

sfia

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The Art of Humanity



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**Dinah Livingstone, 10 St Martin's Close,
London NW1 0HR
editor@sofn.org.uk**

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

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Contents

3 SoF Annual Conference

Editorial

4 The Art of Humanity

Articles

5 *The Shaping Spirit – Beethoven's Last Quartets* by Christopher Hampton

7 *Catching Sight* by Don Cupitt

9 *The Art of Humanity* by Dinah Livingstone

14 *The Struggle Shared: A Dialogue between Atheist Friends (II)* by Philip Berry

16 *Do We Need Religion?* by Anna Sutcliffe

Poetry

4 *Plato and the Waters of the Flood* by John Heath Stubbs

22 *Ghazal* by Joan Sheridan Smith

Reviews

21 **Biblical Studies:** Henry Wansbrough reviews *Who on Earth was Jesus?* by David Boulton

23 **Theology:** Francis McDonagh reviews *The History and Politics of Latin American Theology* by Mario Aguilar

24 **Science:** Dominic Kirkham reviews *Science Vs. Religion? Intelligent Design and the Problem of Evolution* by Steve Fuller

25 **Opera:** Cicely Herbert reviews *The Minotaur* by Harrison Birtwhistle

26 **Stories:** Anthea Boulton reviews *The Biggest Female in the World and Other Stories* by Wendy Perriam

Regulars

18 Letters

20 *Current Affair* by Owl

Front Cover Image: *Jazz* by Matisse

Back Cover Image: *Plate* by Susan Cupitt



is the magazine of the Sea of Faith Network (UK)
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sofia 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.

sofia regards religion as a human creation and, in rejecting the supernatural, is for humanity with its questing imagination and enabling dreams.

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

In The Making



creativity in religion and the arts

SoF Network 21st Annual Conference Liverpool Hope University Friday 25 – Sunday 27 July 2008

Message from Conference Committee Chair Penny Mawdsley

We, your conference-organising team, appreciate that you may still be wondering whether you should travel (further than usual) to an unfamiliar destination, and, in some cases, pay rather more than you are accustomed for a few days away. But if you are still wavering please do reconsider. We have worked hard to provide an exciting line-up of opportunities for you to experiment in creative areas that you may not have tried before. There are workshops by professionals on sculpture, painting and various types of dance, there are several types of choral music-making and dramatic activity on offer, poetry readings by live poets, story-telling and laughter therapy, creative thinking and lively debate in original areas and much, much more (including plenty of less physically active options). You will be able to choose 4 different workshops from the selection.

There will be George Pattison's talk to lead us in, Don Cupitt's reflections to lead us through and Patrick Sandford's lecture to lead us out into our closing event, a round-up of samples of what will have been going on in the various performance arts workshops. There will be plenty of creative fringe activities available too, not forgetting a chance for you to have YOUR say in base groups and the AGM. Hope very much to see you and your friends there!

Contact: Sea of Faith Conference, Tanahlot, Main Road, Brighstone, Newport,
Isle of Wight PO 30 4AJ

Telephone: 01983 740172. Email: sofconf@yahoo.co.uk

More information and downloadable booking form online: www.sofn.org.uk

The Art of Humanity

This June issue of the magazine is a sort of forerunner to SoF's annual Conference, which this year is on religion and the arts. You can read more about it on page 3.

The title of this issue of *Sofia* is *The Art of Humanity*: articles on various arts look at how art enables us both to express and create our humanity. First we have an article from Christopher Hampton on music. He focuses on Beethoven's last quartet and the fascinating question as to why Beethoven actually wrote words on the score: 'muss es sein?': 'must it be?' and then later on: 'es muss sein': 'it must be'.

Next we have Don Cupitt writing about the visual arts. In a broad sweep through the history of European art he tells us how 'around the year 1800 or so in the West a new philosophy and a new understanding of art develop at the same time': artists don't just 'picture' the world as it is; they actually help create the way we see it. 'Art became a way of refreshing, questioning, criticising and revising the ways in which we all see and build our world.'

In a talk she gave to the Yorkshire SoF group called *Do We Need Religion?* Anna Sutcliffe defends art and what might be called the poetic aspects of religion, saying 'A flaw of the Enlightenment project, was the disparaging of poetic and mystical experience *as such*.' I am also including the talk I gave in April to the Oxford SoF Group, called *The Art of Humanity*, which is quite long, so that is why this editorial is quite short.

I hope this issue will give readers food for thought on 'the art of humanity' and that you will consider continuing your creative reflection and activity at the SoF annual Conference in July.

Plato and the Waters of the Flood

In one of the remoter parts of Asia Minor, near what was once the southern boundary of the Phrygians, there is a warm spring flanked by a Hittite monument, and known to the Turks as Plato's Spring. The reason for the name is that it was at this spot, according to Arab legend, that Plato succeeded in stopping the Flood by making the waters run underground

– W.K.C. GUTHRIE, *Orpheus and Greek Religion*

When on Armenian Ararat
Or Parnassus ridge
Scrunched the overloaded keel,
Pelican, ostrich,
Toad, rabbit, and pangolin –
All the beasts of the field –
Scrambled out to possess once more
Their cleansed and desolate world.

Plato, by that fountain,
Spoke to the swirling deep:
'Retire, you waters of Chaos,
Flow retrograde, and sleep;
Above the swift revolving heavens
Rule the intelligible,
Chaste and undecaying ideas;
Brackish waters, fall!'

Plato, in the academic grove,
Among the nightingales,
Expounded to wide-eyed ephebes
His geometric rules;
Reared a republic in the mind
Where only noble lies
Reign; he expelled the poets
(With courtesy, with praise).

Loaded down with useless garlands,
Down to that fountain
The exiled poets proceeded:
'When will you rise again,
Ten-horned, seven-headed seraphim,
Out of your abyss,
Against the beautiful Republic –
Nor tamed by Plato's kiss?'

John Heath-Stubbs

'Plato and the Waters of the Flood' is reprinted from John Heath-Stubbs *Collected Poems 1943-1987* (Carcenet, Manchester 1988) by kind permission of the publishers. The blind poet John-Heath Stubbs was born in 1918, began publishing poems in wartime Oxford and died on December 26 2006 at the age of 88. Fellow poets gathered to read his poems, including the poem above, at a memorial in St James Piccadilly and an anniversary reading at his own church, St Matthew's, Bayswater in London.

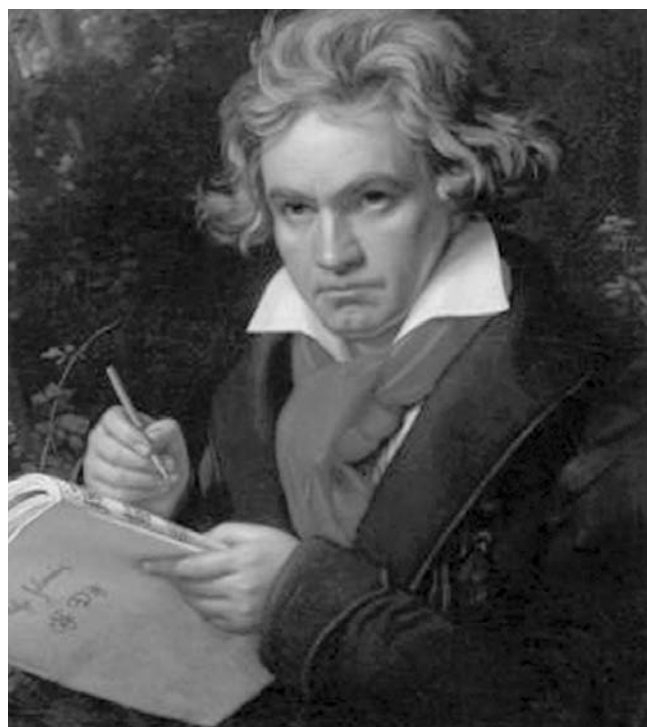
The Shaping Spirit: Beethoven's Last Quartets

Christopher Hampton describes how Beethoven's last quartet 'provides a kind of summing-up of his quest for the essences of artistic form'.

Music has its fundamental place among the great forms of art. It goes back to the primitive beginning of human society, as a manifestation of magic, an invocation of the mystical, an expression of the primary emotions relating to love and war and death, the rituals of religious experience and the carnivalesque celebration of communal feeling. And when put to the service of religious worship – the liturgical demands, for instance, of the Christian churches – it has brought into being extraordinary forms of achievement in the great sung masses of Josquin des Pres, Palestrina, Victoria, Schutz, Bach and Handel, not to mention Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven. Developing out of this combination of word and sound, from Monteverdi onward, emerge the hybrid secular forms of opera, giving voice to the drama and conflict of individual experience, which is at its most intimate in the great song cycles of Schubert, Schumann, Brahms and Wolf, where the sound and meaning of words and music act upon each other to become at best an inseparable unity.

Muss es sein? Must it be?

But in spite of all the evidence of the uses to which it has been put, it could be argued that music is the freest of all the arts in the sense that its primary material – sounds organised by pitch, rhythm and harmonic progression – remains independent of both the physical-visual demands of the external world (as in painting and sculpture) and the restrictive propositional semantic demands



of language. And if the art of poetry comes closest in essence to that of music, still the poem depends on and is restricted by the extraneous multiple contexts and meanings of the words it uses.

Thus music moves in time through the energy of its melodic-rhythmic forms as ordered and driven by the sequential patterns of the notated sung forms given to it by the composer and the performer, without whom it can have no voice. Its logic works, that is, through the combinations of sound it creates in time out of silence and air and space, as a semantic structure contained within the multiple forms it launches upon the atmosphere. And in its most highly developed forms it speaks an intellectual-emotional language of its own that is all the more satisfying in that it is independent of all other (extra-musical) forms of argument, even when it uses them.

Take Beethoven – the Beethoven of the last piano sonatas and quartets, the Diabelli Variations, the *Missa Solemnis* and the Ninth Symphony, where words – including those of Schiller’s ecstatic *Ode to Joy* – become yet another instrument to add to the invisible space-time dimension the music explores and expands and is determined by through the intensity and concentration of Beethoven’s thinking in the astonishing inventiveness and rhythmic energy of these works. This is nowhere more cogently argued in purely musical terms than in the seven movements of the C sharp minor Quartet, Opus 131. Here, it might be said, the germinal opening theme is taken up, transformed and expanded through each of the six movements that succeed it. And the originality of the formal structure of this work and the three other Quartets that were written in the year or so before the composer’s death takes music as far as it has ever moved into the realm of the transcendent and its continually renewable resources, so as almost to become, in T.S. Eliot’s vibrant words, ‘*Erhebung* without motion, concentration / Without elimination’, though it is always (at least till the end of the work) in motion.

Es muss sein. It must be.

How this comes about is one of the mysteries of great art, which is ultimately inexplicable, though such strength is not secretive. It speaks directly to the listener in its own self-contained language through the clarity of the texture, the luminous articulation of line and counterpoint and rhythm, the energy and coherence of motivic development, from the brooding contemplation of the slow movements to the air-driven swiftness of the scherzos they so often emerge from. And this is a matter of the shaping spirit of the philosophy that lies behind it; the unfolding logic of the argument, the intellectual struggle pitched – as William Blake puts it: ‘with intellectual spears and long, winged arrows of thought’ against the contradictions of reality, which Beethoven had fought throughout his life.

And that philosophy is there, delicately affirmed in the music of the last of the Quartets, the Opus 135, which – with its intimacy, intensity and joyousness, its power to speak through the voices of its four instruments – provides a kind of summing-up of Beethoven’s quest for the essences of artistic form. For in this work, Beethoven even makes use of words to drive home his meaning. ‘*Muss es sein?*’ he writes above the three-note motif

of the introduction to the last movement. ‘Must it be?’ Do I have to accept my fate? And the answer comes with the three-note sequence, ‘*Es muss sein*’ (‘it must be’) that follows, which forms the first-subject theme of the movement.

Nor is it an accident that this tentative questioning motif and its resolution should follow immediately upon one of Beethoven’s most deeply felt and searching slow movements, *Lento assai, cantante e tranquillo – a sotto voce* meditation which is transmuted into a hesitant probing intensity as it moves, like a faltering heart-beat, a heart-beat missed, almost stopping, but recovered from, and renewed. For it is *this* which gives rise to the tentative questioning *Muss es sein?* motif of the fourth movement. And its resolution then becomes the main theme of the movement, which is in turn buoyantly confirmed by the second subject, itself emerging out of the three-note motif, to return again, close to the end, in a *pizzicato* dance-like form, as light as air, before giving way to the last notes (the *es muss sein* assertion) of its celebratory *fortissimo* conclusion.

