact, the cause is the ongoing injustice built into the inhuman systems that kill and impoverish people [...] Do not support that system by your silence.'

Without batting an eyelid, we carry on in this crazy, shameless way, that is unjust, cruel, contemptuous and insulting. And we often cover up what we do. Here are just a few facts:

Worldwide spending on arms and armies in 2006 was a staggering 3.3 billion dollars a day, while the total value of support to agriculture in rich countries still runs at over a billion dollars a day. (OECD)

The arms trade is one of the most profitable for all governments in the international community. Together with China, the G-8 countries account for 90% of arms exports. At least half a million people are killed annually by small arms. (Amnesty International)

The aim of globalisation is to dominate the rest of us, any other country, any other world [...] Globalisation is simply westernisation. The West wants to be the centre of the world. (Aminata Traoré: World Social Forum, Mali)

Directly or indirectly, hunger, weapons, forced migrations through lack of land, water or soil, result in *death*. There are also diseases, which in one way or another lead to death: AIDS, malaria – with the scandalous complicity of the multinational pharmaceutical companies, who have sought to protect their own patents by lobbying against making much cheaper life-saving generic treatments available. Then there are many other sources of suffering, such as unemployment and social exclusion. None of these belong to the order of nature. Their causes are historical. And it is important to recognise that today the fundamental cause is capitalism. As L. de Sebastián<sup>4</sup> says:

‘Real capitalism’ is responsible for the organisation of the world economy that is ethically and morally wrong, for the shameful and absurd coexistence in an ever more integrated world of appalling poverty with unprecedented wealth.

## the shameful and absurd coexistence in an ever more integrated world of appalling poverty with unprecedented wealth.

All this happens today without being noticed. When there is criticism, it focuses more on the *adjective* – such as *savage* capitalism – rather than on capitalism itself and its governing principle: the *right to property*. As long as that principle is held to be absolute and unassailable, any economy in the world will be structurally configured by a dynamic of oppression; humans beings will be rated according to their ability to produce wealth; their right to possess and enjoy wealth will prolong and add to the oppression of others and, of course, widen the gap between the haves and have-nots.

Ultimately, this is a *cruel* society. It is cruel because of the suffering it inflicts on the oppressed, and because of its unfeeling attitude (although there are valiant exceptions) towards that suffering in a world of abundance. Leonardo Boff says: ‘When future generations judge our time, they will call us barbarians, inhuman and pitiless, because of our heartlessness towards the sufferings of our brothers and sisters.’ To give just one example: ‘If human beings had even a little humanity, just 4% of the 225 largest fortunes in the world would be enough to give food, water, health and education to all.’ That is obscene.

We could go on quoting indefinitely. The figures we have given refer to today, not to some pre-globalisation period and they come from responsible and informed sources. But if we want them to help heal our civilisation’s ‘serious illness’, we must heed the warning of a Colombian missionary who has spent eighteen years in Uganda: ‘Statistics don’t bleed; people do.’

We are always seeking excuses to avoid confronting – or even coming into contact with – reality. Looking back, we might say that fifty years ago there was more wretched poverty on the planet, and in a sense that is true. But we must tell the whole truth; that is the only honest way to face reality. Looking to the future, there might even be a sense of euphoria: within two decades China may be able to eliminate the hunger of hundreds of millions of people – although we do not know whether they will manage it, or if they do, at what human cost.

But even if we are optimistic, reality still screams at us. ‘It can’t be like this!’ ‘God is angry’ (A. Nolan). ‘The unreasonable has become reasonable’ (H. Marcuse). And we haven’t even mentioned Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Darfur...

## Woes of the Spirit suffered by human beings: Dehumanisation

All this turns the vast majority in our world into ‘crucified people, [...] whose human face continues to be wiped out by the sin of the world. The powers of that world keep robbing them of everything, snatching their life from them, yes above all, their life.’

Ellacuría stressed the attack on life. The wealth-civilisation does not produce life; to a greater or lesser extent, it produces various kinds of death. Neither does it humanise people, which is what we want to focus on now. It is *inhuman* to deprive others of life when it would be possible to ensure it. But even more inhuman is the way that it is done, unjustly, cruelly and contemptuously – sometimes even in the name of a god. And it is inhuman that this deprivation of life should go hand in hand with the head-on pursuit of success and affluence. The wealth-civilisation fosters thinking and feeling that create a cultural and ideological climate poisoning the air the human spirit breathes. So not only is the *oikos* – our fundamental life-web – sick and in need of healing, but also the very *air* our spirits breathe. We are dehumanised, because we forget the *truth*. There is a *cover-up* of the truth and a proliferation of lies, *silence* in the face of scandalous inequality between rich and poor, *numbness* of the rich – and also of the poor – generated and indeed intended by the mass media.

It is dehumanising to forget *decency*. It is a brazen *mockery* of the victims to fail to implement important UN resolutions on fundamental human rights. There is massive *corruption* in nearly all spheres of power, justified by the unquestioned dogma of profit. There is *impunity* before, during and after atrocities, often carried out by governments themselves. It is also wrong to turn western democracy into an *absolute dogma*, without checking how it operates.

It is dehumanising to forget *maturity*, especially now when we hear that our world has ‘come of age’. There are *forms of fundamentalism*, that look attractive but have serious consequences: individualism, superficiality, success and pleasure are heedlessly accepted, promoted and rewarded. Simplistic and infantile attitudes are sometimes expressed with sentimental language in politics, and particularly often, in religion.



Then there is the dehumanising *compliance* of the West with Empire – *imperium magnum latrocinium* (the ‘great thieving empire’), as Augustine called it, even if we don’t talk like that much nowadays. This servility in one form or another, makes the West an accomplice in that Empire’s economic and military crimes and its human rights violations. It accepts the arrogance and domination of some human beings over others as normal. And it accepts obedience to that Empire’s orders as necessary, or at least understandable, if we want to be assured of a ‘good life’, ‘success’, and ‘security’, the ultimate ‘saving’ benefits.

In short, we are dehumanised by our *selfishness*, and our *heartlessness* towards the dramatic facts of cruel poverty, AIDs, exclusion and discrimination. We are dehumanised by our *contempt* for poor and indigenous people, and for our mother Earth.

We regard this dehumanisation as quite natural and something we can do nothing about, because that is the way things are. We don’t notice much since, unlike physical evils that lead to physical death, spiritual woes are not so easily reckoned. But they are extremely harmful.

## Ignoring human dignity

The first dehumanising aspect of some attempts to eliminate poverty is the way human dignity is ignored, almost on principle, as if that dignity had nothing to do with the matter. Or accepting that any means of alleviating poverty will do. That way of thinking is not only unethical, but also dehumanising, because we are not talking about wild animals but human beings.

It is also dehumanising to accept so readily in practice, even if not in theory, the slow rate of progress in overcoming poverty and the targets countries set for themselves. From the viewpoint of abundance, the rate of progress may seem relatively human and quick, but

**Just 4% of the 225 largest fortunes in the world would be enough to give food, water, health and education to all.**

from the viewpoint of poverty – and decency – it is inhumanly slow, and in some cases, as in some sub-Saharan countries, there has even been a postponement of the dates set. Development specialists have said that the millennium goals are flawed and will do little to diminish poverty. ‘Reducing by half the number of people suffering from hunger will take 145 years, and not be achieved by 2015, as 189 heads of state had guaranteed.’

It is also dehumanising that in the search for solutions, ethics is sidelined. Abolishing hunger requires technological know-how and strategies and a good dose of political pragmatism. But ignoring ethics does matter.

It matters for reasons of effectiveness: a top FAO official stated that ‘solving the problem of hunger today is not basically an economic or political problem; it is an ethical problem.’ And it matters on principle. If we can dispense with ethics to solve human problems, it means that efficiency and ethics can be divorced without damage to humanity. The ancient ideal, at least aspiration, of marrying virtue and happiness vanishes. All that remains is pragmatism with its strong brutalising potential.

And the same can be said for the language which is often used about human problems like hunger: *political will* is needed. Firstly, that means recognising that the political will is just not there, since hunger continues. And secondly, since *political* will is merely *human* will, the language of politics is being used as a cover-up. If there is no political will, that simply means that there is no effective human will to eliminate hunger. Confronted with the scandal of a hungry world, the term ‘political’ will is less shaming. It is used because it is less blatant than ‘human’ will, which asks us straight out: do we human beings want to eliminate hunger? We can debate the politics of this in order to seek a cop-out, and that is why the term is preferred. There can be no cop-out when we speak of the *human* will to eliminate hunger.

Let’s leave it there. Jean Ziegler says: ‘A child who dies of hunger is murdered.’ Those words bring Ivan Karamazov to mind. Karamazov’s anger when children were torn apart by dogs by order of a landlord, who was a former soldier, found no consolation in the thought that those children might go to a place where they would become at one with a universal harmony. ‘If they invite me to that heaven, I’ll refuse to go.’

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<sup>1</sup> On 16 November 1989, Jon Sobrino’s colleagues at the Central American University in San Salvador, the University Rector Ignacio Ellacuría SJ, five other Jesuits and their housekeeper and her daughter, were murdered by a Death Squad. Jon Sobrino escaped because he was speaking abroad.

<sup>2</sup> In: *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> J. Ziegler is UN Special Advisor on the Right to Food.

<sup>4</sup> L. de Sebastián, *Problemas de la globalización*, Barcelona, 2005, p. 4.

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As *Sofia* is not an academic journal, endnotes have been kept to a minimum but a fully referenced version of this article is available from the Editor. The article is an extract from Jon Sobrino’s book *The Eye of the Needle*, translated by Dinah Livingstone to be published by Darton, Longman and Todd (London) on 21 May 2008 at £9.95. The book has ample references.

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Jon Sobrino S.J., a Basque from Spain, is a liberation theologian teaching for many years in the Central American University in San Salvador. He has published many books. In 2006 Sobrino’s two major works on christology, *Christ the Liberator* and *Jesus the Liberator*, were censured by the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (Inquisition).

# 'Jesus Calls Us from the Worship of the Vain World's Golden Store'

Graham Carey asks: But in Bradford? In the Church of England?

Rabbi Abraham Heschel has written: 'It is customary to blame secular science and atheism for the eclipse of religion in modern society. It would be more honest to blame religion for its own defeats. Religion declined not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid.'

I believe my Church still fails to preach with vitality the biblical imperative with regard to the ecological collapse that faces us all. Some are aware of my work on this subject, which I set out in *Ecological Collapse: A Silent Church*. Channel 4 has broadcast a programme on a global failure in this same manner. Mark Dowd remarked that, of old, 'the leader is there to warn the people.' What we actually have is a situation pregnant with unrivalled opportunity and a church again last in line for capturing our imagination. Secular organisations have for decades warned, published and become martyrs not only to the material peril we are in but also to the social peril: Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, Women's Environmental Network, Pesticides Action Network and, of course, the well-known EarthFirst! eco-warriors. Several Catholic nuns and priests have died defending forest and native peoples of the Amazonian regions. We could not only encourage our school teachers to celebrate such brave religious but even set up a specialist Anglican unit to teach non-violent resistance to evil. It seems, however, that we are too much in love with the material consumption that goes with worshipping the vain world's golden store.

## the cruel flaunting of wealth, in the eyes of the despairing homeless, on programmes such as *Relocation, Relocation*

With a diminished and faltering church that has little will to reach out radically to a thoughtful, educated constituency, clergy would understandably have trouble in finding the language to use with their overwhelmingly conservative congregations; there is almost no one in my own town's congregations pro-actively conversing with others on the new knowledge or the complex issues of the day; most appear to consume anti-Christian, non-compassionate low-grade papers and pop media trivia to the exclusion of the richest intellectual and artistic culture the world has ever seen: and this culture includes theology, the

place where the church does its thinking. We can quote as examples Küng, Sölle, Kierkegaard. I hear little church comment on the spiritually ugly posturings of *Deal, No Deal* or on the cruel flaunting of wealth, in the eyes of the despairing homeless, on programmes such as *Relocation, Relocation*. Shouldn't we be expressing views on such items that dominate prime-time television? Especially in the city which has the largest number of bankruptcies and almost the largest number of house repossessions in the country – and the personal resentment to which these things lead. Why should young people come to church when we have nothing to say about such insidious harm, and little or nothing of personal, cultural or religious significance to them?

### Invocation

I thought  
now that I am old  
you would not come to dwell  
in my imagination.  
Before you brought  
dreamtime, escape  
renewal of the real  
and words to give it shape.

I did not think  
you would come like this –  
so human and so mortal and so male  
so absolutely on a day in time  
to rock my reason  
cause thought and speech to quail;  
already memory  
a pale moonlight version of yourself  
that I must try  
to think my way around,  
wonder at, be embarrassed by.

Kathleen McPhilemy

Kathleen McPhilemy's most recent collection is *The Lion in the Forest* (Katabasis 2004).

We should not require clergy to be social workers but priests; they were ordained to preach the truest good news. Our whole situation is not tragic but, on the contrary, exploding with a covert optimism we seem to be blind to. This news is nowhere more evident than among the hundreds of secular and religious sustainable communities listed in my *World Out of Control*. But when do clergy preach about such places where young people have the most loving contexts in which to grow up and whose teaching is found in Acts 2 and 1 Cor 12:25? Rarely if ever do we see programmes on such places on prime-time television – it's much more important for wealthy media owners to have spiritually questionable and corrupt fantasy worlds crowd out intelligent, educated values.

Modern socialism has long known the importance of understanding and enjoying culture and education in the service of freeing people from oppression – their own and other peoples' – but does the church want to liberate us? We should be running our schools so well, so happily and so religiously that belonging to their teachers' own church – or some other – when they reach adulthood would be something young people would all seriously want to do!

But could Bradford clergy learn to lead? The evidence so far does not look good. What could we do? We have an excellent Bishop's Officer, and the Diocese could relieve him of his present duties on full pay and instruct him to retreat, pray, meditate, rest and enjoy 'thoughtlessly' a three-month sabbatical at the Earth Connections Sustainability Centre on the remote Isle of Eigg in Scotland. This could be followed by a further three months on Iona, in which he would thoughtfully attend to the idea of how best to lead Bradford in a future of almost certain long-term social and ecological collapse. No Bishops' Council could instruct him better than he himself could. We should not neglect the lessons of the great flowering of Yorkshire Cistercian monasticism.

## The church's failure is as intellectual as it is spiritual.

We should celebrate the courageous, law-breaking life, not so much past martyrdoms, as those martyrdoms taking place today among EarthFirsters!, Greenpeace and Catholic religious globally. We could show film on this subject especially to the young attending our conferences; and film of anti-Trident activists dismantling weapons of mass destruction. The question does seriously arise of what we are going to say to



young people that is not being better said by Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, Women's Environmental Network and Pesticides Action Network. The human agenda is not spent or yet going to fail us; but it is far larger than Synods and Councils of Bishops appear to recognise or have time for. The essential question for the Bishop's Officer, Synod, Bishop – even parishes – is this: are they willing to consider the dismantling of the structure of global industrialisation along with its deeply false assumptions on life? Or shall we continue to pass motions that keep these structures in place?

There is no lack of suggested reading. For example, the items edited into my *World Out of Control*; Olivier Clement's *Roots of Christian Mysticism* (1993). There is the joyous North American communitarian literature; there are Wendell Berry, Sandra Steingraber, Joel Steinfeld's beautiful *Sweet Earth: Experimental Utopias in America* (2006). We have Jerry Mander's important critiques of industrial technology. The church's failure is as intellectual as it is spiritual, and we will not get far without studying and talking much harder than at present. As Adrian Hastings wrote in *The Tablet*, 'There is little time to lose in preparing ourselves mentally for Christian life in the very hardest of times to come.'

A new awareness of the problem will not come about without consulting revolutionary Christian thought: 'The problems we face today cannot be solved at the level of thinking that gave rise to them. We need new thinking – an evolution of our ideas, feelings, values and perceptions: an evolution of our consciousness.' Addressing a joint session of the US Congress in February 1991, Vaclav Havel, President of Czechoslovakia, went on to say:

Without a global revolution in the sphere of human consciousness, nothing will change for the better... And the catastrophe towards which this world is headed – the ecological, social, demographic or general breakdown of civilisation – will be unavoidable.

And to end with John Ruskin:

It is only possible to answer for the final truth of principles, not for the direct success of plans. What can be immediately accomplished is always questionable; what can be finally accomplished, inconceivable.

This is an edited extract of a longer document. Graham Carey has taught art at school, college and Open University and is an active member of Bradford Diocesan Synods.



# Our Attitude to Time

Eric Whittaker reflects on time, eternity and Einstein.