What more could one ask of the artist? In this work, as in the three others written over the final months of the composer’s life, the personal has become the universal, a triumph of art and its transformation of the self’s voice into forms that survive even the death of the self. And the Opus 135 is the *last* quartet, perhaps even Beethoven’s last work – intimate and affirmative, its final cadence an unreserved Yes to the Other in the self, as life-enhancing as the seasonal renewals of the natural world – an artifice that confirms rebirth, as the earth’s hidden roots their summer flowering.

We cannot ask for more. *Es muss sein* – the music says it all speaking ‘for the clarity of the stars / at their galactic distance... where they have so long stabbed / skies beyond the reach of thought’. And in this sense, facing the unresolved questions of reality, we are left to make of this music what it has to say to us, if in the end we can rise to it.

Christopher Hampton studied music at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London, gaining his AGSM in piano and conducting. He then taught English for 28 years at the University of Westminster and the City Literary Institute. His prose works include *Socialism in a Crippled World* (Penguin, London 1981) and *A Radical Reader* (Penguin 1984, recently reissued by Spokesman Press). His most recent poetry collection is *Border Crossings* (Katabasis, 2005).

Catching Sight

Don Cupitt takes a long perspective of European art.

My eyes are failing now, but for most of my life I had excellent vision. There were two reasons for this: one was that I had good visual acuity – ‘better than twenty-twenty’ as optometrists put it – and the other was that as a schoolboy I was taught to use my eyes by Ian Fleming-Williams, the very notable art master at my school, Charterhouse. Fleming-Williams had in his time toured all the art galleries and architectural monuments of Europe, buying all the picture-postcards and bringing them home to be assembled into a massive card-index. If he had a lesson to give about Rheims or Goya, he simply opened the big drawer containing the Index, picked out the relevant block of cards, and put them one-by-one beneath the epidiascope. We were riveted: I later went to Nikolaus Pevsner, but Fleming-Williams was better. He taught us to see at a glance the differences between Signorelli and Botticelli, Raphael and Perugino, Titian and Veronese. It was a wonderful training in the use of one’s eyes; and almost equally good was the instruction I got from my housemaster, Bob Arrowsmith, on how to look at a medieval English church and read its history. He drove me round Hampshire, drilling the sequence of styles into my head.

Since those early days, nearly sixty years ago, I have always looked at pictures and at buildings. One’s taste gradually changes, and it is only in later life that I have begun to respond more warmly to classical architecture and to sculpture. But this lifelong attraction to art has also caused me intellectual problems. Religion, the most important concern of my life, has always been *both* art’s chief patron *and* art’s fiercest enemy. All three of the ‘Abrahamic’ faiths, the Jewish, the Christian and the Muslim, have strong iconoclastic traditions going back to their earliest beginnings. You must not make nor worship idols, nor be led astray by what pleases the senses. The austere introverted ‘Negative Way’, which rejects the images, is loftier than the Affirmation of the Images in popular Hinduism and in Catholicism.

So it has long been felt, and philosophy has had a similarly suspicious attitude to art ever since Plato. For Plato, a painting was a mere ‘copy of a copy of a copy’, because a painting depicted something presented to the artist’s eye, which itself represented something out there in Nature, which itself in turn was a mere copy or image of things that belong to the world of eternal Forms. You could perhaps allow that painting was like the myths of popular religion: it was a way to God via images and stories that might be suitable for ordinary people, but philosophy was the royal road to Eternal Truth.

Notice that Plato assumes the normality of realism in art. A painting is a painting of something, a representation.



Van Gogh, *Starry Night*

It gets its merit and its interest from the way it copies something that it is *about*. It was only very gradually – beginning with people like Titian in the sixteenth century – that an artist could begin to be thought of as a creative person, and indeed as a major cultural figure. Before then, God was the only creator, and man merely copied. Just about the only secular use of the verb ‘to create’ was *legal*: a king might ‘create’ a dukedom or some other institution. But then gradually during the Enlightenment the conception of human creativity, and especially of the human creative imagination, becomes clearer and stronger. In time, the creative artist comes to be seen as a world-builder. Poetry, for example, is seen as ordering and even *brightening* the world, by strengthening the language in which we describe things. Poetry can question, refine and sharpen our perceptions, and it is right to see a great poet as a major teacher of humankind.

So it comes about that around the year 1800 or so in the West a new philosophy and a new understanding of art develop at the same time. People begin to give up the old idea that we find ourselves to be readymade selves in a finished and readymade world. We don’t see the world just as it is, nor do we see ourselves just as we are, and the human eye is not a simple Brownie camera. We are ourselves the world builders. No non-human being ever taught us what we are, and what our world is. On the contrary, we have slowly evolved amongst ourselves and through our own ceaseless conversation all our ideas about what the world is and what we are. Our cultural traditions are like traditions of folk art. The human world is a great humming conversation, a buzz of varied interpretations and evaluations, through which we develop and maintain a

consensus world-picture – a consensus that we are all the time questioning, revising and elaborating.

In the Bible a traditional society pictures the world as having been made and finished once and for all by a series of staccato utterances of God. The new story is rather different. It says that we and we alone build and rebuild all we know. We have always been inside our own heads, knowing only our own human angle. We can never have absolute knowledge of any so-called ‘real world’, so we should forget the Real World. Instead, we should accept that *our* world, a provisional communal interpretation, is all we can or will ever have. It is not worthless. On the contrary, because it is always and at every point open to criticism and revision, it has a certain flexibility, and so a strength and beauty of its own. Indeed, when we fully understand the new situation, we become able to see that critical thinking is much stronger than the old dogmatic kind of thinking, just as liberal democratic politics is much stronger than the old politics of absolute monarchy. The extraordinary creative energy and power of modern Western culture is entirely due to our being always and on principle ready to talk, ready to hear criticism and to revise our ideas about the world we have made. The mark of modern post-Christian culture is this spirit of continuous self-criticism and striving for reform which is the legacy of Christianity.

Painting became critical, secular and more democratic – especially in the great school of Paris.

Having said all this, you can now guess what I want to say about the meaning of art in modern culture. Until about 1800 or 1850, most Western art celebrated the Establishment. Patronage came chiefly from the Church, and from the Crown and the nobility. Art was ‘realistic’. It glorified the powers that be, following standard iconography and treating standard topics. But during the nineteenth century the leading artists steadily moved away from the academies and the old forms of patronage. They did not wish to do grand portraits of kings and aristocrats any more, and traditional religious themes gradually became less attractive to them. Instead, painting became critical, secular and more democratic – especially in the great school of Paris. Through their work, artists sought to develop each his or her own artistic personality – often finding that it could take ten or twenty years fully to find one’s own distinctive voice. Art became a way of refreshing, questioning, criticising and revising the ways in which we all see and build our world.

Thus in the modern period art has become democratised, and in the process has become popular and intimately relevant to every ordinary person. In general philosophy we now see that there is only one world, the human life-world, a world that is always seen from our human angle, shaped by our human language, and coloured up by our human

feelings. There is no Real World any more: there is only the outsideless *human* world. And within this human life-world of ours religion and art have very closely-related functions. Religion should help us to face the truth about life and about the human situation as we now understand it, helping us to commit ourselves joyfully to the only life we will ever know or *can* know. Art will help to refresh our senses and our feelings: it will help us to see how we can enjoy life more and build our world better.

Notice that on the view I am proposing neither ‘life’, nor religion, nor art have any permanently-fixed nature or essence. On the contrary, there is a sense in which for modern people all art is always *anti-art*, and all religion *anti-religion*. We must always begin by questioning what we have inherited from the previous generation. Our whole culture has become perpetually self-criticising and self-reforming, to such an extent that like the fashion industry we all of us live by continual innovation. We don’t want to allow ourselves to become gradually numbed by habit: we want to keep ourselves fresh. We need novelty in order to get *turned on*.

This typically-modern or even post-modern desire, to be perpetually recovering a freshness that we are constantly in danger of losing, has been very well spelt out for us by two great figures, Wordsworth and Nietzsche. Nietzsche in particular links it with the pursuit of new and fresh metaphors in poetry, metaphors that have the power to galvanise our imagination and our feelings. This sudden surge of life and feeling within us that good art provokes helps us to love life and feel that life is worth living.

So far so good. I think we see how it is that modern art has now finally found its vocation and won the hearts of the general public. Think, for example, of the Angel of the North. At first it met general scorn and resentment, but today coachloads of ordinary folk travel to see it every day from all over the old industrial North of England. They love it. Somehow it refreshes their own pride in their own cultural tradition, which is tough and industrial but also has wings – is both steely and spiritual. That’s good popular art, and a sight for sore eyes.

Art has somehow got itself up to date, and religion quite clearly ought to update itself along the same lines. So, at least, I have been arguing in recent years. Unfortunately our established religious institutions, leaden and mediocre, have no desire at all to get themselves up-to-date and serve the people better. They are moribund, and they intend to remain so. It’s a great shame. Perhaps Europe’s long history of suspicion of the senses – ‘the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life’ (*I John 2:16*) – holds us all back. We all of us need art education that will teach us to enjoy our senses and use them more constructively to build a better world.

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

The Art Of Humanity

Dinah Livingstone gave this talk to the Oxford SoF Group in April

This talk, called *The Art of Humanity*, will focus on the verbal art of poetry. The talk is both a defence of poetry and a natural theology (with nothing supernatural about it) and inquires how the making that goes into those sister arts contributes to the making of humanity. I begin by looking briefly at how we live on Earth as animals, but as poetic, paradoxical animals to whom imagination comes naturally as soon as we learn to speak. Like ourselves, poetry unites what is sensual and earthy with what is intellectual and spiritual, and theology creates imaginary supernatural beings as personifications or other ways of figuring what we encounter in our lives. The paradox is that in us matter goes 'all the way up', and spirit goes 'all the way down'. For poetry, theology and humanity the power and the passion is to be *speaking matter, incarnate word*.



The author aged 6 on Fitz Fritz

Living on Earth

Human beings are an animal species that has evolved within the ecosystem of Planet Earth. Like other animals, in order to live, we have to engage physically with our environment and one another. We are material bodies that need material things in order to survive – warmth, food, drink – and Earth is the habitat we have in which to get them. If we fail, we die. The Earth is a physical body in space and although it has been modified over the millennia by human labour, we did not create it. It is an exhaustible physical treasury given to us. Likewise each human being that is born is given a particular, limited, mortal body. How that little body develops depends partly on his or her given genetic material and partly on how well it is looked after by parents and others.

The power and the passion is to be *speaking matter, incarnate word*.

In order to satisfy their needs, humans have developed skills in hunting, gathering, agriculture, building, carpentry, cooking, sewing, weaving... and as they cannot survive in isolation, they create social groups to protect individuals. In all these tasks they use language. However, language is not something that replaces animal consciousness and knowledge, but emerges out of it and enormously enriches it. So what is knowledge? For this talk I don't think the best place to start is the philosopher's abstract enquiry. Better to start not by asking about knowledge of something or other, but knowledge *how* to do something.

A good carpenter knows *how* to saw wood straight, put up shelves that don't collapse, fit a door so that it is not proud – and makes it all look so simple, whereas an inexperienced, butter-fingered person like me can be left cursing all morning. If you know the salsa it means you know how to dance the salsa. It is probably impossible to learn it from a book without hearing the music or seeing anyone dance it. We used to dance a lot in the 1960s to music like *The Yellow Submarine* but when not long ago a daughter tried to teach me the salsa, I couldn't get it. In one sense I 'knew' what the salsa was, as I saw other people dancing it, but I did not know *how* to do it. My body couldn't get it; perhaps it was just not 'my' rhythm or I was 'past it'.