In our religious language we are still haunted by the concept of a three-decker universe. In the 1920s I was brought up to sing 'there's a home for little children above the bright blue sky', and although that hymn may have been superseded I still sing with gusto every Christmas 'he came down to earth from heaven'. Of course we know that there is no spatial position in the physical universe where heaven could be located, but we get away with it most of the time by working with the concept of a parallel three-decker spiritual universe in which up and down do not refer to physical dimensions but rather to higher and lower moral or ethical concepts. Thus we can happily leave geographical and astronomical considerations to one side in our religious talk. However I believe that this dual universe approach can lead us into problems in connection with the concept of time. It is fairly easy to free our spiritual three-decker universe from the constraints of spatial directions, but in most people's minds it shares the time dimension with its physical counterpart. However the legitimacy of such a sharing of the time dimension requires very careful consideration.

## The only point of time that we actually experience is the present moment.

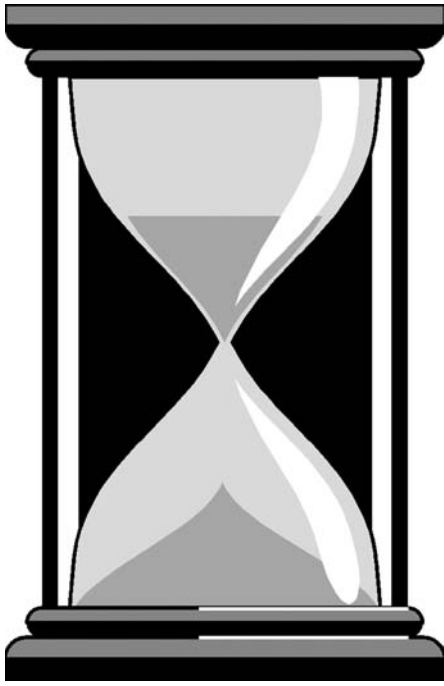
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Our direct experience of time is rather like that portrayed by a digital clock which, instead of having a moving hand, displays a succession of present moments. Nowadays such clocks usually present a series of illuminated digits which change up every minute or every second to tell us the actual time. Of course we do not experience time in a precise numerical way like that. But the first digital clocks worked by turning over a series of flaps on which the numerals were written. If one imagines a clock like that but with blank flaps, then that is rather like our direct experience of time. A flap corresponding to a 'present moment' keeps flicking over in our consciousness – perhaps about ten of them every second, since that is about the smallest time interval that we can resolve in noticing changes in our environment. This experience of a sequence of moments is very closely tied up with our experience of consciousness itself.

Although we cannot count the 'moments' that flick through our experience, we can usually keep some track of the total of them while we are conscious, even though in extreme circumstances we 'lose account of time'. Even when we are asleep and unconscious of the sequence of moments, we are often able (though not always) to keep some track of how much time has elapsed since we went to sleep, even to the extent of being able to pre-determine the time at which we shall wake up. However in deeper unconsciousness, as under anaesthesia, this ability is totally lost. Our obsession with time is perhaps closely associated with our innate desire to cling to consciousness, because only so can we feel assured of continuing to exist.

The next thing that we have to take into account is our distinction between past and future. The only point of time that we actually experience is the present moment, but we remember a long, long series of such moments that we call the past, and we expect there to be a further long series of such moments that we have not experienced 'yet'. We expect these 'future' moments to exist whether we look forward to them in hope or with dread, or even if we do not expect to be conscious (or even alive) to experience them. But we never actually experience either the past or the future, only the present.

The concept of time in physical science is quite different. Here there is really no concept of a present moment, except in so far as an observer of events is concerned. In the classical approach derived from Newton, time is a dimension alongside the three dimensions of space, its value changes continuously, it is applicable everywhere, and it enables one to describe the motions of every object in space. Why then should we not equally apply it in our three-decker spiritual universe? The answer is because of Einstein. We have had Newton's system for three hundred years and everyone regards it as normal, and although we have now had Einstein's system for about a hundred years, and it is accepted as a fundamental part of physics, that is always applied and where it leads to significantly different results, in ordinary life such an application is very rare. As a result it has not fully entered our consciousness that the nature of time according to Einstein is vitally different. It is not a separate dimension alongside the three of space, but a constituent of a four-dimensional space-time.



Every observer experiences a dimension of time that is sequential, together with three dimensions of space, but the specific direction in the four dimensional space-time that different observers experience as time depends on their velocity. This leads to the so-called 'twin paradox'. If one of a pair of twins goes on a long journey with a speed close enough to that of light, then when they are reunited he will have aged less than his stay-at-home brother, and this difference will apply to physical changes in their bodies, to the lengths of time in their memories, and the times recorded on their wristwatches. He will have experienced a shorter time than his brother because he will have experienced as space a component of what his brother experienced as time. Because there is no such thing as a unique time applicable everywhere and to everything in the physical universe, we have not got such thing as a time that can be transferred to our three-decker spiritual universe. The latter must therefore be regarded as timeless.

The idea of a parallel three-decker spiritual universe alongside the physical one means that we are sort of amphibians living in both. The continuous time dimension of our physical side appears as a sequence of moments which are presumably irruptions from the spiritual world through our brain activity, which enable us to make choices and decisions. Such irruptions can only occur so long (in time) as our physical side exists, and that is a finite entity that ends with its death. The spiritual universe on the other hand is outside time and is eternal, which is the quality of not being temporal, not an infinitely long endurance. Now that we have freed

our spiritual side from the limitations of time we can accept that it can have all the qualities that we really want, rest eternal and light perpetual, and be freed from the horror of lasting for an infinite number of years. This horror becomes apparent if we sing one of the verses of *Amazing Grace*:

When we've been there ten thousand years  
bright shining as the sun,  
we've no less days to sing God's praise  
than when we first begun.

Although written in the eighteenth century this conclusion is a perfect statement of the ideas of modern mathematicians regarding infinite numbers. Personally I would find starting my ten thousand and first year on that basis quite horrific. Having been forced by Einstein to put our three-decker spiritual world outside time, we have not only clarified the nature of our own existence, we have also potentially solved some major problems of theological thought, because we have also put God outside time – just as we have long realised that he is outside space. Of course there has always been a strong tendency to put God outside time:

A thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday;  
Before Abraham was I am;  
The lamb slain before the foundation of the world.

But equally there has always been a resistance towards making a good job of it, perhaps because of a concern to maintain the idea that God is active in history. However since there is evidently a somewhat porous boundary between our spiritual three-decker universe and the world of time and space so far as we are concerned, it can be equally porous to God's activity manifested at specific points in space-time. But the important thing is that God is not located at those points, or indeed at any other points in time. This means that there is no problem about freewill because there is no problem of God's having foreknowledge of our decisions before we make them, as foreknowledge involves knowledge at an earlier point in time. When we read a novel we follow the characters in their time frame, and we are outside it. We can agonise with the characters in the decisions that they make, even if we have read the story many times before and know what will happen. We know the whole of it at once in our time, whereas they experience it sequentially in their time. We exercise our freewill sequentially within our time frame, and though God is aware of the whole story he is aware of it from outside that time frame.

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Eric Whittaker is a retired academic scientist and a member of St. John's Church, Kidlington. He attends the Oxford SoF group.

## Please send your letters to:

Sofia Letters Editor

Ken Smith,

Bridleways,

Haling Grove,

South Croydon CR2 6DQ

revkevin19@hotmail.co.uk

## Eternity – here and now

Dear Editor,

Eric Whittaker may write about 'quality of life here and now' which is fine if you are young and healthy and prosperous, but what about the poor, the sick and the old? 'Pie in the sky when you die' has been justly ridiculed and condemned because it seemed to endorse social inaction, but Jesus did promise 'eternal life', for example to the Samaritan woman. Read St. John's Gospel.

To my mind it is unthinkable that all those suffering a poor 'quality of life' should not find ultimate redress. It may be simplistic, but I prefer to believe with Isaiah that God 'will wipe away the tear from every eye'. That does not, of course preclude our doing everything within our power to alleviate poverty and suffering, but in the meantime many thousands of people live wretched lives and die in squalor. It all depends whether you think each person is uniquely valuable or whether you think only in general terms about society as a whole. The concept 'eternity' is beyond our understanding but that doesn't invalidate it if you are humble enough to acknowledge the possibility of mystery.