The London taxi driver has to pass a fiendishly difficult exam called 'The Knowledge'. This is a practical test of knowing how to find your way round all the streets of London. My father (a keen amateur jockey) once rode two winners on one day at Wincanton, his own horse Fitz Fritz and Dorothy belonging a neighbour. It helped that he knew the steeplechase course – that is, he knew how to ride round it and what to look out for. A farmer who 'knows his pigs' knows how to look after them so that they thrive. That practical knowledge is the basis but of course there is a lot more to get to know about pigs (as there is about London). When I was a child we had some delightful, intelligent Gloucester Old Spots and they had lots of 'character' we got to know. Likewise – though much more deeply – a new mother learns to know her baby.

A baby usually learns how to crawl before he learns the word 'crawl' and how to walk before he learns the word 'walk'. A cat can't talk at all but it can learn some things. I recently acquired a new kitten and when it was a few months old I began teaching it how to use the cat flap. In order to get into the garden it has to open the

kitchen door (left ajar) with its paw, go through a cat flap at the top of the stairs, go downstairs and out through another cat flap. It has now learnt how to do this and never makes a mess in the house. Similarly young children have to learn how to use the lavatory. But no cat can compete with Luther who, the story goes, was on the lavatory when he had his eureka moment: 'The just shall live by faith!' All the instincts humans share with animals are enriched by language and sometimes by laughter. Lovers have private jokes.

Although we learn how to do certain things in a similar way to other animals, our learning is much richer because we are speaking animals. As a means of communication, of their nature languages are not private, just as human beings are not isolated 'headcases' but social animals, members of a species. Even before it can speak the baby is entering a language community and learning to talk, so although he will probably walk before he can say the word walk, he will still appreciate the encouraging words and cries of his dotting family and gradually connect doing and saying. Similarly, a whole web and history of ideas surround dancing, carpentry and pig husbandry.

Another sort of knowing how to is knowing how to distinguish, how to tell edible blackberry from poisonous belladonna, how to tell wheat from barley (barley has a beard). That is also practical knowledge. If you mistake belladonna for blackberries and gorge yourself, you could die. Language enables us to *name* these plants and pass on our knowledge to others. Language has to engage with the world as it is. Telling someone blackberries are poisonous and belladonna good to eat is dangerous, when the opposite is the case.

That is not to say that any of this knowledge is static or perfect. A musician might strive all her life to play better, a carpenter to increase his skills or a cabbie to learn better short cuts or new one-way systems. Knowledge how to starts by being *good enough* knowledge to do the job and after that, at least in some fields, you can go on learning all your life. Knowledge how to becomes art.

By making language, or rather, languages, humans exponentially increased their powers of interacting and dealing with the Earth and each other. And with their powers, their desires also increased for a richer life. In personal life each human individual meets love, beauty, joy. As well as having to secure food and shelter, he or she has to face pain, death, boredom, loneliness or a sense of futility when they occur. The increased consciousness that comes with language brings both the possibility of a richer life and is a richer source of suffering.

The rest of this talk will look at how humans use *art* to express and deal with their predicament. It will concentrate on the sister arts of poetry and theology (assuming, with Blake, that all gods are created by the human 'poetic genius'). However much our consciousness increases, knowledge that is 'sweet reason', art that speaks to our condition, must involve an acknowledgment of and acquired familiarity with the

physicality of ourselves and the Earth. That is what we have to work with, which no art can ignore. There is a continuum. It is not the sort of continuum that when we reach 'stage 2' we have 'moved on' from 'stage 1'. We carry it all with us. We remain mortal bodies even when playing or hearing the most 'heavenly' music' or enjoying the most 'divine' visions. We are speaking animals with an expanding consciousness, not spiritual beings striving to 'rise above' our animal nature. Gnosis that denies what we are is false, art that is not rooted in Earth fails, just as a building that ignores the laws of physics will fall down. Human language and art must have some recognisable relation to the world we live in, so that our word remains *incarnate*, our wisdom *embodied*.

Poetic Paradoxical Animal

We are poetic animals by nature. The continuum works both ways. Just as we remain mortal bodies even when enjoying the most spiritual experiences, our highest poetry makes the fullest use of the physical resources of spoken language. Words are the poet's *material*. Words are physically produced by human lungs, throats, tongues, lips and teeth. Indeed, languages are called 'tongues'. Hopkins called poetry 'the darling child of speech and lips'. The *sounds* of words are very important in poetry, for example, whether the vowels used are 'dark' and formed at the back of the mouth or lighter front vowels. English is fortunate that its word 'dark' has the most open back vowel α : –that is why the doctor tells you to say aaah! How we hear that darkness in Milton's Samson's tremendous protest against his blindness:

O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon,
irrecoverably dark, total eclipse
without all hope of day!

In contrast, the words 'blaze' and 'day' are a close front diphthong, here recalling the *absent* light.

The *pattern* of sounds also matters, what sounds are repeated in a pleasing order. So does the *rhythm* of stressed and unstressed beats, which we respond to as physical beings with beating hearts. The various poetic forms have more extended rhythmic and sonic patterns. Poetry is language to which people may have a strong physical response – making the heart beat faster or the hair rise on the back of your neck.

At the same time the *content* of poetry must also appeal our senses – what we can see, hear, feel, taste and smell. Poetry may use synaesthesia, appealing to two or more senses at once. Poetry deals in particularities, very concrete things. For example, John Heath-Stubbs' poem 'Plato and the Waters of the Flood' (see page 4) begins with Noah's Ark landing:

When on Armenian Ararat
or Parnassus ridge
scrunched the overloaded keel,
pelican, ostrich,
toad, rabbit and pangolin –
all the beasts of the field –
scrambled out to possess once more
their cleansed and desolate world...



How to play the trumpet

The poem is much more graphic because he names 'pelican, ostrich, toad, rabbit and pangolin' than if he had just said 'animals'. The verbs 'scrunched' and 'scrambled' are more particular and vivid than if he had just said the ark 'landed' or the animals 'went out' and we enjoy the resonance of the proper names 'Armenian Ararat or Parnassus' ridge'. However, I don't agree with the dictum of a certain school of poetry 'no ideas but in things'. Although poetry deals in the sensual and particular, it has always also dealt in ideas, the wholeness of experience, intellectual as well as sensual. 'For a tear is an intellectual thing.' In a poem the particular often has most universal resonance.

The German word for writing poetry is *dichten*, related to *dicht* meaning 'thick'. Poetry 'thickens' language and therefore consciousness, making it more concentrated and intense. A poet is a *Dichter*. Sound and rhythm are ways of concentrating the language of a poem, as are its appeal to the senses and its ideas. Befitting us as a speaking animal species, poems (and ideas) are not isolated. Another way in which a poem thickens language and consciousness, increasing 'connectivity', is by being a conversation in a tradition, by allusions. This can be done in what I have always regarded as a rather heavy-handed way like T.S. Eliot in *The Wasteland* or with the light touch of 'answer, echo, answer'. The problem is, the lighter the touch, the finer your audience's ear must be. The poem packs a lot of psychic energy into a little space. It is not 'tired' language but gives a sense of springing freshness. At the same time there is a sense of rightness, even inevitability: these words in this order is how the poem 'had to be'.

A vital means of poetic concentration or *thickening* is the use of symbolic language. Coleridge seems to be right that nature gives us our 'shaping spirit of imagination' at birth. One of the most astonishing things

about watching a two-year-old learn to talk is that metaphor, symbol and 'let's pretend' (as well as joking) seem to come naturally as soon as the words are acquired. The child will go into a corner and say: 'I'm a pony in a barn,' and neigh. Or: 'I'm a naughty goblin,' and run off with a biscuit. Or: 'I'm an astronaut and this is my rocket,' (a stick). Or the child can wave a magic wand and tell his grandfather: 'You're a cat.' Grandfather is expected to miaow. The child is aware that it's a game of 'pretend' and chooses when to wave the wand again and turn Grandfather back into himself. We are born to be not merely speaking animals but poetic animals. A poetic potential is not something 'added on' to language but is inherent in it. Children learning to talk not only enjoy sounds and rhythms but have a native gift for symbol and metaphor.

As well as having enormous variety, everything on our Earth has a family resemblance. Part of learning to talk is learning the names of things, so that you can distinguish them, tell them apart. At the same time we see how one thing is *like* another. Here is just one small example. This poem 'November' ends:

Flutter, flit and tweet,
keen to survive the coming cold.
Each little rustle,
sudden or stray thought,
might be a bird
or a falling leaf.

Not only are the flitting small birds like the free-floating brown leaves, but both are like a 'sudden or stray thought'. The noises are very small: 'flutter, flit and tweet... each little rustle.' Of course a thought makes no noise at all but it is as if it 'rustled'. That metaphor involves sight and sound, but we can have metaphors for all the senses. For example the smell of the Earth is 'a draught of strong ale, warm, huddled cattle', which involves smell, taste and touch. We can also have *rhythmic metaphors*. Perhaps the one everyone remembers (and young children love) is the galloping anapaestic tetrameter:

I sprang to the stirrup, and Joris, and he.
I galloped, Dirck galloped, we galloped all three.

Poetry 'thickens' language and therefore consciousness.

In his *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth speaks of 'a principle which must be well known to those who have made any of the arts the object of accurate reflection; namely the pleasure which the mind derives from the *perception of similitude in dissimilitude*. This principle is the great spring of the activity of our minds and their chief feeder.' This similitude in dissimilitude – likeness in difference and distinction in likeness – is one of the ways in which poetry expands or 'thickens' our consciousness. There is the shock of recognition that something is *like* something else and the pleasing tension

that it is also *unlike*. A metaphor compares two things in this way. For the metaphor to have poetic power its 'vehicle' (that is the thing to which something else is being compared) must be well rooted in the material Earth, *physically* well grounded. For example, in Hopkins' poem *Hurrahing in the Harvest* (using a metaphor which his friend Robert Bridges tut-tutted was 'in poor taste') he compares Christ to the beautiful hills of his beloved 'wild Wales':

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

Hopkins had a Jesuit training in philosophy and theology and of course he did not think the blue hills were really Christ's (or the Greek god Atlas's) shoulder. It is a metaphor expressing a moment of ecstasy. Its poetic power (the metaphor's substance or vehicle) derives from the fact that strong and beautiful blue hills, male shoulders and horses physically exist and can be apprehended by our senses.

Poets must each find their own voice to express themselves, the Earth and humanity – what it is and could be. Voice is first and foremost a human bodily power. Poetry does not 'float' or 'rise above' that human bodily power to become 'pure spirit'. On the contrary, rather than *abstracting*, it uses its bodily, sensual capabilities to the utmost. It beautifully suits the poetic paradoxical animals we are: matter 'all the way up', spirit 'all the way down'. It is most sublime when it is most embodied. Poetry is incarnate word.



El Greco: Holy Trinity

Natural Grace

Keats called trees 'mighty senators'. He personified them. Others have called trees gods. And Hildegard of Bingen spoke of 'greenness' as divine. I often talk to trees and can quite see how people could think of particularly noble trees as gods. I also say things like 'Sun, please shine today' or 'Rain, rain, go away'. When it thunders, it is easy to imagine a mighty being or god grumbling overhead.

As Blake put it: 'The ancient poets animated all sensible objects with gods or geniuses, calling them by the names and adorning them with the properties of woods, rivers, mountains, lakes, cities, nations, and whatever their enlarged and numerous senses could perceive.' 'Animating' sensible objects with gods is a poetic activity. Personification is a poetic trope, akin to metaphor. What we may describe as more 'primitive' religion thinks of the

sun or rain or thunder itself as a god. Then people may go on to think of the god as the master or maker of sun, rain and thunder. Mighty Jove has thunderbolts. It is not a long step between saying 'God thunders' and 'God makes thunder'. And it is still a form of personification. God is the supernatural force or divine person who makes thunder, or when you get to monotheism, God is the divine person who makes everything.

As well as being or making cosmic forces and things on Earth, gods or God can be a personification of human capabilities, actual or idealised. Men can be fathers and God is called an 'almighty father'. Human beings can love and they can personify God *as* love, saying God is Love. Once God is a person he or she can be a character in a story. He walks in the Garden of Eden. In the rather horrific story of the sacrifice of Isaac he orders Abraham to kill his only son. In *Paradise Lost* God the Father and God the Son are both characters (Milton's theology, by the way, seems to be Arian) and the whole cosmos throngs with good and evil angels.