Yours faithfully,  
Joan Smith

38 Holcombe Crescent, Ipswich, IP2 9QL

## It's all about images

Dear Editor,

Kirkham is wrong to suggest 'The conflict is about ... specifically the values of the European Enlightenment.' I posit the central conflict is about **images**. The pivotal date is 1485, long before the European Enlightenment, the year Botticelli painted *The Birth of Venus* for a Medici villa, a mythically charged painting no more acceptable to Islam now than it was then. The painting represents both the re-emergence of a highly secular art (various Roman villas held art no less secular) divorced from Church patronage as well as the emergence, unique at the time, of Italian banking and Letters of Credit involving 'corresponding' banks in Europe. Oddly enough, the Medici who commissioned the Botticelli also employed a Florentine called Amerigo Vespucci, who sailed to the New World – and gave his name to a continent. 1485 is the pivotal date in a conflict which has no prospect, until the end of time, of resolution. In my support, I quote the highly regarded E. H. Gombrich from his *The Story of Art*. 'The religion of the Middle East, which swept everything before it in the seventh and eighth centuries A. D., the religion of the

Mohammedan conquerors of Persia, Mesopotamia, Egypt, North Africa and Spain, was even more rigorous in this matter (of images) than Christianity

had been. The making of images was forbidden.' Little has changed. Fast forward to the 1990's and you have the British invention of the world wide web creating a parallel world of equal import to the 'digitisation' of surplus in Italian banking aided by an explosion (sic) in the ability of digital technology to proliferate imagery on an uncontrollable, global basis. This led to a 'perfect storm' for Islam, and thus 9/11 with its symbolic and actual destruction of iconography; though even that event, ironically, was led by the idea (in the mind of Bin Laden) of achieving iconic acts of destruction as imagery that would stick in the West. The pivotal moment for us is thus Botticelli mixing some 'paint' in 1485, after an entry in a Medici banking ledger.

Yours sincerely  
Christopher Truman  
39 Marsden Street, London, NW5 3HE  
TRUMAN433@aol.com

## An even larger view

Dear Editor,

*The Larger View* – page 4 of *Sofia* 86: This hymn is not only published in Storey's selected writings but is also No 126 in the Unitarian hymnbook, *Hymns for Living*, which contains another 31 of his re-writings, many of them deserving wider acknowledgment.

Yours sincerely,  
Bruce Nightingale.  
bruce.nightingale@fastmessage.co.uk



letters

## KIT WIDDOWS

At our December 8th meeting, SoF Trustees were shocked and sad to hear that our Vice-Chair Kit Widdows had died suddenly that morning. He was 61. For the last twelve years of his life Kit was Master of St Thomas the Martyr Church in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, where he was active in campaigns such as Fair Trade and Jubilee 2000, and helped found the debating forum 'Breathing Space'. Kit solidly supported *Sofia* magazine when it was under threat last year. Members will have read John Pearson's obituary in the February *Portholes*.



# Current Affair

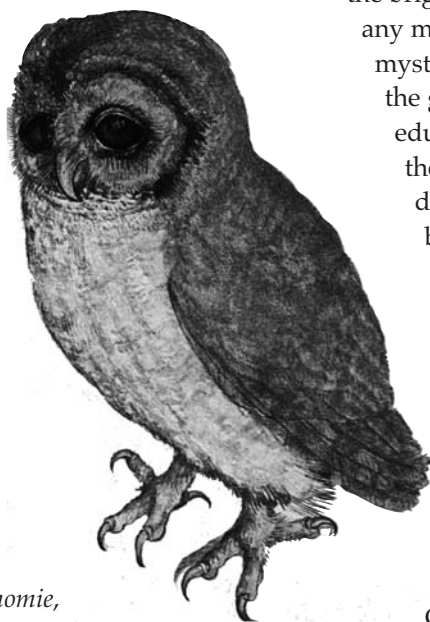
## Comment by Owl

Owl was pecking around for something light-hearted to spring us into the new year when the stark news of the serial suicides of young people in a Welsh town made a stronger bid for comment. Naturally we hear of 'questions being asked' so that 'lessons can be learned' – that useless sort of thing. But these tragic actions, which have left families and friends bereft, are frighteningly thought to be attracting emulation. Locally other young people confess to having 'thought about it.'

The explanations offered are along predictable lines: 'Nothing exciting for us to do at nights' . . . 'Few career opportunities'. This is far from a classic *anomie*, however. The vacuum, abhorred, gets filled. In the virtual world to which all the young have instant access, lives can be constructed, shared, empathised with – lived in fact. Fact, or fiction? We all walk around constantly 'writing' our mental autobiography. Some of us do more romanticising than others. But the revelation that immature young people are setting up their own 'memorial pages' on internet 'social' sites and posting illiterate messages to the memory of their departed peers is truly sinister.

'Now more than ever seems it rich to die . . .' – in Owl's generation that was a wonderful line for doleful adolescent who had been ticked off, again, for untidiness or indolence. 'To cease upon the midnight with no pain . . .' Properly educated, we could plod to school wallowing in Keats and a sense of injustice, yet we didn't react by stringing ourselves up with our school ties. Maybe there's a vacuum of logic here which Sea of Faith and the like-minded should be making more effort to fill. Reading what the young of Bridgend say makes it clear that they see suicide as the entry to another virtual world even nicer than Facebook or Bebo. It's a 'better place', where, it's implied, no effort is required of them, and where they and their friends stay forever young.

It would be as unfair to blame Welsh Chapel tradition for underwriting this fiction as it would to blame the Muslim paradise for beardless suicide bombers. The 'happy land' hymns of existence 'above



the bright blue sky' are not sung in schools any more. The 'sweet chariot' is mysteriously invoked only as a vehicle for the gods of rugby. But where in our educational and nurturing institutions is there a place for encouraging the developing mind to deal with human birth, life and death along logical as well as imaginative lines, and to show the difference? Whose job is it? The parents', of course: they nearly all manage to see that their offspring enjoy Santa Claus as real, then 'real'! When it comes to God and Heaven, however, they expect 'school' to do the needful, if they think about it at all. So where is this 'skill' on the National

Curriculum tick-list? You're right – there's no space anywhere for reflection on such topics, for the kind of classroom discussion which used to open windows of imagination and give adolescent fears and misapprehensions a good airing. Teachers now run a mile from anything unscripted. Youth workers are undermanned in the frantic business of setting up 'activities' to keep the young off the streets and out of Facebook. Almost all are untrained in anything resembling theology or philosophy.

And the Church . . . ? Well it usually still has a hand in the funerals, and maybe is a comfort on the whole. It's not doing the 'facts of life' job, though, often out of fear rather than hypocrisy. The tabloids are quick to smell out and demonise any thinking that might just 'undermine faith'. Meanwhile youngsters apostrophise their dead friends in bleak blogs – and a grown man, lost in psychotic fog, walks off a hotel balcony with his two children 'to heaven', where he is now sure his dead son resides, presumably forever a boy. So who is left carrying the torch for grown-up thinking? Pullman and Rowling, of course! But they are writing fiction.

A girl from Bridgend who said, 'I've thought about it' was talking about the suicides, but concluded 'I would never be so selfish.' Food for thought, and action?

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

Stephen Mitchell reviews

## **Impossible Loves**

by Don Cupitt

Polebridge Press (USA). 2007. 104 pages. ISBN: 9781598150018.

'And yet . . . as our lives pass we cannot help but become aware of the extent to which we continue to yearn after and pursue various impossible objects, loves, dreams, and projects. Why do we do this - and indeed do it more and more? What is the role of these impossible loves in our lives?'

What, even Don Cupitt? But of course. We do exactly that. We all do. Even Don. It is this extraordinary, searching honesty that have made Don Cupitt's books such a powerful read. This book is no exception and takes us on a new and extraordinary journey of self-discovery.

Those who think they know every turn in Cupitt's philosophy of life, may be tempted to skip the first chapter *So Far*. Before doing so they should think twice about the chapter's heading. *So far*. How far? That far? Even here we are beginning to suspect a looking-back, a looking-back that is slightly amazed at the distance travelled. So far that the starting point is almost lost to sight. So far that we may not be quite aware of where we are. For 'We are always in arrears: even self-awareness is always in arrears, as is shown by the familiar example of the athlete who has already decided upon the correct stroke and has begun to execute it well before he has become conscious of the flight path of the ball coming towards him.'

There are four classes of impossible loves that we are to explore, the dead, God, various unattainable or forbidden love objects, and various impossible dreams or ideals. Between them 'they consume a surprising amount of our time and emotional energy, especially as we grow older - that is, live past 70.' So be warned, this is not an easy read, even if you're nowhere near 70 - yet. It is an easy read in the sense that this is one of the most easily read Cupitt books. The words, the ideas, the writing are easily accessible. Almost too easy. We're tempted to turn the pages too quickly. But, if we are going to engage in any way with this book, then we are going to pause and reflect and explore ourselves.