What is the point of inventing these supernatural beings? First there is the poetic point. They are personifications expressing our deep experiences of the world. Some things we encounter in the world give us a sense of awe, 'something far more deeply interfused', a sense of the holy. For Blake: 'Everything that lives is holy.' As we are naturally poetic animals, we try to express this in poetic terms, using tropes like personification and allegory. People who regard God as 'real' just don't know that is what they are doing, rather like Molière's *bourgeois gentilhomme*, who was amazed to discover he had been speaking prose.

Although the Earth and our material human bodies are given to us, in another sense humanity is also what we make of it – it is a project or goal, what we as individuals and a species can become. Humans are ambitious and want to know not only how to survive, but how to live with meaning. They make art, and once made, this art shapes *them*. They try to make *living* an art. As poetic animals, we keep seeking a 'thicker' – expanded, intenser – consciousness and here theology comes in as a sister art to poetry, creating supernatural beings, who nevertheless all 'reside in the human breast'. In fact, that poetic quest remains even for those who, like Don Cupitt, have 'taken leave of God'. Cupitt now speaks of true religion in terms of the eminently poetic task of 'finding your own voice'. Not everyone likes writing or even reading poetry. But poetry is a paradigm for every kind of knowing how to that becomes an art. You can ride a race, make a garden or bake a cake that is 'pure poetry'.

Theology talks about the art of living in terms of salvation. I think even if we do not believe in the supernatural, theology has a lot of human wisdom and creativity embedded in it, which can inspire us in the art of living. In an earlier talk I looked at how the Christ epic, especially in Paul, was a tremendous drama of the making of humanity, human fulfilment. The theology of the Incarnation, beginning in the New Testament and reaching a peak at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, with its reiterated mantra, *the same, the same, the same*, brings God down into humanity. Christ is *salus quoniam caro*. The salvation he brings comes through his humanity, 'even to death, death on a cross'. In his poem *Jerusalem* Blake speaks of Jesus as 'the Lord, the Universal Humanity'. Theologians such as Teilhard de Chardin and Matthew Fox speak about the 'cosmic Christ'. The 'whole Christ' is an epic poem, the *poiesis* (making) of humanity. In becoming human, God becomes saving *incarnate word*.

I only have time to mention one more – related – theological example. The theology of the Trinity is a model of the possibilities of the human psyche. God the Father personifies power, energy, life, that we receive from parents. He pours all this into his Son, his Word, with nothing held back, his whole divine nature, so that the Son has everything that the Father has. Then together they pour that same whole divine nature into the Spirit, into *love*, so that the Spirit is the personified 'mutual love with which they love one another'. That Augustinian model is called 'circumcession' – 'flowing round into': being flows into speaking; being and speaking into loving; and speaking and loving back round into being. Similarly, although of course we are neither perfect nor infinite, we humans pour our energies into knowing and knowing how to, which may become art. But like every art, the art of living is not just abstract knowledge; it is practical knowledge and involves doing, in this case, living well, loving. On that Trinitarian model all our knowing should pour into loving, into kindness.

Human Kindness

What kind of creatures are humans? We noted one paradox about us above: that we are poetic animals. Another paradox is that we are the only animals who can be unkind. A cat that plays with a mouse is not being unkind; it is acting by instinct. We have a choice. That is where ethics comes in. In our quest we may create all sorts of gods, but placating or pleasing these gods is not always an ethical or moral activity. The gods are not necessarily good, just powerful – they may personify powerful, real natural forces and you don't want to get on the wrong side of them. It's only when the will of God (or God himself) is equated with love (or goodness) that obeying him becomes an ethical activity. If God is Love personified, you obey his commandments by doing what love requires, by loving. But you could also do what love requires, you could also love, without personifying it. As Stevie Smith puts it:

To choose a god of love, as he did and does,
Is a little move then?

Yes, it is.

A larger one will be when men
Love love and hate hate but do not deify them?

It will be a larger one.

Behaviour cannot be judged on a god's divine say-so or the say-so of his priests – be they mitred archbishops or red-braced worshippers of Mammon in the City, who have always reminded me of the prophets of Baal that 'shrieked and capered and cut themselves with knives as is their custom'. The behaviour of humans (*and their gods*) has to be judged on humanist criteria, which we have to work out together with other human beings. A lot of the time we know perfectly well how to be kind; it's just a question of *doing* it. Or when things are more complex, we have to try to work them out together.

Behaviour of humans (*and their gods*) has to be judged on humanist criteria.

Humans speak for themselves, make language, poetry, all the gods and all the arts. Every good work of art must have its own integrity and expands our humanity, because it is something a human has achieved. Humanity is what humans do. But poetry is not enough. Wisdom is not enough. Recalling the theology of the Trinity, the art of living involves both poetry *and* kindness. In fact, Paul tells the Corinthians: 'the greatest of these is love'. (I think a good translation for *agape* here could be kindness). Poets are famed for their feuding and religious people can be even more horrible, warring on each other, burning each other alive and so on. I remember the shock and disappointment I felt after reading St Bernard's wonderful works on the *Love of God* and the *Song of Songs* to discover how absolutely vile he was to Abelard at the Council of Sens. And I expect we can all think of examples closer to home.

Recalling the theology of the Incarnation, Passion and Resurrection, the art of humanity is to go down into the depths of our physical-psyche being (a 'descent into hell' – *ad inferos*: the lower regions –, a 'raid on the inarticulate'), bring it all back up with you, embody it in language, speak out, create. But that is not all: the art of humanity is also, indispensably, to behave kindly as one odd bod to another. Just as poetry must relate to the physical world we live in, kindness, like mothering, may involve a lot of hard work and physical exhaustion. The art of humanity is poetry and kindness, incarnate word and deed.

Dinah Livingstone is the editor of *Sofia*. Her most recent poetry collections are *Kindness* (2007) and *Presence* (2003).

The Struggle Shared

A Dialogue between Atheist Friends II

The concluding two episodes of Philip Berry's dialogue between the atheist friends Thomas and Simon.

A Test

At a kitchen table

- S I have been tested, sorely tested. In fact, this discussion seems wholly irrelevant to me, to my life. Six months ago I could not contemplate joining you, that's why I cancelled.
- T I'm so sorry.
- S And now, six months later, I can rationalise, and separate my thoughts from the images that will, I know, reduce me to tears. Can I remove myself from the anger? Probably not. But I don't think that should invalidate my thoughts. Our experiences, my wife's and mine, have taken us down into the extremes of existence on this earth, so I should be allowed to judge. The unbiased are either uninvolved or unemotional, and God, I am sure, did not put us to here to watch, but to live.
- T The uninvolved are protected from pain, I think. I am.
- S You'll get involved. You've been in love, I know you have. You know pain, but yes, loss of a child is the worst imaginable pain. And it has taught me something.
- T So what happened? Can I ask that of you, to look back and recall your thoughts? Did you think about God during those hours.
- S I did, because I was powerless, and could do nothing else. I thought of more earthbound matters of course, of my wife, of the guilt I knew she would suffer because she was not there...she was working abroad for a month...of our decision to have only one child, of our prospects...for how many marriages survive such a shock...and then, of the meaning, the lack of meaning. And it was at this point that I recognised the redundancy of faith.
- T You woke up that morning, before he was taken ill, with faith?
- S Yes I did. I was never religious, you know that, but after he was born, during the first few years, as we saw him through the normal dangers of infancy, I had come to rely on something, some overseeing power...and I may have called that power God. Fatherhood changed me. I feared the world, not for my sake but his. I watched bombs tear the roofs off the very buses I had carried him on a week previously, soft and vulnerable in his papoose. I listened to the radio and watched the news, heard of children engulfed in tsunamis or atomised by booby traps in the markets of Baghdad, and I feared for the world that he was going to inherit. I had to believe that there was a long-term plan, devised by someone or something. I could not trust a planet in which the

leading powers, from my western perspective, appeared to have no regard for the environment, and in which religious fundamentalism was growing rather than diminishing. So yes, I woke up with faith, not at the front of my mind, but there, bolstering me against the constant anxieties. I entered the bedroom to get the boy up. He was five. He was sleeping, for which I had felt grateful an hour earlier, it being a Saturday morning. I stroked his head, and he smiled, but did not open his eyes. So I covered him up with the duvet and let him sleep another hour. When I went back I knew he really had to get up, and pulled the duvet away. He did not respond, merely groaned. I shook him, and noticed how cold his forearm was. Then I saw a mark, a crop of tiny purple dots. I knew what they were, and within five minutes I had bundled him, still uncomplaining, into the back of the car, duvet wrapped around him. He never spoke again. The meningitis had already swollen his brain, and was now out of control, in his blood stream, bruising his skin. And all I could do was stand by his bed, watch his chest rise and fall with the ventilator, and leave every so often to try and contact his mother in the States. I could not get through. Something wrong with her phone, or mine...she felt guilty for that, along with everything else. She had no idea it was happening, I had to wait for her regular call at lunchtime, in the American evening. His blood pressure fell, despite the drugs, his kidneys stopped, they started dialysis, but the septicaemia raged through him, and all I could do was think. Grief, emotion, the most intense emotion of course, the desire to swap my body with his, and the anger, already growing, at the arbitrariness. It was a natural death, a vindictive but random quirk of nature, like the tsunami, like an earthquake, like an influenza epidemic, but taking only the one child. But arbitrary things should not happen in the presence of an overseer. All things must be designed, done for a reason. These are old ideas Thomas. But if they are done to a plan, it is a plan that does not need me or my progeny. If it is part of a plan, there must be a greater benefit. What benefit? Does another death from meningitis help ensure that in the long run a cure is sought and found, thereby improving humanity and aiding its mission, to exist, to spread. Was he a small sacrifice, a rebalancing of power between bacteria and humans, both organisms having a right to exist on earth? I could think of no reason, no justification, nothing within my understanding. And so, my faith diminished. Perhaps it was always fragile, coming to late in life as I did. But it was not strong enough to withstand that challenge, that insult. Of course these were not the preoccupations that I took to bed that night, having kissed his forehead one last time...but they came to me, in the weeks that followed.

- T Our preoccupations seem so meaningless. All our discussions, all our philosophy...
- S No. That is too easy. We must still try. It's vital. A test of my faith, surely, but a test of our willingness to think, to discuss. We will talk again Thomas, have no doubt. But not for a while.

The Tunnel

The platform

- T ...and you survived Simon, your mind survived...the loss of your family, of everything dear to you. I'll not even try to guess to what depths it dragged you, or how you made it through, but I can see the same keen mind at work, trying to work it out. It's rare, and impressive.
- S Whereas you my friend, are in a state. I find you on a station platform, peering into the mouth of a tunnel, waiting for the London train to take you away from your friends, family, from all that you know. You'd do just as well to step in front of it as get on it, for all the peace of mind that leaving will bring you. How can your sense of identity grow away from the people, 'deluded' as they are in their faith, who recognise you, value you, in whose lives and memories you exist?
- T Step in front of it! Your imagination is ghoulish. I have been trying Simon, for years. I have tried to understand my peers, but I feel like a fake, mouthing platitudes but privately, silently, knowing that they are wrong, and misguided. I am too serious, I accept that. I should overlook religion, faith, and just get on with life. Yes, I should! But it's not me. Perhaps I too needed a test...that's a stupid thing to say, sorry...
- S No, don't tiptoe around me. I know what you are saying.
- T ...to throw me from my philosophical perch and drag me closer, to life. I've been lucky, with family, with love, I have never had to reach for spiritual assistance. But perhaps that is an advantage, in tackling these issues. It keeps my philosophies pure.
- S But your detachment has disabled you, as I said it would many years ago, such that you can find no place here, on earth. You have travelled, observed, scrutinised the world, your fellow citizens of the world, and the result is alienation.
- T It is frustration. Because I know why mankind believes – because it cannot understand, and it cannot accept that it cannot understand. The result of this discomfort...is faith. Blind faith, for what evidence is there? What proof? I have seen none...only stories, only ragged scrolls, dubious accounts.
- S But your response to this feeling of frustration cannot be escape. There is no escape from your own mind.
- T What is your answer then?
- S Another sort of faith, an optimism, a confidence in our species' ability not only to survive, but to thrive, intellectually. A compromise between spiritual independence and faith, whereby we can proceed and attempt to hurdle problems that otherwise we would assume to be insurmountable. As long as we recognise that our inability to comprehend the mysteries of existence are due to the limited (but expandable, we must believe that) capacity of our minds, then we should have no need to rely on images, icons, texts and testaments. We would evolve, and develop minds better fitted to tackling these problems.
- T Faith in ourselves, followed by an inexorable advance. But faith nevertheless.
- S No. An absence of nihilism. A cause for hope. These are simple human needs.
- T But precarious, vulnerable. It depends on us, on a confidence in ourselves. Effective faiths are founded on impermeable, unquestionable entities, ones that we cannot allow ourselves to doubt, ones that even if we do doubt, we cannot prove the absence of. Once an element of doubt develops in a certain faith, it is prone to disintegrate. God, even if he is no more than a reflection of our insecurities in this frighteningly large universe, is untouchable.
- S All these years Thomas, we have been talking of mankind, of multitudes, enormous groups. In reality very few need to think on such 'deep' matters, or even to have definite ideas on religion and meaning. It has no real or drastic effect on people's everyday lives if they feel there is a point to existence or not. It would be silly for everyone to preoccupy themselves on such subjects, while they overlooked their physical functions as citizens. Not everyone has the inclination or the ability to ponder such imponderables. The average, the normal person's motives in life are based on immediate needs; money, comfort, friendship, pleasure...assuming of course that the basics, such as food, water and heat are in abundance. Without those the average human could not give a damn about whether their species' continued existence mattered in the long run or not. Our survival instinct is subconscious, an instinct.
- T So your self-directed faith, so useful for you, is unnecessary after all.
- S Perhaps not. An underlying trend, an imperceptible ebb will steer humanity towards certain ends, perhaps away from God towards spiritual independence, and great progress. No single generation will be conscious of it, but a long-term change will occur, due to the singular achievements of spiritually emancipated individuals. We may learn how to grasp the enormity of the physical laws that hold us together...
- T You believe that? That humanism, which is what you describe essentially, can provide for us?
- S Maybe. I wanted to see your reaction. To see the light of inquiry in your eyes.
- T Relax. You're so melodramatic. Did you really think I would...finish it, here? But you have succeeded. I won't be leaving today. Or any time soon. I promise.
- S Did you even have a ticket Thomas? Show me.
- T I had no destination.

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

Do We Need Religion?

Anna Sutcliffe gave this talk to the Yorkshire SoF Group.

In presenting a piece about David Hume and the Edinburgh Enlightenment, Andrew Marr concluded: 'This is all we have. If we cannot make it work, nothing will.' Do we agree? I think, on balance, I do, and that is taking note of the mistakes made in the context of the Enlightenment. One problem seems to have been what is called *scientism*, i.e. taking a hypothesis for proven because of a great desire to *believe* that something is true – an ironic outcome over against the reluctance to accept the tenets of religion on grounds of lack of hard evidence. Such mistakes seem to have been made in, for instance, medical 'science' and psychology, and some are, were, the very language games that characterise the alleged 'darkness' of the Middle Ages. If the word *hysterion* means "womb", the condition hysteria must – mustn't it? – be especially characteristic of women? Any stick is good enough to beat a dog, and women, for most practical purposes, have always been 'dogs', and mostly still are. We've all met people who give themselves out to be rationalists, and blithely assume that this makes them rational, without further demonstration.

A flaw of the Enlightenment project, was the disparaging of poetic and mystical experience *as such*.

Another flaw, as I see it, of the Enlightenment project, was the disparaging of poetic and mystical experience *as such* and not just the deploring of claims that such experiences and insights prove something, though of themselves they fail to prove anything. I do not think I hold with the notion of different *magisteria* – science and poetry according to Mary Midgley, science and religion per Stephen Jay Gould. I incline to agree with Richard Dawkins that, given a bit of hard evidence for the existence of God, we'd hear much less about separate *magisteria*. All the same, I belong to those who value what I'll call 'the poetic dimension' for its own sake. And religions do impinge upon what I'm calling 'the poetic'. I hope I do not misunderstand, but Dawkins and others do not seem to allow for the kind of thing to which I refer. I am using the word broadly, not restricting it to the making of verse, though it does show itself most splendidly in that genre, arguably.

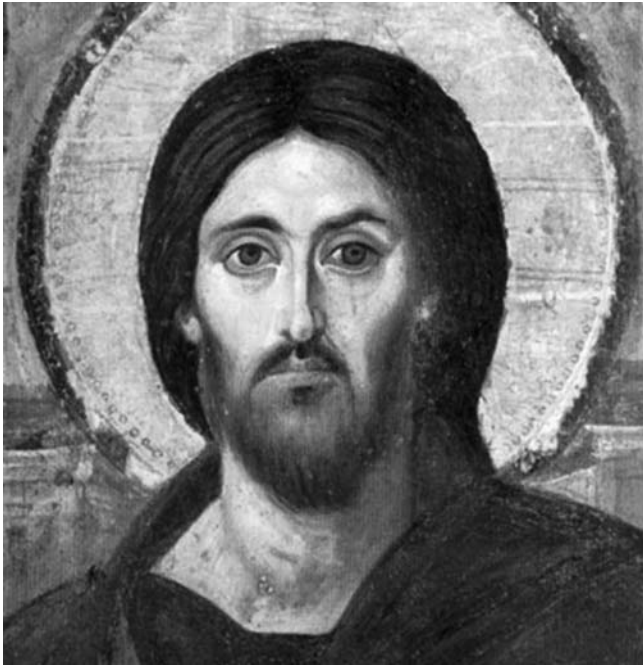
All religions, I think, operate to a large extent in the poetic mode. This is why, for instance, I find the image of the Suffering Servant to be one I cannot manage without, even if I go with Richard Dawkins and call myself an atheist (if I do). I take Christianity to be a remarkable amalgam of poetic vision, and a collection of ethical teachings. A good letter appeared in *Sofia* recently, about the two concepts Jesus and the Christ, for which I was grateful. 'The Christ' is to be seen in the very greatest Eastern icons: the heads of Christ, the Virgin (*theotokos*, the god bearer), etc. The image may be found in poetry, say in English, at least as far as the Reformation. Helen Bellamy and I are working on a presentation involving poetry and music, for which I am suggesting we include John Skelton's poem 'Wofully Arrayd':

Wofully arrayed,
My blood, man,
For thee, ran,
It cannot be nayd,
My body, blo and wan,
Wofully arrayd

which was set to music by William Cornysh, who also worked for Henry VIII.

No, I do not believe that the Jewish man, Jesus, was/is the second person of the Trinity. But I cannot abandon the suffering servant icon. If one argues that religion is wholly bad (as Dawkins seems to do), and one can hardly ignore the unspeakable evils that it has been used to excuse, must one abandon this poetic thing? Most especially, must one abandon it in education? I think even Richard Dawkins might say 'no' – so keen is he on the Bible being mediated in education because of its cultural centrality. I would hate to be seen to argue that – if we are to align ourselves with the Enlightenment project (as I think, agreeing with Andrew Marr, we must) that such poetic tropes as I mention might be cast away as so much superstition – or, even, so much mythology.

The task of thus interpreting the matter is one for – shall I say 'enlightened' – education, a project far from anything we have today in state education. Dawkins thinks that the annexing of children as religious affiliates is tantamount to child abuse, but I scarcely think he would disagree with me profoundly about the importance of mediating, *for children as well*, this, among other 'poetics' as I shall say.



Edgar Wind, once Oxford Professor of Fine Art and an early Reith lecturer, said, in his book *Art and Anarchy*, that we, today (that is, in his day) could never apprehend, say, pagan art representing deities as their makers once did, because we lack their 'sacred fear'. If I translate that to my own case: is my be-glamouring – for want of a better word – by the great icons and poems afforded by Christianity, dependent to some degree – maybe to a large degree – upon my upbringing as a Christian (albeit one brought up in a rather imageless brand of Christianity) who was taught to *fear* these personages? I shall never know. I do know that I am not at all devoid of a certain kind of rapture when faced by images and stories from pagan cultures. I would, therefore, deplore any education or modification of culture that made impossible the sort of apprehension I have tried to describe. Nevertheless, I would not want any children of mine constrained to believe except according to the best contemporary evidence – *in all humility*.

All extant religions are constructs of patriarchal societies, and that, for me, rules them out as ethical guides in large part. When Joanna Dales and I belonged to a group called Leeds Christian Feminists, I recall a young student appearing one night, who said – if she had to choose between Christianity and feminism, she would have to choose feminism. Religious institutions are always – however they may begin as revolutionary – conservative forces. Don Cupitt tells us that such projects as *Médecin sans Frontières* are the new body of Christ. Feminism, the cause in large part of the emancipation and empowerment of women, did not come from the churches. The Church of England, in particular (because I know it a bit) hasn't begun to catch up with the 20th century women's movement. Philip

Knight, talking in Leicester about a neo-catholic theologian, Vattimo, explained his – Vattimo's – project as the idea that *secularism*, in our time, is not the enemy of religion, but the inevitable *reductio* of Christianity, a notion not unlike what we hear from Don Cupitt.

Humanists take great exception to the idea that goodness cannot eventuate unless it is mediated by religion, that, somehow, religions own goodness, as they own various treasures. Dawkins argues strongly for altruism as emerging in the process of evolution. In other words, the idea that goodness is something churches, etc., possess and dole out, is just another takeover bid, and its pretensions look pretty unimpressive if one thinks of the situations of women, children and homosexuals, for instance. All the same...

All extant religions are constructs of patriarchal societies.

As a Congregationalist, I was taught that I must obey the church 'as far as reason and conscience allow'. 'Oh, good,' I thought, 'I needn't take a blind bit of notice'. History is history, and how far the good aspects of the Enlightenment derive from Christianity – from religion, *tout court*, is now difficult to say. But: why do we need *religions* to produce good civil society? We may agree that we need respect for the autonomy of individuals, for privacy, for personal creeds and opinions, for scope restricted only by the needs of others, never, never, for laws made for their own sake.

I fear greatly for our society and for our dearly-bought freedoms. I see no hope – though, being alive, I must go with life, and live *as if* I had hope, as Shelley would say. Because I do not believe in the supernatural tenets of realist Christianity, and because I think I can see that only realist Christianity offers redemption, as distinct from a (forever out of date) pattern for everyday living as in Islam and Judaism, or a means of release, as in Hindu and Buddhist 'religions', I think I see that human life is tragic. Like the rabbits in *Watership Down*, constantly culled, who consoled themselves with tragic poetry, I fear that 'tragic poetry' is unlikely to become obsolete. It did, for the rabbits, once they understood their situation, but we and our situation are more complex. Sophisticated paganism, anyone?...

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

Please send your letters to:

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

Images and Ideas

Dear Editor,

Christopher Truman mistakenly attributes to me a quote by the former distinguished editor of the Roman Catholic journal, *The Tablet* (Letters No.87). However, it is a view – that current global conflicts polarise around the values of the Enlightenment – I find entirely credible. It is endorsed on a daily basis by media reports of global current affairs. In contrast, the conflict over images – though deeply embedded in history, from Mosaic prohibitions through Byzantine controversies to the destruction of the Bamian statues and the Danish cartoons – is a detail of a larger, ongoing, religious narrative. This latter now pales into insignificance in the context of the fundamental change in human consciousness, that took place in the seventeenth century, of how we view the world: either in terms of the discourse of analogical inference (traditional ‘religious’ thinking) or the methodology of empirical verification (new secular thinking). The consequences of this epistemic change – extensively considered by the German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg and the French philosopher Michael Foucault, and of course Don (cf. *Talking with Dinosaurs*) – now reverberate throughout our world, not only in terms of religious and secular societies but even between and within individuals within these larger entities. It is the most potent issue in human awareness, religious and ideological conflict, and in its terrorist consequences. In contrast, viewing a Botticelli might be regarded as light relief!

Yours,
 Dominic Kirkham,
 94 Clarendon Road, Manchester M34 5SE
 paul@paulkirkham5.wanadoo.co.uk;

Religious Humanism?

Dear Editor,

David Warden (July 2007) finely describes the tensions and agreements that exist between

humanists and members of the Sea of Faith. Because there is no SoF group here, and encouraged by him, I threw my



lot in with a very lively, local, humanist group and found its monthly meetings welcoming and stimulating. There was one personal reaction that I did not expect. As I told the secretary/leader, Edwin Salter, on leaving the Humanist meeting I feel more ‘religious’ than when I leave the Sunday service of my local chapel. ‘Religious’ in the sense of valuing my own tradition and devotional heritage. I found the hinterland of secular humanism emotionally bare. There occurs a depth and warmth when using the metaphors of religion that encourages a caring concern, not just for the truth but for one another, when rational discussion fails.