We begin with perhaps one of the most painful of impossible loves, love for the dead, especially those 'very dear to us . . . They are reference points. We think of them daily, and somehow cannot help imagining that our thinking of them is a form of *communing* with them, and that is a very good thing to do.' And then on, on to our great loves in *Great Love*, and *Eternal Separation*. No quotations here. If you want Cupitt on marriage, buy the book.



reviews

This is a book written, of course, from one of the newest and most atheistic visions of the world. It's

written by someone who has constantly striven to be rid of every vestige of the old world-view. But even 'the world *after* God will go on being haunted by the ghost of God, much as the self-styled unbeliever admits by his very use of the term 'atheist' that God was there before him.' 'I must confess,' writes Cupitt, 'that I myself have not yet found a satisfactory way of describing the new vision of the world and the new religious outlook that does not secretly presuppose the primacy of the old God and the old view. So I am stuck in an impossible intellectual love-relationship with an impossible God. And I'm not sure that I even want to be cured.' Now learn to live with that impossible love. That is freedom. That is life.

It's why everyone of us who boast that we have travelled some way into this far country, who have liberated ourselves from so much of the oppression of the past should read the book. Without this kind of rigorous honesty and humility, we deceive ourselves and . . . and, yes, if you finished that phrase the ghost haunts you still.

But I mustn't give the impression that this a heavy book. The writing is full of Cupitt's wit and lightness of touch, the lines of poetry, the playing with words and rhetorical flourishes. . . 'Contemplating all these impossible loves,' he says, 'helps me with one vital task of learning how to end by being content with what I have been, what I have had, and what I have done, be it little or much.' And are these the final words? Of course they aren't. This is just the starting point for a future reconstruction of the human world.

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Stephen Mitchell is Chair of the Trustees of the Sea of Faith Network and author of *God in the Bath*.

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This book is available for £9.00 inclusive of p&p from: Stephen Mitchell, All Saints' Vicarage, The Street, Gazeley, Newmarket CB8 8RB.

Tony Windross reviews

## ***In Praise of the Secular***

by Lloyd Geering

St Andrew's Trust (New Zealand). 2007. 56 pages. £6.

In their book *A Religious Atheist?*, Raymond Pelly and Peter Stuart attempt an overview of the voluminous writings of Lloyd Geering. No one could accuse them of being unduly sympathetic to his work, and so it's not surprising that their eventual conclusion is negative. The main problem is that they have little understanding of why his views have developed over some 35 years in an ever more radical direction. The heterodox path is a hard one, and never chosen wilfully or lightly. Indeed, it's never actually chosen at all: we simply find ourselves drawn inexorably in particular directions given the sort of people we are. Reason may have a walk-on rationalisation part, but it's probably not what got us to where we've ended up.

It's a matter of being attracted to the company of some people rather than others, and it may be impossible to say why. There will be those who find Lloyd Geering a highly congenial intellectual and spiritual companion, whilst others would do anything to avoid him. The latter should therefore steer well clear of *In Praise of the Secular*, his latest publication. In it, as in all his work, he asks the questions that come naturally to intelligent and sceptical 21st century people, but which the churches almost always shy away from.

In his writings he shows that it really is possible to take the modern world and all its questions with the utmost seriousness, whilst at the same time putting religion at the heart of life. For Geering there is no contradiction between faith and science, because they are doing very different jobs – such that to try and treat them in the same way is in effect a category mistake. Instead of religion having to retreat into a ghetto in order to survive, he wants it to get out into the world and confront its critics head-on. Having survived a heresy trial in 1967, his reputation (and infamy) both inside New Zealand and much further afield grew steadily. And although there are many points of contact between Geering and Don Cupitt, neither is derivable from the other, having travelled their own antipodean paths completely independently of one another.

Far from trying to defend religion against the inroads of science, Geering enthusiastically embraces the secular, a word which originally meant simply 'this-worldly'. To be secular in this sense (the sense that Geering advocates) is to take the world of scientific knowledge with the seriousness it deserves. Einstein famously said that it's important to put things as simply as possible – but no simpler. In similar vein, Geering urges us to take the truths of science with the seriousness they deserve – but no more than that. If

you want knowledge, science is the place to go – in fact, it's the only place to go.

Religion doesn't give us

peculiarly exotic

knowledge, but a vision of what's possible, and a community through which we can try to realise it. Echoing Tillich, Geering writes that 'humans show themselves to be religious whenever and wherever they take the questions of human existence seriously', which means that 'the only truly non-religious person is one who treats human existence as trivial or meaningless' (p10). To wrestle with the Big Questions is (by definition) to be religious – whatever conclusion you may come to. Given the almost universal human tendency to look for meaning, and to hope for fulfilment, there is no reason to suppose that religion is on the point of disappearing. The challenge is to unshackle the asking of such questions, from the banal dogmatisms that are the public face of most churches.

For Geering a secular state is religiously neutral, rather than opposed to religion. It corresponds to Karl Popper's 'Open Society', and steers a vital middle course between theocratic fundamentalism and militant atheism. 'Fundamentalism is distrustful of human reason. It cannot enter into open dialogue because its dogmas must not be questioned' (p39). Fundamentalism, whether religious or atheistic, cannot tolerate pluralism: for the fundamentalist the truth is knowable – and essentially simple. It is a protest against the complexity of the world, and offers a route map that is so clear that it doesn't require (and indeed cannot accommodate) any kind of individual thinking.

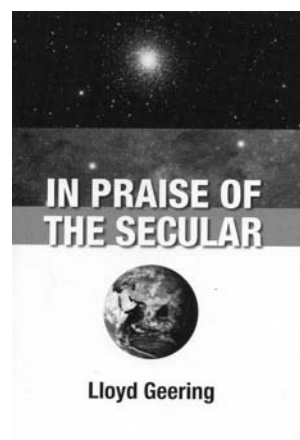
*In Praise of the Secular* is a stimulating romp through a great deal of territory, and offers an ideal introduction to Geering's thinking. It can be thoroughly recommended to anyone who would like support for the religious enterprise, and who is capable of thinking outside the ecclesiastical box.

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This book is available for £6.00 inclusive of p&p from:  
Stephen Mitchell, All Saints' Vicarage, The Street, Gazeley,  
Newmarket CB8 8RB

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Tony Windross is Vicar of St Peter's, Sheringham, Norfolk.  
His book *The Thoughtful Guide to Faith* was published by  
O Books in 2004.



reviews



John Nunser reviews

## ***Jesus Reconsidered: Scholarship in the Public Eye***

Bernard Brandon Scott (ed)

Polebridge Press (Santa Rosa CA). 2007. 104 pages. \$18 (amazon.com). ISBN: 9781598150025.

## ***The Future of the Christian Tradition: the Jesus Seminar***

Robert J. Miller (ed)

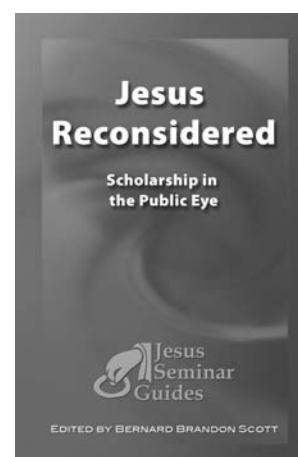
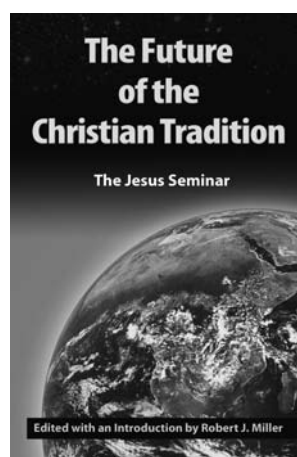
Polebridge Press (Santa Rosa CA). 2007. 264 pages. ISBN: 9781598150001.

The Jesus Seminar project, which began in Berkeley CA in March 1985, brought together a group of North American scholars from a variety of Christian denominations who were admittedly not of the first rank academically – but then, Lord Acton maintained that it is such writers who are the best guide to how a generation is thinking and hoping. The keynote address by Robert W. Funk, opening the Seminar's work, looked forward to a programme whose conclusions would – unprecedentedly within the churches – be presented to their ordinary members with full publicity, and which would be structured at every stage of enquiry as corporate (and therefore reliable). The simplest definition of its task was to identify the undoubted sayings and actions of Jesus of Nazareth, from the four canonical gospels, from Q, and from the *Gospel of Thomas*.

The Seminar clearly became collegial and mutually affirming even in disagreement; but – surprise! – as time went on those of its members from institutions with an explicit commitment to biblical inerrancy and atonement-theology withdrew. The Seminar's central conclusion is that the historical Jesus had been driven by wisdom and prophecy, with little remainder, and that a very large part of the apparatus of subsequent church-membership has no grounding in his life. *Jesus Reconsidered* is a clear and valuable survey of the Seminar's work. *The Future* is a collection of papers given at a special general meeting of members and sympathisers held in New York in 2004 when the biblical work was largely complete. These papers (with a few from non-theological disciplines) were to address, in the light of the Seminar's conclusions, the present and future life of the Christian tradition as it confronts 'the global age and the new millennium'. There is much reference to 'Axial Ages', the first in 800-200 BCE and the second in our own time. The character of *The Future* is given a fresh twist by its including two papers from the very English Don Cupitt, whose response to 'the Christian tradition' is critiqued by several contributors.

This is not however sufficient to make the discussion 'global'. It seems very American, and from a certain generation – mine (so that is not a criticism!). I was a history student when the UN resolved its Universal Declaration of Human Rights; I sat at the feet of Tillich at Harvard in 1957; I was Dean of a Cambridge college when John Robinson's *Honest to God* was published in 1964 and Vatican II completed its work the following year. There was no reason to suppose the flourishing *aggiornamento* of Christian tradition in at least some continuing church contexts had by definition to be a dead duck. Karl Barth has much to answer for.

Don Cupitt's tribute to John Robinson is written with real affection and feeling. He notes the way that ordinary



people – not just those still in touch with congregations – picked up his book. But such people got the message that the holy and learned Michael Ramsay, Archbishop of Canterbury, together with most parish clergy dismissed Robinson. In the years of 'the spirit of 68', the New English Bible and the Series III Eucharist pressed ancient texts into 'contemporary' clothing, and as Krister Stendahl and John Drury respectively commented they became weirdly unlikely news-stories and doggedly incredible belief-statements. Which I assume is where the Seminar began: that Jesus was not like that.

Can 'the Christian tradition' – and now we have to talk global language – find a *renovatio* that starts with Jesus? As things are, that can't be likely or democratic. Any serious attempt to found a fresh collegial order for a way forward would (at least for a time) need to build a mini-society that cut clean away from those wedded to biblical inerrancy and 'washed in the blood of the lamb' preaching. And then – perhaps a more English-congenial way – succeed in pushing all that to the back of everyone's wardrobe, like the Prayer Book service for the 'Churching of Women'.

Meanwhile God – reported in a sometimes counter-intuitive variety of sightings across the world – rules (the Dawkins alternative may be as probable, but is considerably less humanly attractive). His kingdom (I don't like the Seminar's 'imperial domain'), that Jesus so authentically defined himself as relating to, has a plausible connexion with the universalising of human rights. Humans are still inescapably bound into lives of religiosity, much of it increasingly likely – unless we offer alternatives – to be far from their vocation

John Nunser is a fellow of the Human Rights Centre at the University of Essex and Canon Emeritus of Lincoln Cathedral.

Anne Ashworth reviews

## Common Prayer

by Fiona Sampson.

Carcanet (Manchester). 2007. 74 pages. £9.95. ISBN 9781857549423

In the title poem of this collection, the poet Fiona Sampson writes:

Screen-iron of sanctuary  
and communion rail, in a dark church;  
a hassock rasping the knees.  
Struggle. Prayer as continuing failure.  
The self  
    mounting by questions  
to collapse –  
    God  
was in his own unbridgeable  
distance.

So what for her is *Common Prayer*? It is a super-sensitive awareness of the world around, coupled with a recognition of the divine in human relationships. The latter produces erotic poems with religious titles such as *Body Mass*, in which sex is worship. Here every line uses religious language to describe the sex act, ending 'chasing flights of angels, he/ tumbles to earth himself – in we.' In *Take, Eat* we read 'Kissing and praying? Not the same' and yet, the poet adds, each is saying 'I'm yours alone. Self, ambition, fall away here.' Two of the poems are almost unbearably poignant, describing a beloved person dying in hospital. In one of these, *The Miracle Cabinet*, the 'cabinet' is the hospital lift but the whole painful experience is framed in biblical language.

Before we proceed, a health warning. It needs to be said that this is not a book for those who cannot cope with the hints and disjunctions of contemporary poetry. Your brain may hurt. Many of the poems are 'difficult', but not one lacks the divine spark. They excite, they lift, they throw light on the mundane scene in a truly religious transfiguration. The poet Charles Tomlinson declared that he sought 'a poetry of water, light and air'. Fiona Sampson has found such a poetry. Many of her images are of water and light, images derived from a fine-tuned close observation. Her poems reveal what she calls 'the stretched line of attention holding itself/ breath stilled.' In *La Source*, for instance, a spring is where 'a lens of rising water/ bends the grass.' The words 'light' and 'window' recur throughout the book, in many poems several times. *Attitudes of Prayer* is not a simple poem but has a series of very simple images of light: 'Light glints on a door-handle,/ draws parallels on the carpet... Lamplight on skin, on a polished table.'

A poem called *Night Fugue* begins with the arresting line 'Gathering left-over light, the barn owl...' For *Mehr Licht* the epigraph is from Goethe: 'Open the second shutter too, so more light can come in.' A key sentence in the poem is 'The word you're looking for is/ incandescence.' The poem ends with a splendid image of the energy of light:

waves of colour-particles  
are washing your hair, they're thrown streaming  
down your back –  
soundlessly  
the whole scarf  
of light; the pulsing crown.



reviews

Fiona Sampson opens for her readers that second shutter we too seldom use. As she stands on *Trumpledor Beach*:

Water breaks lightly  
on sand –  
a rhythmic exhalation...  
salt-blisters bloom between your toes  
like the blossom of foam...  
Through each pale colour  
you can almost see light  
itself.

From the beach she passes to

The modern city,  
tremoring against an early-morning sky...  
It shifts in light  
the way water  
shifts a gleam from place to place.

Not all Sampson's poems are in free verse. Some, such as *Body Mass*, are sonnets, albeit with flexible line lengths. Two of these refer to nuns. One begins 'Slim as a nun, I lie along/ the margin of a borrowed bed' and goes on to ask 'Abandonment... is this, then, what incarnation means?' *Anchorage* speaks at first scathingly of how

Those fasting women in their cells  
drained a honeycomb brain  
of every sugar drop of sense...  
Would any question what she did  
to distance her from how we live,  
outside such dedication?

Yet the poet closes with an aching appreciation: she is left with

a taste of something sweet –  
the emptied self a room swept white.

One imagines perhaps a Catholic or high Anglican background for this poet, now necessarily left behind yet still providing her with a mental framework and religious language. So, yes, *Common Prayer* is in a strange sense a religious book, but the poet's common prayer is a matter of attentiveness to this world – in her own words, 'Obedience/ to this given world.' She makes us see the sacramental in the ordinary, and that is a poet's most precious task.

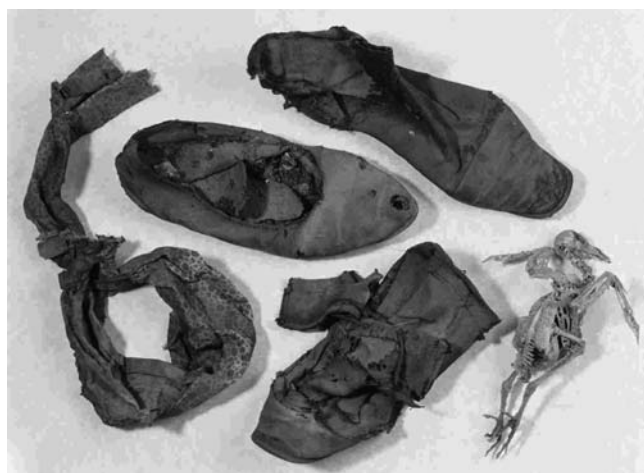
## Cicely Herbert visits *the Northampton Museum*

Throughout human history, 'to go barefoot' has been seen as either the manifestation of extreme poverty, or as an expression of the wish to discard material belongings and to live in simplicity. One remembers Gandhi.