‘Religious’ in the sense of witnessing to that tradition. Now I was on the other side of the argument. In church circles I am questioning and critical. As one Church Steward said when introducing me at a Sunday service, ‘We welcome him again to the pulpit. We don’t often agree with what he says but he does make us think.’ But here I found myself with a defensive and protective attitude. This, I thought, is because secular humanism is so antagonistic to religion, all religion, that it attacks targets constructed in childhood which have been long since abandoned by the main stream denominations, and are naturally annoyed when their conservative theology is corrected. One visiting cleric who took a modest liberal line was told bluntly that he was a heretic. It is an achievement when a Christian is judged, condemned, and excommunicated by a group of humanists!

In this encounter it has been very difficult to express in a concise way the SoF position. I am sure that David Warden is right when he says that ‘we are navigating the same sea,’ though in the group I was advised that the SoF exploration sounds more like being in ‘the soup – of religiosity’.

Yours,
 John White,
 78, Suffield Way, King’s Lynn, Norfolk PE30 3DL
 john.white78@virgin.net

The Great Oak

At the bottom of my garden stood a great oak tree. It was there when a 'select development of executive style dwellings' was hastily assembled, which housed me and my family for about 12 years. It was there when a hundred years before, the Council created a Municipal Cemetery, an oasis of peace and sadness the other side of my garden fence. A place to visit, to remember, to bring flowers, to show love, to show you cared, to think of all the 'if onlys' which make up each person's life story.

Each autumn, the Great Oak shed its harvest of acorns, a feast for the grey squirrels that lived their lives in its branches. Some they buried as a winter store, some lay undiscovered to grow into trees for another generation, as the Great Oak had become the gift of a generation now long forgotten.

At the first Sea Of Faith Conference, held on a cold but bright day many years ago, we gathered to talk about things most of us had never talked about in public before. How the world of religious thought no longer gave us answers that made sense, no longer helped us make sense of our lives. We discovered that we shared a common conclusion that it just didn't work any longer.

It was all going very well, when a lady sitting in front of me (I used to remember her name but sadly no more) asked the distinguished panel of speakers, 'but what about the heart?' It was a question that has never been answered and I speak as someone who has read, sometimes over and over, most of the words written so beautifully by Don Cupitt, Don whom I first met as an earnest Theology undergraduate in 1967.

The lady, whose question lived longer than the memory of who she was, went on to say that intellectual discussion was all very well but making sense of your life was for her an affair of the emotions. Whatever common sense told you was all very well but some of us, maybe most of us, live our lives through our feelings about things. It was an affair of the heart. The answer to her question is quite simple even though it has taken me 40 years and a course of counselling to work it out.

To make sense of life firstly we need to feel we are loveable. Easier said than done. Then we need to feel we are loved. And finally we need to feel that ultimately all will be well. This is what the great religions have tried to do for us even though the intellectual infrastructure that supported them has crumbled and fallen away. To me this matters not. The great religions are not 'true' in an intellectual sense but they can work 'as if' they are true. They can make us feel better about ourselves and our place in the scheme of things.

I often think of the electric light switch. I never understood or believed the scientific explanations as to how electricity works. Maybe that is taking scepticism too far but that's how it was for me.



Despite this I have no hesitation in turning on the light when I need it and turning it off when I want to save the planet. I can even mend it when it doesn't work. That's how religion works for me too. Don has won the argument but religion was always about how we feel about things rather than how we think about things. However atheistic my intellect has made me, my heart lives in the certain knowledge that the person I created as a choirboy in the 1950's, the Jesus of the story books lives with me as an ever-present friend and guide. A person without whom I could never have survived as long as I have. Day by day he's there telling me that all will be well. That if there is only one set of footprints in the sand, they are his carrying me through.

The acorns from the Great Oak feed me as they feed the grey squirrels. It helps to have a positive mental approach to things. To think of life as a cup half full. To value what you have and not to be dragged down by what you don't have, by the pain and the suffering we all endure. There are doubtless many ways of doing this but the one that works for me, the acorn that feeds me, is the certain knowledge that he is there for me as he has always been. Even though he probably never existed in the real world. Even though if he did we can never know anything about him.

The Great Oak disappears and the squirrels with it. Acorns fall no more. The winter store is bare. I can't imagine such a world. The intellect tells us we don't need it any more. Maybe we can use the Internet as we used cemeteries, a place to show your feelings, to make sense of life. But what of the people in the select development of executive style dwellings? How barren will their lives be? Is the problem of the heart to be solved by another generation of wonder drugs from Glaxo Smith Kline Beecham?

The Sea of Faith has had its day, has run its course, has ebbed and now runs down the pebbles on Dover Beach. Sadly the question was never answered. What about the heart? The Great Oak is no more. The world will look for its answers somewhere else.

Stephen Broughton
SBroug@aol.com

Current Affair

Comment by Owl

There's nothing an Owl likes better than a freshly opened can of worms. Not that the worms themselves need to be fresh, just fat and wriggly, like the mass of contributions to the latest debate on the singing of *Jerusalem* ('And did those feet...?'). In case you've missed it, there's been an almighty rumpus following a report that Colin Slee, Dean of Southwark, does not regard William Blake's verses as a suitable 'hymn' for memorial services.

At the lowest end of the scale there are the 'Have Your Say' emails posted on news websites such as that of Virgin Media. When Owl flew past the other day there were already more than 2500 'reactions', almost all illiterate but 95% opposing the 'ban'. Such argument as was attempted ranged from the fairly reasonable 'It's a cracking tune, uplifting, and everybody knows it cos we had it at school' to the vitriolic 'It's C of E Bishops (sic) poncing in dresses that should be banned – no wonder the churches are empty' and the unspeakably racist. Racist? Yes, the 'ban' was widely seen as a politically correct kow-towing to those who, if they don't like us (Anglo-Saxons) promoting our 'green and pleasant' at weddings and funerals as well as the Albert Hall, should be told where they can take themselves.

A few vain attempts were made to lift the tone and discuss what Blake's imagery could possibly have meant – and what relevance it might have to the congregation at a funeral, a wedding or a meeting of the WI. Parry's tune was, rightly, praised by all, including those who thought he was elgar (sic). Switch to the *Daily Telegraph* and one of the unfortunate Mr Slee's brothers in Christ, the Reverend Dr Peter Mullen, is allowed a central half-page of intellectual vitriol. The Dean is classed with 'polite mechanicals' among today's clergy, who are of course 'trendy', 'modern', 'liberal' and eschew anything 'too nationalistic'. The author rounds off with a triumphant 'Bring me my sword' (sic).

If little of theological note is being said at any level, perhaps that's significant. Down Owl's lane there's been some entirely secular murmuring regarding another patriotic ditty. Apart from the English members, community choir singers hailing from Wales, Scotland, New Zealand, Switzerland, Russia and South Africa are being expected to give some welly to another 'cracking good tune', Ivor Novello's 'Rose of England'. Christopher Hassall's words are jingoistic and militaristic in the extreme, but any dissent has been dismissed by the

choir committee as small-minded. 'Rousing', 'uplifting' and 'audience-pleasing' are qualities held to neutralise even quite unpleasant imagery.

'Now wakes our foe of foes, mad to pluck our rose,
Frantic he comes, drumming his drums of war,
But England's pride still blossoms fresh on England's shore...'

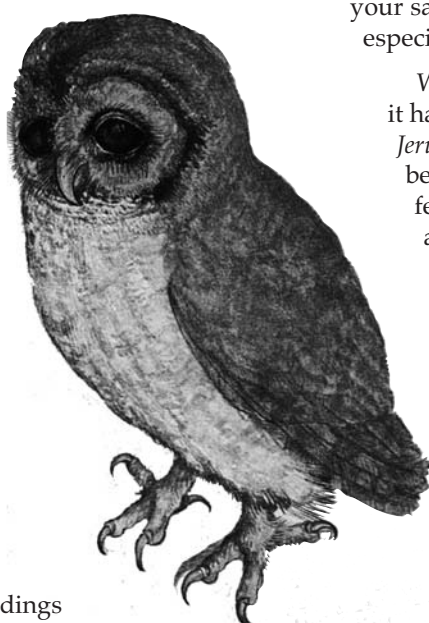
It's exactly the kind of sentiment that many 'have your say' emailers are revelling in right now, especially the BNP supporters.

Whether patriotism is or is not 'enough', it has to be taken seriously, however. With *Jerusalem* we have a muddy argument because the mix of patriotism, religious feeling and song is so volatile. Early associations of patriotic fervour with truly beautiful words and strong tunes remain embedded in the brain. The power of songs of another's homeland can be infectious as well. Try not being carried away by the massed choirs, even if you don't know the words in Welsh or Hebrew. Try not visualising the 'amber waves of grain' and the 'purple mountain majesties' of America the Beautiful, 'from sea to shining sea'.

On one count the Dean is absolutely right. Despite its inclusion in *Ancient and Modern*, among other respected anthologies, *Jerusalem* should not be classed as a 'hymn'. But few today are troubled by such niceties. The fact that Blake poses four questions, the answer to all of which is 'No', has traditionally delighted choirboys, but that's an outdated joke. So would this can of worms have been better left unopened? Perhaps a Southwark congregation could have been expected to have better taste. The lines of 'taste', appropriateness and theological acceptability are drawn somewhere, by someone, at all services and ceremonies which come under a 'church' umbrella. There are always going to be spats when the arguments of popularity, the feel-good factor and 'but it was his favourite!' will not wash.

A final thought. If anything, Blake's poem with its invigorating imagery, taken out of the context of the author's strange but brilliant oeuvre, is preferable to that other *A and M* entry under 'National'. Morally it is surely questionable to vow to one's country (unspecified) 'the love that asks no questions.'

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



Henry Wansbrough reviews

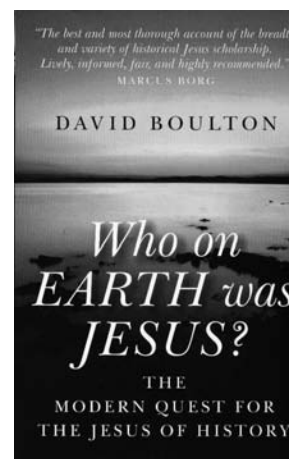
Who on Earth was Jesus?

by David Boulton

O Books (Winchester). 2008. 420 pages.
ISBN: 978-1-84694-018-7. £14.95.

An enthusiastic foreword by Richard Holloway (retired/resigned Bishop of Edinburgh and fierce critic of the conventional church). American-style paperback. Cheerfully irreverent style – ‘Jesus as celestial policeman’, ‘a magical Jesus “beyond the bright blue sky”’. It all looks like one more of those clever, debunking popular rants produced in newspapers at Christmas and Easter by journalists who are slightly out of their depths. In any case, a book of this kind is difficult to review, the larger part of a reviewer’s task being to introduce a book and its contents, only the smaller part being to assess and criticise it. Boulton sets out to summarise a long-standing debate in which a range of opinions needs to be presented, and summaries of summaries make tedious and indigestible reading. The debate about the possibility of discovering the historical Jesus began between the pagan Celsus and the Christian Justin Martyr barely a century after the death of Jesus, brandishing many of the arguments used in the revival of the debate a millennium-and-a-half later. It cuts at the heart of traditional Christianity, for no serious reader of Paul and of the gospels can deny that the New Testament and other contemporary writers present their stories about Jesus in a way widely different from that of modern historians. Yet, if we cannot establish some historical truth about Jesus, if the stories of his teachings, miracles, death and resurrection are pure myths, then Christianity dissolves into dust.