When I suggested to our Editor that I would like to write about a museum dedicated to the history of footwear, she reminded me of the story of Saint John of the Cross, the great Spanish mystic, a member of the reforming branch of the Carmelites, who was imprisoned after he had encouraged members of his order to lead a simpler and more ascetic life, one that included forgoing footwear. This suggestion was not to the liking of the more worldly members of the order, who had no wish to be 'Discalced'. In 1575 John was seized and imprisoned in a cell so small he could barely stand upright. It was during the nine months he spent in the darkness of this dungeon that he wrote his greatest work *The Canticle*.

In *The Merchant of Venice* Shakespeare puns the words 'soul' and 'sole'. I remembered this during my visit to the Northampton Museum, which has a collection of 'Concealed Shoes', one of the fascinating byways covered by the exhibits. It has been suggested that unlike items of clothing, shoes retain the shape of the wearer, and because of this many people believe that they contain the spirit of the wearer. Concealed shoes have usually been discovered during restoration work to old houses and cottages, often having been hidden in parts of the wall nearest to doors and windows, or in the roof, perhaps to ward off evil spirits. A number of the 'concealed shoes' have been sent to the museum where some are on display. These are of particular interest to historians, because they tend to be shoes belonging to the poor, which would not otherwise have survived intact. Most of these shoes 'are heavily worn and show evidence of multiple repairs.' It is also possible that the concealment may have had been connected to the practice of witchcraft and magic rites.

In contrast, many of the display cases in the two galleries devoted to the history of footwear and shoemaking, glow and shimmer with inventiveness, colour, and glorious fun. The information provided by the curators is exemplary, revealing the extraordinary lengths that people are prepared to go to, in order to enhance their feet. Some of the historical excesses are



distressing to view – in particular the tiny shoes worn by Chinese women whose feet were so cruelly bound from infancy – and others, such as Vivienne Westwood's more extreme creations are, quite simply, daft. One learns how Moira Shearer wore out 25 pairs of ballet shoes during the making of the film *The Red Shoes*. Among the exhibits are, Turkish bathhouse shoes, toe-peg shoes from India, blue suede rock'n'roll shoes and even footwear for valued animals. On display are a silver satin boot for a dog with a sore paw, a pair of black rubber wellington boots made by Dunlop for sheep with foot problems, a sturdy leather boot worn by a pony, and another for an elephant.

Examples of present-day students' work show that the future is in good hands; and I have a personal reason to be grateful to the famous Doctor Marten, a local man, whose sturdy shoes saved my feet when a car ran into me. 'Doc Martens' are in demand world-wide and until recently were made in Northampton, as the orthopaedic footwear supplied to the National Health Service, still is.

There are displays of expensive footwear for the rich and the royal, and many examples of the folly of those who have more money than sense. Most importantly, one learns something of the history of the shoemakers, descendants of the earliest cordwainers. (There was a street of cordwainers in the town by the 13th century.) In spite of the inexorable rise of mass production techniques world wide, Northampton remains a major centre for bespoke and beautifully crafted shoes. I don't have space to do justice to such a fascinating collection, but for anyone seeking an enjoyable and informative day out, I recommend a visit to this unique museum. You will not be disappointed and you will learn a great deal about the inventiveness, craftsmanship and skill of human beings.

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The Northampton Museum and Art Gallery is at Guildhall Rd, Northampton (tel: 01604 838111). It is open Monday to Saturday 10am-5pm; Sundays 2pm-5pm. Admission is free.

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Cicely Herbert is one of the trio who founded and continue to run *Poems on the Underground*. Her poetry collection *In Hospital* (Katabasis 1992) describes her stay in London University College Hospital after a road accident in which she nearly lost a leg.



# Mayday Notes



## Utopia

The subtitle of Jon Sobrino's new book, an extract of which appears on page 10, is 'A Utopian-Prophetic Essay'. As he says himself, the idea of 'Utopia' is not treated with much respect in postmodernity and it is true that nowadays in England 'utopian' tends to have overtones of 'unrealistic' or 'mere fantasy'. However, Utopia is an enabling dream we do not want to lose, especially if we think of it, not as some 'perfect' world but as a 'good enough' world for everybody. Utopia has a long tradition in London, where we will be welcoming Sobrino this summer.

When I translated *Love* by Ernesto Cardenal, published in 1974, Cardenal visited London (his country Nicaragua was still under the Somoza dictatorship at that time). The publisher gave us a good dinner and afterwards asked Ernesto what he would like to do for the rest of the evening. He replied what sounded like: 'San Tomás Moro.' He wanted to pay his respects to the author of *Utopia*. So late at night, we drove through Chelsea and finally round the walls of the Tower of London, where More had his head cut off, and thought about Utopia.

London's utopian tradition includes not only Thomas More from Chelsea; but from the English Revolution (like the Nicaraguan, such a 'theological' revolution): Thomas Rainborough in the Putney Debates; and Gerrard Winstanley, who led the Diggers on St George's Hill in Surrey, afterwards living near St Giles in the Fields; William Blake from Lambeth and his tomb in Bunhill Fields; from 'dingy Hammersmith': William Morris and his *News from Nowhere*. As a Londoner, that is my tradition, and I briefly quote below from More, Rainborough, Winstanley, Blake and Morris.

## Thomas More *Utopia* 1516

In other commonwealths, every man knows that unless he provides for himself, how flourishing soever the commonwealth may be, he must die of hunger; so that he sees the necessity of preferring his own concerns to the public; but in Utopia, where every man has a right to everything, they all know that if care is taken to keep the public stores full, no private man can want anything; for among them there is no unequal distribution, so that no man is poor, none in necessity; and though no man has anything, yet they are all rich...

## Thomas Rainborough 1647

Really I think that the poorest he that is in England hath a life to live as the greatest he; and therefore truly, sir, I think it's clear that every man that is to live under a government ought first by his own consent to put himself under that government.

## Gerrard Winstanley 1649

In the beginning of Time, the great Creator Reason made the Earth to be a Common Treasury, to preserve Beasts, Birds, Fishes and Man, the lord that was to govern this Creation, for Man had Dominion given to him, over the Beasts, Birds, and Fishes; but not one word was spoken in the beginning, that one branch of mankind should rule over another. And the Reason is this. Every single man, Male or Female, is a perfect creature of himself...

## William Blake, *Jerusalem* 1804

The Divine Vision still was seen,  
Still was the Human form Divine,  
Weeping in weak and mortal clay,  
O Jesus, still the Form was thine...

In my Exchanges every Land  
Shall walk, and mine in every Land,  
Mutual shall build Jerusalem,  
Both heart in heart and hand in hand.

## William Morris 1890

*Guest awakes from his dream of the future.*

I lay in my bed in my house at dingy Hammersmith thinking about it all and trying to consider if I was overwhelmed with despair at finding I had been dreaming a dream; and strange to say I was not so despairing...

Ellen's last mournful look seemed to say: 'Go back again, now you have seen us, and your outward eyes have learned that in spite of all the infallible maxims of your day there is yet a time of rest in store for the world, when mastery has changed into fellowship – but not before... Go on living while you may, striving with whatsoever pain and labour needs must be, to build up little by little the new day of fellowship and rest and happiness.'

Yes, surely! and if others can see it as I have seen it, then it may be called a vision rather than a dream.

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Books: Thomas More, *Utopia*; *Selected Writings of Gerrard Winstanley* (Aporia Press, London, 1989); William Blake, *Jerusalem*; *Three Works* by William Morris (Lawrence and Wishart, London 1986). Exhibition: The Putney Debates Exhibition, St Mary's Church Putney (ring for exhibition opening times: 020 8788 4414).

Jonathon Porritt reviews

## ***Earth Shattering – eco poems***

edited by Neil Astley

Bloodaxe (Newcastle). 2007. 256 pages. £9.99. ISBN: 9781852247744

Any poetry anthology, in any field, inevitably owes something to those anthologies that have gone before it. But with *Earth Shattering*, Neil Astley has set out to do something rather different – not just moving us well beyond the canon of ‘nature poetry’ (which a number of other anthologies have also sought to do over the last few years), but by digging much deeper into the complexities of the historical relationship between humankind and the living Earth that sustains us, reflected in a highly contemporaneous and politically relevant way. That will certainly appeal to environmental activists who will already be familiar with many of the poets featured in *Earth Shattering*. But they will discover a whole lot more than that in this astonishingly eclectic and wide-ranging anthology.