First of all it must be said that respect for the author and his competence as an investigative journalist grow steadily as he works tenaciously through the involved and complicated debates. At no level, popular, student or specialist, have I encountered so comprehensive and comprehensible a presentation of the issues involved. The persevering reader ends with a grasp of the questions that need to be asked and of the answers that have been given. Whether these answers are right or wrong is another matter. The reader is left to make a personal choice of weapons, techniques and coaches in the duel, for it is a book which should not merely be read, but fought over until it is dog-eared and tattered (then in the second edition perhaps some of the schoolboy spelling-howlers might be corrected!).



reviews

The personalities are well presented, with an adequate account of their position and credentials. The range is comprehensive and up-to-date, including even the Pope’s book, which he handed to me on publication day in April 2007. The views are well summarised, with lengthy and carefully-chosen quotations presenting the nub of their arguments. The great purple passages from Albert Schweitzer, Sanders and Vermes are there to inspire the reader, though the author’s own final purple passage (p. 404-7) falls rather flat. Ever and again there occur refreshing little details which I found enlightening: the synoptic gospels are so called not because (an awkward derivation) they can be ‘seen together’, but simply because they are included in Griesbach’s Synopsis, and it was a delight to learn that Strauss’ great work was translated into English by George Eliot. Above all, the assessments of the positions held by scholars are judicious and well explained. Boulton goes out of his way to be fair and even-handed. Every now and then the reader is offered a little light entertainment, such as the neat and fair presentation of Secret Gospel of Mark, with its homoerotic suggestions about Jesus, ‘discovered’ in the 1950s (p. 58) or the uncompromising sermon of Fr Cantalamessa to the papal household (p. 192). There is even a bit of the thrill of the detective novel: in a good whodunnit all the clues point increasingly to the wrong suspect until the final dénouement reveals the real killer. In this book one candidate seems to be scoring all the points – only to be left at the end hanging limply on the ropes.

Outstanding is the discussion of the Jesus Seminar, which has so often been mocked and caricatured. Here its principals and principles are sympathetically presented, together with the valuable related work on non-canonical gospels and other texts on which it is founded. One Christian reader may fear that the Jesus Seminar has won the day, as it doggedly strips the

wallpaper, piece by piece, off the cosy traditional Christian home; another may reckon to glimpse comforting light through holes in the argument. Then comes the counterpoint in the varied interpretations put on these data by distinguished scholars who continue to find in the historical Jesus enough basis to support their religious commitment. Is there a deliberate crescendo in the order Marcus Borg, Ed Sanders, John Meier, Tom Wright and Josef Ratzinger? All these are presented with masterly courtesy and clarity, with only a gentle hint of mockery at the papal attribution of John's Gospel to the son of Zebedee, 'following (or swallowing) a somewhat tortuous argument elaborated by Martin Hengel' (p. 294).

Intriguing is the thread running through the book, Jesus' teaching on the coming end of the world. Both John the Baptist (the predecessor and possibly mentor of Jesus) and Paul (the earliest follower of Jesus whose writings we possess) are dominated by a conviction of an approaching 'end of the world'. Was not Jesus similarly dominated and was he not simply wrong? Did he not simply 'goof it up' on this point? Did he really teach that the stars would fall from heaven and how soon? This becomes almost a test-case. Some gospel texts indicate a speedy end, others substitute a kingdom-within. What did Jesus teach? If he was wrong on such an important point, he can hardly be a reliable leader, let alone 'son of God' (in whatever sense this is meant) or divine. The constant return to this point is justified, but the failure to appreciate the context and genre of Jesus' sayings is the one serious fault of the book. Seen against the background of first-century Jewish literature, the eschatological sayings (and especially the 'apocalyptic' ones) of Jesus must be heard as images and ciphers of the decisive action of God which Christians see effective in the Resurrection of Christ. Christians do believe that the world was changed for ever by these events.

Any number of questions remain, principal among them – to my mind – being the evaluation of the factuality of the story of Jesus' passion, death and resurrection. These (or at least the acceptance of them) are, after all, the facts earliest and most crisply attested by both Christian and non-Christian witnesses. Perhaps these will serve for another book, but David Boulton has already performed an important service to gospel studies which will be appreciated and argued over by Christians and non-Christians alike.

Ghazal

Spirit that raises the gale on the moor,
what is your name?

that sifts drifted snow through the hinge
of the door,
what is your name'?

that furls the white breakers over the
shore,
what is your name?

that flies overhead the red banners of
war,
what is your name?

that sighs in the forest as if to explore,
what is your name?

that lights sudden flame that explodes
with a roar,
what is your name?

that pushes the clouds from behind and
before,
what is your name?

that breathes in the life of the heart, in
its core,
what is your name?

Joan Sheridan Smith

The poem 'Ghazal' is published in Joan Sheridan Smith's latest collection *Shall We Dance* (Poetry Monthly Press, Nottingham 2008).

Dom Henry Wansbrough is a monk of Ampleforth. He is General Editor of the New Jerusalem Bible and for a dozen years was on the Pope's Biblical Commission. He has been Chairman of the Oxford Faculty of Theology and from 1990-2004 was Master of St Benet's Hall.

Francis McDonagh reviews

The History and Politics of Latin American Theology

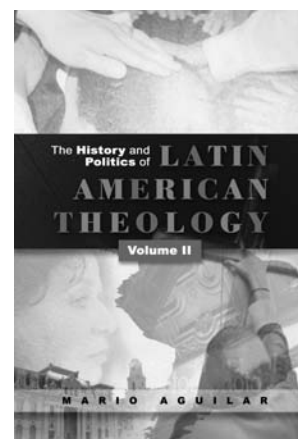
by Mario Aguilar

SCM Press (London), vol. I, 224 pages, 2007, ISBN: 9780334040231; vol. II, 256 pages, 2008, ISBN: 9780334041603. £22.99 each.

Mario Aguilar is Professor of Religion and Politics at the University of St Andrews. There are pages of his book that light up with the excitement of his subject. There is the poetry of the names of the indigenous peoples of Chiapas in his discussion of Bishop Samuel Ruíz: Tzotzil, Tzelbal, Tojolabal, Chol, Mam, Zoque, Mixe, Kakchiquel, Lacandon. Another strength of the book is that it casts its net wider than academics and includes practitioners of liberation theology, that is prophets-pastors: Archbishop Oscar Romero, Bishop Ruíz, Bishop Pedro Casaldáliga. There are also non-Catholics: José Míguez Bonino and Elsa Támez, and an agnostic, Iván Petrella. Ignacio Ellacuría is known as one of the six Jesuit martyrs of El Salvador, but to have his intellectual development analysed is valuable. And Aguilar naturally discusses key figures from the earliest days of this tradition: Gustavo Gutiérrez and Jon Sobrino, and Leonardo Boff.

The key concern of this work is to relate Latin American liberation theology to its social and political context, from the dictatorships of the 1960s and 1970s to the economic dictatorship of the age of globalisation, 'from the military dictatorships to the macro-dictatorship of the neoliberal empire,' as Pedro Casaldáliga puts it. A second discussion is whether liberation theology still exists, and the relation between the original emphasis on social and economic liberation and 'theologies of inculturation, feminist and queer theologies, ecological theologies'. Aguilar plumps for pluralism – 'liberation theologies' – within a tradition. Later writers 'continue using the methodologies of Gutiérrez or Sobrino to address new injustices... Liberation theology is not dead; it has diversified to include the suffering people of God, located in many churches, many mosques and many secular spaces.'

The present two volumes are due to be completed by a third, so any assessment is bound to be provisional, but some questions are clear. Perhaps the main one is what this book sets out to do, and who it is aimed at. The author describes it as academic, and certainly the volume of references in Spanish and Portuguese points to very serious students. More significant is Aguilar's use of Karl Mannheim's concept of social generations to structure his analysis. While he stresses that this is not a strictly one-directional chronological concept – younger thinkers can influence older – it doesn't fit too easily the fact that Gutiérrez and Sobrino have continued in theological activity throughout the period under discussion. Aguilar is also forced to admit that Casaldáliga 'represents continuity', although he wants him to represent the 'new' issue of ecology.



reviews

Unfortunately, at the same time as defending the rainforest, Casaldáliga also continues to defend the Cuban regime, a decidedly 'old' position. For this reader, at least, this analytical framework felt like a straitjacket. I was also not convinced by the argument that Samuel Ruíz's 'support for civil society was different from other...responses throughout Latin America': The tradition of the Brazilian Church has many examples of this, from Hélder Câmara to Paulo Evaristo Arns. The discussion of the place of theology in the university is interesting, but occasionally degenerates into agonising about the relation of middle-class academics to the political process, and especially to the poor. This is rescued to some extent by Aguilar's presentation of his own position, and his ventures into theology, but it leaves the reader puzzled about what sort of book this is.

The book reflects the author's Chilean origins, good on Chile, a sense of less familiarity with Brazil. While the basic historical background is well presented, in some cases the argument relies more on theory than on historical research, most notably in the case of the chapter on the Jesuits, which depends on an argument about the relationship between the Spiritual Exercises and the option for the poor, but doesn't provide evidence for Aguilar's claim that the Jesuits were the driving force of liberation theology and the option for the poor throughout Latin America. In Central America this is beyond doubt, there was Segundo in Uruguay, but in Brazil, for example, it is far from clear.

These two volumes suffer from lamentable editing and proof-reading. It may be too much to expect a publisher to smooth out an author's Hispanic and academic style, but it is unforgivable for Segundo to turn into Sobrino in the same paragraph (vol. II, p. 73), or for us to be faced with 'the sole of their daily life' (vol. II, p. 144). Let us hope that the final volume receives more TLC.

Francis McDonagh is Programme Manager for the Andes Region for the Catholic development agency, CAFOD. He has covered events in the Latin American Church as a journalist for over 20 years, and has translated works by Oscar Romero, Jon Sobrino and Pedro Casaldáliga.

Does Science Need Supernatural Guidance?

Dominic Kirkham reviews

Science Vs. Religion? Intelligent Design and the Problem of Evolution

by Steve Fuller

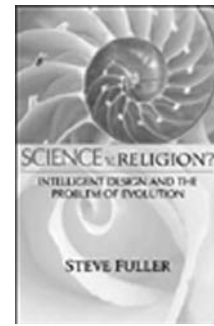
Polity Press. (Oxford). 2007. 192 pages. ISBN: 978-0745641225. £15.99.

This is a book about science by a sociologist, and it shows! Engaging and intelligently written, it misrepresents reality, rather like its subject – Intelligent Design Theory (IDT). Though the title of this work might indicate a stark choice between science and religion, the appended question mark indicates the possibility of a resolution to the seemingly unending Manichaeic struggle between two incompatibles. Fuller believes that religion is important for science: that it ‘offers the hope for a radical transcendence of humanity’s origins that evolution firmly denies’; that the present scientific world-view has its roots in a biblical inspired creationism; and, moreover, it provides a motivation for science – so much so that, ‘to lose touch with the creationist back story to modern science would be to undermine the strongest reason for pursuing science.’

Enter Francis Bacon and the *scienza nuova* of the seventeenth century! When we do look closely at the details, the story is not so much of a seamless emergence as something much more controversial. At almost every turn new thinking was blocked by ecclesiastical authority and biblical paradigms – one thinks of the groundbreaking work of Thomas Willis (in neurology) or James Hutton (in geology), who went in dread of the capital charge of ‘atheism’. In fact it was only when biblical paradigms were set aside that progress was made in understanding nature.

Not only does Fuller not seem to recognise this but wants to press further the claims of religiously grounded science. He believes that when one looks closely (as he claims to have done) at the modern branches of biological science such as genetics, biochemistry and molecular biology – those new areas of research which constitute what we now call neo-Darwinism – then you would be forced to conclude, ‘that Darwin (had he been alive today) would reinterpret natural selection as a design-based mechanism, possibly propelled by a divine engineer’

This is an amazing claim. As it happens it is an issue that two distinguished American biologists, Marc Kirschner and John Gerhart, actually address in their recent detailed assessment of neo-Darwinian science *The Plausibility of Life* (Yale, 2005) – another work missing from Fuller’s bibliography! Their conclusion is diametrically opposed to that of Fuller, stating that, ‘Today’s persuasive and consistent answers (to the problems arising from the emergence of biological novelty and phenotypic variation) have come through molecular, cellular and developmental experiments (that) can now be seen as one of the strengths of a general theory of evolution’ (pg.270). They completely dismiss the claims of IDT.



reviews

Regardless of all this, there is a more fundamental concern with Fuller’s thesis. A careful reading of the sub-title will reveal what it is. We note that evolution is not a theory but a ‘problem’. Generally, creationists make good mileage out of the line that evolution is ‘just a theory’ – just like we all have our pet theories about things. Only generally we don’t! What we do have are hypotheses – a very different thing.