For one thing, Astley sets out systematically to fill some of the yawning gaps in our usual range, particularly regarding eco-poetry from the United States. For me, this was a real delight. Over-familiarity with the work of ‘old faithfuls’ such as Wendell Berry and Gary Snyder would appear to have rendered me deaf to poets such as Denise Levertov, Mary Oliver and W.S. Merwin, let alone a whole slew of native American poets including Linda Hogan and Joy Harjo who are such subtle, fresh voices, covering an extraordinary emotional range.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the dominant tone here and in the anthology as a whole is unavoidably elegiac, with many poems focussed on both historical and current loss of species, habitats, special places and ‘right relationships’. Cumulatively, the power of that indictment is overwhelming, the pain and anger intense. There are far fewer poems simply celebrating the beauty and mystery of the Earth and its teeming citizenry, even though the two sections that do focus more on this inspirational quality (*The Great Web* and *Force of Nature*) are amongst the strongest in the anthology, with excellent commentaries from the Editor.

This has to be one of the great strengths of *Earth Shattering*. The work of each of the poets featured in the anthology is properly contextualised, the significance of their wider work briefly explained, and hugely helpful insights provided into motivation and, occasionally, interpretation. For the most part, Neil Astley relies on his own expertise in providing these ‘extended footnotes’, but I particularly enjoyed the way he draws on other writers (such as Jonathan Bate whose wonderful *Song of the Earth* Astley cites as his own most important influence) and other poets to provide additional insights. Sometimes he draws on the poet’s own commentaries of their underlying philosophy, especially when this has relevance to the collection as a whole. For example Mary Oliver’s reflection on her own poetic impulse (‘the man who does not know nature, who does not walk under the leaves as under his own



reviews

roof, is partial and wounded. I say this even as wilderness shrinks beneath our unkindness and our indifference. We can come to our senses yet, and rescue the world, but we will never return it to anything like its original form’) clearly doubles up as a leitmotiv for many, many of the authors represented here.

In this whole area of reflection and commentary, Astley’s editorial touch seems very sound. There may be rather more questions both about the categorisation of contributors (with considerable overlap between different sections) and indeed the choice of contributors. This may sound churlish, but there were a surprisingly large number of poems that I just found very hard work as in producing almost zero reward for considerable time invested. And given that this is a substantial collection, I found myself towards the end either dipping in or tracking contributions from poets that had really caught my attention rather than crunching each and every individual item.

But there were so many completely new discoveries as to more than make up for the occasional ‘what the hell is that about?’. Perhaps it just reflects my own current mood (one of growing anger at the fact that what we are doing to the Earth today we are doing in full knowledge, with no conceivable excuse of ignorance or uncertainty as to consequence), but I was particularly struck by those poets who explicitly link environmental devastation to the ongoing oppression of communities and whole nations – Jayne Cortez writing about the Ogoni people in Nigeria, for instance, or Ernesto Cardenal reflecting on the impact of the Somoza regime in Nicaragua.

These are certainly some of the more polemical contributions, unapologetically setting out to stir anger and action – as Oodgeroo, the first published Aboriginal poet, puts it:

But time is running out,  
And time is close at hand,  
For the Dreamtime folk are massing  
To defend their timeless land  
Come gentle black man  
Show your strength;  
Time to take a stand.  
Make the violent miner feel  
Your violent  
Love of land.

But the heart of *Earth Shattering* lies in one grand philosophical enquiry threaded throughout the collection: to what extent are we destined, as a species, to rediscover a proper sense of co-habitation, of deepest intimacy with the living world – or are we now locked into the role of alien presence, or hateful cancer, until the final reckoning? Theodore Roethke's 'Moss Gathering' or Pattiann Rogers's 'The Laying on of Hands' beautifully capture that essential conflict between our non-negotiable 'naturalness' and our problematic and habitually destructive separateness.

The enquiry remains open-ended – just! But as Neil Astley so eloquently reminds us, poetry has a special, possibly unique role to play in persuading us to confront such conflicts far more honestly than we are currently inclined to do:

As our world's politicians and corporations orchestrate our headlong rush towards Eco-Armageddon, poetry may seem like a hopeless gesture. But 'Earth Shattering' shows that the power of poetry is in the detail, in the force of each individual poem, in every poem's effect on every reader. And anyone whose resolve is stirred will strengthen the collective call for change.

Jonathon Porritt is Founder Director of Forum for the Future [www.forumforthefuture.org.uk](http://www.forumforthefuture.org.uk), Chairman of the UK Sustainable Development Commission [www.sd-commission.org.uk](http://www.sd-commission.org.uk); and author of *Capitalism as if the World Matters*; (Earthscan, revised pbk edition 2007) available through Forum for the Future website.

## Milton's 400th Birthday

Your Editor will be taking part in the celebrations for Milton's 400th birthday at the Chalfont St Giles and Jordans Festival, reading some of Milton's and her own poems on May 13th. For further details of the week-long Festival see [www.chalfontstgilesliteraryfestival.org](http://www.chalfontstgilesliteraryfestival.org) or contact [editor@sofn.org.uk](mailto:editor@sofn.org.uk) One of my favourite passages in *Paradise Lost* comes in Book 8, when Adam asks the Archangel Raphael if angels make love, making the Archangel blush:

'To love thou blam'st me not – for love, thou say'st, leads up to heaven, is both the way and guide; bear with me, then, if lawful what I ask: Love not the heavenly spirits, and how their love express they – by looks only, or do they mix irradiance, virtual or immediate touch?'

To whom the angel, with a smile that glowed celestial rosy-red, love's proper hue, answered: 'Let it suffice thee that thou know'st us happy, and without love no happiness...'



## Distribution Des Anges

*A response to poem by Gerard Lemaire with this title*

It's a difficult question, this:  
whether they are in fact there  
where they are said to be.  
As far as I can see  
the fishmonger's far too busy  
to make any comment.  
Those who've seen them  
might say they appear  
as mercurial flashes of light  
off the scales of the fish  
where they dart underwater.  
But why should the fishmonger care?  
For him it's the fish that count.  
And angels, unlike fish,  
aren't easily caught.  
Besides, who'd want them,  
bodiless and light-infested,  
gracing the dinner-table,  
however distributed?  
Not the little women  
who stand in the queue  
by the fishmonger's lorry.  
Angels thrive elsewhere,  
find their place in the luminous  
golds and greens and blues  
of Florentine Fra Angelicoes,  
conjured from the numinous  
into the tactile forms of art.

Christopher Hampton

Christopher Hampton taught for many years in the University of Westminster and the London City Literary Institute. His latest collection is *Border Crossings* (Katabasis 2005).



## This Is My Body

1

*This is my body* said Demeter, briefly.  
She wasn't given to words.  
Her tapering toes said it  
curling along roots  
nuzzling moles and voles  
tapping the phosphates of the Eumenides  
(who were not word women either –  
liturgical dance, perhaps  
under their brown ceiling).

*This is my body* said Demeter's fingers,  
threading sunstruck cornstalks,  
tips extended, feathered nerve endings  
reduplicated, pliant.

*And this*, combing out her hair thinnings:  
keys to new sycamores,  
conkers, elderberries.  
I am laying down layers of coal.

Mother, prattled Persephone,  
why do things keep falling?  
Why won't the corn stay green?  
And Mother, listen, feel –  
something underground  
is stamping, heaving, chanting.

*Corn is mown  
and corn is ground.  
Ground is torn  
and earth turns round.  
This is my body  
baked as bread,*

Demeter said.

2

*This is my body* said the man, briefly.  
He had been given to words.  
Words were given to him.  
He had given away his words.

Now, running out of stock  
and out of time  
and almost out of flesh  
(they were yapping, snapping, seething  
under the reaped furrows  
after his blood, the Furies) –

*this is my blood* he added hastily,  
willing it all to friends.

Rabbi, babbled Thomas,  
how can we know the way?  
Shall we all go under?

*Earth is food  
and earth is wine.  
Motherhood  
and fall are mine.  
This is my body,  
wine and bread,*

the man about to be buried said.

## 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  
as heavenly acrobatics.

Anne Ashworth

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We reprint the poem *Flying* as in *Sofia 86* its final line got clipped in electronic flight. Acknowledgment: *Flying* first appeared in *The Rialto*. Anne Ashworth's publications include her poem-sequence *The Verb To Be is Everywhere Irregular*, (SoF), and her prose-and-poetry treatise, *The Oblique Light: poetry and peak experience* (Quaker Universalist Group). Poet Anne Ashworth will be running a workshop at SoF summer conference *In The Making: Creativity in Religion And the Arts* (July 25-7: see insert flier).



*‘There was a rich man, who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, full of sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man’s table; moreover the dogs came and licked his sores.’*