If evolution is a problem then, in Fuller’s subtitle, intelligent design is the solution. In fact not only does he claim IDT to be more ‘intellectually satisfying’ – in that it reunites science and ethics in a purposeful programme – but that, ‘IDT is well placed to demonstrate how operating with religiously inspired, design-based assumptions has led to hypotheses whose empirical validity have been accepted even by those not sharing those assumptions.’

At the heart of the IDT controversy lies a misapplication of the word ‘intelligent’. Because clever humans can find intelligible patterns in natural phenomena this does not necessarily indicate an intelligent designer. Curiously enough, this difference is nowhere more clearly illustrated than in the debates that took place between Darwin and Captain Fitzroy on board *The Beagle* (graphically dramatised in Harry Thompson’s gripping account of the voyage in *This Thing of Darkness*, 2005). Fitzroy’s claim to fame is as founder of the study of meteorology. As a committed creationist Fitzroy was convinced that weather patterns were intelligible because they reflected the workings of an intelligent creator. Though Fitzroy was right – there are intelligible patterns in the weather – it is also true, as Darwin gleaned, that intelligible weather patterns do not mean an intelligent weather designer. It is on this simple non sequitur that the whole edifice of IDT thinking rests.

Having got over the science in this book one may enjoy the sociology. Though Fuller seems intent on conflating Darwin’s science with social Darwinism, he has interesting things to say about the development of Western science, the cultural and ideological significance of IDT, and the shenanigans related to its influence in the USA. Do look out for the fireworks that will most likely occur over how to celebrate the bicentenary of the birth of Darwin in 2009!

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.

Cicely Herbert reviews

The Minotaur

by Harrison Birtwistle

at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden

As one whose first operatic experience was as a teen-aged usher who stood through two entire Ring Cycles, and never looked back, (I learned from Gluck what such an action can lead to), I believe that a visit to the opera can be a profoundly powerful and liberating experience.

The production of Harrison Birtwistle's *Minotaur* at Covent Garden can be considered a triumph. The vocal lines in Birtwistle's new composition are easier on the ear than for any previous work of his that I have heard. Much of the orchestral sound is beautiful, almost delicate, with some extraordinary textures. In this production, conducted by Antonio Pappano and directed by Stephen Langridge, the overture is accompanied by a deeply disturbing video installation of a swelling, threatening, moonlit sea, the surface of which never quite breaks. It is both a thrilling and terrifying start to the opera, and sets the mood for the tragedy that unfolds as the sacrificial 'innocents' land on Crete and we watch them descend with Theseus into the Labyrinth. The libretto is by the poet, David Harsent, who has collaborated with the composer several times in the past. The words in a sung performance are not always readily audible, and a wise decision has been made to use surtitles for the English text. Purists who object to the use of surtitles will doubtless complain, but I found that this assists one to follow the nuances of a story, and greatly increases one's involvement in the proceedings.

Birtwistle's take on the myth is not the usual one, for here, it is the beast hidden in the depths of the Labyrinth, the Minotaur himself, and not Theseus, who is the focus of the story. Freud is said to have likened the human brain to a labyrinth and psychoanalysis could be regarded as the process which sets out to destroy the Minotaur, the beast within. The Greeks knew a thing or two about the power of theatre – a place where groups of disparate people, each with concerns and troubles, hidden emotions, secret shames, joys and fears, are brought together in a shared and cathartic experience. The night I saw *The Minotaur*, the audience left the Opera House elated, having spent an utterly absorbing three hours, united as witnesses to a major theatrical and musical event, one which may well, in time, come to be regarded as a milestone in operatic history.



reviews

The day that our 'World Leaders' stop to consider whether acts of vengeance can ever solve the human predicament, they would do well to remember the warning words of the operatic heroine, Ariadne, at the start of the opera, as she follows the progress of the black-sailed boat, carrying its load of sacrificial victims to their certain death:

Blood calls for blood, a debt that's never paid
Betrayal never forgotten or forgiven
...a lust that still festers

And perhaps when that day comes, we will finally realise that the lust for vengeance creates only further acts of vengeance in an unending cycle of violence, and we may begin to look for other ways of reconciling conflicts.

The shape of a theatre, with the stage and auditorium, forms a space within which the protagonists, performers and audience alike, are able to unite in a dialogue about the human condition, often profoundly instructive, and sometimes life-changing. The morning after my visit to the Opera House, I sat at a Quaker Meeting, in another kind of circle, where, instead of encompassing the Minotaur's tragedy, my gaze was directed to a simple wooden table on which stood a bowl of spring flowers. The heart that had raced with the destructive power of the Minotaur the night before, was stilled to a steady beat.

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.

Cicely is a superb performer of her own work. At a recent poetry reading in Camden Town she held her audience even when a furious dog fight broke out in the street outside, accompanied by uncouth human cries.

Anthea Boulton interviews the author and reviews

The Biggest Female in the World and Other Stories

by Wendy Perriam

Robert Hale (London). 2007. £18.99. 224 pages. hbk. ISBN: 9780709083777.



Wendy Perriam

When Wendy's third, latest book of short stories arrived in the mail my first thought was 'how does she do it? How does she come up with all these new stories and characters that burst from the pages with such energy and emotion and quirkiness?'

We arranged to meet so we could record an interview, and my first question was, 'How much do the stories reflect your life?'

'Writing a book is like building a nest,' she told me, 'you gather bits from here and there, stories just jump out at you. But some recurrent themes such as loss, the feeling of being an outsider, the influence of parents especially fathers, depression and suicide do come from personal experience. My story *Birthday* tells of a mother trying to compensate for the loss of her babies; I had two miscarriages before my daughter was born. In *Dandelion* a woman's life is dominated by memories of her dead father; my father was not dead but away in spirit for most of my childhood, therefore linked in my mind with God the Father.

I went to convent schools between the ages of four and 17. During those years I was always writing, but by 16 I was seriously questioning my faith, I was so aware of the suffering in the world. So I stopped attending communion. The nuns declared I was in Satan's power and, finally, expelled me for heresy, which was terrifying for a once-devout child. I went into a total depression, which resulted in a loss of health, happiness and any sense of purpose and which stopped me writing. At 18 I even attempted suicide.

The nuns taught me that men were superior, and there were few men in my family, distant figures mostly doctors and lawyers, so I didn't question this. I grew up being attracted to older, cleverer authority figures and it was only later that I realised I was taking a submissive role. According to the nuns, sex outside marriage led straight to hell. So

when I first had sex, as a student at Oxford, I was filled with guilt and shame, fear of my parents and worry about eternal damnation.'

Small wonder Wendy finds herself at home in *Sea of Faith*. 'I still believe in hell emotionally, not rationally, but my indoctrination was so deep it's hard to disentangle imagination from real fears. That's why I'm so against the indoctrination of children, it will probably stay with them for life. A large part of me is still open to miracles. I miss religion and a sense of being close to God and the communion of saints – probably a total delusion.'

I noted that these themes run through the new collection. *Paradise Lost* imagines the appearance of angels, a character in *Saviour* notes how 'God kept his distance nowadays' and *May* suggests that we can't define truth but should be open to possibilities beyond logic, reason and even common sense.

'After graduating,' Wendy continued, 'I worked in the USA, but Dad wanted me to come back and get "a proper job". He suggested Advertising, so Advertising it was. I hated it, especially as I was working on fashion accounts and cars, and I had no interest in fashion and loathed cars! It didn't even occur to me that one could choose a career or do what one wanted in life.

'In 1962 I spent 8 weeks in hospital. Doctors told me I had a life-shortening disease and that I would never have children. In 1964 I married Tim, whom I'd met at Oxford, and had a child a year later after two miscarriages. I wasn't managing to write during this time because, on top of the illness, Tim lost his job so I became the breadwinner.

'Then came a painful divorce. In fact I had a breakdown after Tim left and went to psychiatric hospital (where the psychiatrist had an affair with me and, much later, killed himself). In 1974 I remarried, taking on two stepchildren who were very damaged, since their Mum had died from MS and also had severe mental problems. We went to live in Surbiton and I decided to take a second

degree at Kingston Poly so that I could teach English (History had been my first subject). While I was there, the writer in residence saw the stories I'd contributed to the Poly magazine and showed them to his agent who wrote "Stop your degree and write me a novel. I will publish it". With great trepidation I *did* stop and wrote my first novel *in bed*, fearing it would never work and I'd given up my degree for nothing. I was really delighted. I'd wanted to write from the age of 4, and it was very therapeutic. I could work through all life's problems. I used miscarriage, illness and infertility, divorce and loss of faith as subjects for my novels.' (Wendy has written 16 to date).

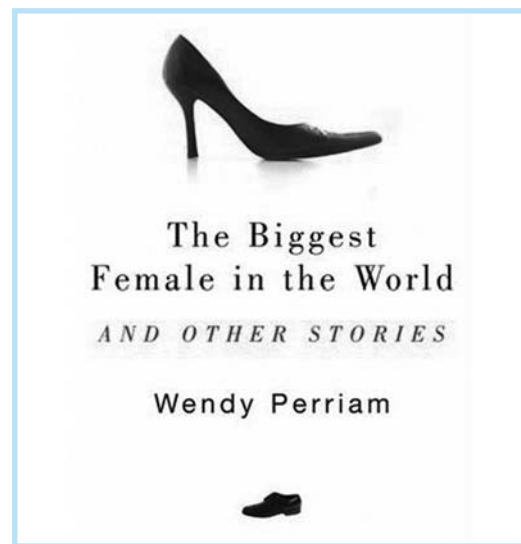
'I decided to try writing short stories, and I loved it. Novels need to be more geared to reality, they require firmer structure and a lot of research. With short stories I have the freedom to go off into the world of the imagination. I can create weirder characters, and these really exist for me. I'm irresistibly drawn to the transgressives, maybe because there's a transgressive inside me, struggling to get out!'

Watching Wendy as she sits in my flat, dressed in her trademark style of bright colours and bold designs, it was hard to equate this vibrant, funny, sensitive woman with the extraordinary life experiences she had related. No wonder she sees so deeply into the anxieties of life, the obstacles, the pains and disappointments. What's great is that through all these experiences she retains her generous-hearted sympathy and, through the alchemy of imagination, is able to transform bitterness into gold.

Life is evidently more satisfying for Wendy these days. 'Since I'm very much a "morning person" I try to devote the first part of the day to my writing. I usually continue for several hours, but some of the work will be revision and rewriting, once that initial burst of energy starts to drain away. On certain days I teach Creative Writing and I find alternating teaching with writing is the perfect combination.'

However, bitter elements haven't stopped leaking into the crucible. 'My nephew committed suicide on the evening of the millennium. I saw the terrible anguish it caused my sister and that changed my view of suicide totally.' In this collection, Wendy bases *Suicide* on a real experience she had on a train journey and she makes her characters consider the moral and emotional implications.

There are plenty of lighter ingredients in the brew, however. There's humour, piquant



description of the pleasures of the senses and, of course, sex. In *Kentucky Fried* the wife of a much older man, frustrated by his lack of ardour, goes out on a blisteringly hot summer's day and, having encountered a gang of workmen re-tarmac the road, imagines them all making rough, sweaty, brutish love to her. As Wendy explained, 'I intend to continue opening bedroom doors because I'm interested in the huge gap between reality and fantasy. According to various research studies, many people are frustrated in their sex-lives (or don't have any at all), yet the general impression given by our society is that everyone is experiencing multiple orgasm whilst swinging from the chandeliers.'

And so to the title story, *The Biggest Female in the World*, which threads together several familiar themes. There's fantasy, comedy, a downtrodden partner, memories of sex, and a tease. At first, readers might assume that the Biggest Female is Edwin's vastly expanded wife, Roza, but they'd be wrong. Wendy has done her homework. The Biggest Female in the World is in fact... Japanese Knotweed. I'll leave you to find out why, and to discover for yourselves the outward flamboyance and inner truths to be found in Wendy Perriam's world.

Anthea Boulton worked at Granada TV from the mid 1960s into 1970s, writing storylines for *Coronation Street* plus some drama adaptations for TV. After her two daughters were born she freelanced for BBC local radio, programmes including writing book reviews and popular local history. She has been a JP since 1978 and is still serving. She now lives at Hobsons Farm, Dentdale, where she runs an oral history project recording memories of local people.

Wendy Perriam's new book *Little Marvel and Other Stories* is published this month by Robert Hale (London).



There must be more to life than having everything