

sfia

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In the Making
CONFERENCE ISSUE

sfia

down to Earth

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Front Cover Image: Brigid, Celtic goddess of poetry, fire, smithing and fertility, also St Brigid/Bride, traditionally Mary's midwife at the birth of Jesus, the Word.

Back Cover Image: Mount Etna, the Roman god Vulcan's forge, where, among other things, he made Achilles' shield.

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is the magazine of the Sea of Faith Network (UK)
Registered Charity No. 1113177.

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

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

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

In the Making

This year's SoF Conference in Liverpool was about 'creativity in religion and the arts'. It was a very enjoyable and good-tempered Conference.

This issue of *Sofia* includes introductions to two of the workshops by Ken Smith and Don Cupitt and a report on a third by David Paterson. We have a shortened version of the talk by theologian George Pattison and two extracts from the unscripted talk, or perhaps it should be called performance, by theatre director Patrick Sandford. As well as talks and discussions, there were singing, dancing, sculpting, laughing, poetry... plenty of creativity and a great spirit.

Later, as I was thinking about that spirit I remembered Lorca's description of the *duende*, the spirit (which he calls 'the spirit of the earth'), that arises most often 'in music, dance and spoken poetry, arts that require a living body as interpreter – forms that arise and die ceaselessly, and are defined by an exact present.' He says of the *duende*:

'It gives a sensation of freshness wholly unknown, having the quality of newly created rose, of miracle, and produces in the end an almost religious enthusiasm. In all Arabic music, dance and song the appearance of the *duende* is accompanied by vociferous shouts of 'Alá! Alá, God! God!'... and in the singing of southern Spain the presence of the *duende* is followed by shouts of 'Viva Dios!'

So is religion just artistic enthusiasm, just great art? That can't be right. We all know that some highly cultivated people can get a buzz from great art – Bach, Beethoven – and in their daily lives be cruel or even murderers. Keats – a greater poet than Shelley to my mind, though in his day some hostile reviewers dismissed him as a 'cockney poet' because of his lower social class – confronts this problem in *The Fall of Hyperion*. It is a tremendous but quite a muddled poem and, unsurprisingly, he was unable to finish it. He begins by saying:

For Poesy alone can tell her dreams,
With the fine spell of words alone can save
Imagination from the sable chain
And dumb enchantment.

Later in the poem he enters an old sanctuary where he meets the high prophetess of a goddess and asks her why he has been privileged to enter this sanctuary, when much worthier people, who do much more good, are not:

Are there not thousands in the world, said I,
Encouraged by the sooth voice of the shade,
Who love their fellows even to the death,
Who feel the giant agony of the world,
And more, like slaves to poor humanity,
Labour for mortal good?

She replies:

'Those whom thou spak'st of are no
visionaries,'
Rejoined that voice – 'They are no dreamers
weak,
They seek no wonder but the human face;
No music but a happy-noted voice.
They come not here, they have no thought to come –
And thou art here, **for thou art less than they...**'

The prophetess agrees with Paul that the greatest gift is love, kindness, greater even than 'speaking with tongues of men and angels.' And rather than being the great I AM, the poet is taught *humility*.

Nevertheless art and poetry are necessary. That is because humanity is not ready-made, complete, but *in the making*. With the bodies and the habitat we are given, we can make something of ourselves, to some extent make ourselves. We may even call this fulfilment of humanity's potential 'God' or the 'cosmic Christ'. Or as Pattison put it at the end of his talk 'through Christ, human beings become "Saviours of God". In the talk he did not make it clear whether he thought God existed in the first place or, as *Sofia* Editor would think, was created by human beings.

For human self-making, artists – 'visionaries' – are needed. But that does not mean that poetry must or indeed should be didactic. As Keats said in a letter to his friend John Hamilton Reynolds: 'We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us – and if we do not agree, seems to put its hand in its breeches' pocket. Poetry should be great and unobtrusive, a thing which enters one's soul...' That is the way poetry 'makes' us – by being itself, with its own integrity – and 'entering the soul'. It is not the only thing that makes us and even when we 'see' and 'speak' afresh, we don't always *do*: our actions don't always live up to our vision. Usually, only God's word is his deed and he is a human construct. I disagree with Auden that 'poetry makes nothing happen' but on the other hand, in our flower-power youth we were very naïve to feel sometimes we could just walk together up Primrose Hill with flowers in our hands, with songs and poems, and look down on London, our city, and by that alone transform it into 'Jerusalem'.

We make mistakes. We fail. We constantly need remaking. (However, as Ken Smith says in his piece *Carpe Diem*, we don't have to deny the naïve enthusiasms of our youth but re-embodiment them, perhaps with more insight and effectiveness.) I was thinking about George Pattison's suggestion in his talk that the model for the artist should not be Genesis 1, creation out of nothing

like the great I AM, but Christ's passion, because humanity not only needs making but *remaking*, healing.

In the example he gives, Neil Jordan's film *Angel* set during the Troubles in Northern Ireland, Danny the sax player can go places where others can't go. 'It's a kind of poetic license.' Pattison comments: 'Only the artist, only the one with the "poetic license" can find his way to the heart of darkness'. Finally, Danny 'finds an anguished redemption in the ruins of the burnt-out dance hall' as the cycle of killing comes to an end.

Pattison sees Danny, the main *character* in the film, as related to Christ's passion, as protagonist in a story of redemption. He is not saying that *making* the film is like Christ's passion, whereas earlier he criticised the model of the *artist creating* as being like God creating in Genesis 1. I wondered about that, because surely he couldn't mean that the *content* of art should always be about redemption? That would be 'having a design on us' and very limiting, even though, of course, the scope of art is the whole human condition, including the darkness.

There are ways in which making a work of art, a poem, can be compared to the passion, a descent, a 'raid on the inarticulate', a harrowing of hell and resurrection of the Word. But that is a metaphor, quite a far-fetched one. A poem is something you *make*. But Jesus did not crucify himself. He was a victim, crucified by the occupying imperial power, abetted or manipulated by the dominant local priesthood. It was as if a powerful local religious group in Iraq denounced an enemy fellow-citizen as an 'insurgent' or 'terrorist' to the US forces, to be killed or sent to a hell like Abu Ghraib. Sitting in my garden with my cup of tea and notebook, with a poem coming on, is not at all like that.

And incidentally, what about the West, the subject of Don Cupitt's workshop? It won't come as a surprise to readers that *Sofia* Editor regards his view of it as too complacent and triumphalist, downplaying what is wrong with the West – particularly the wrong that we do – and the achievements and wisdom of other civilisations. We still have a long way to go before 'kingdom come'.

Certainly artists and poets can enter and *describe*, *speak* the heart of darkness. For example Coleridge's *Ode to Dejection*:

A Grief without a pang, void, dark and drear,
A stifling, drowsy, unimpassioned Grief
That find no natural outlet, no relief...

Or Hopkins in his 'terrible sonnets':

O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap
May who ne'er hung there...

But surely it's not true that 'only the artist can find his way to the heart of darkness.' In our contingent state it is all too easy to fall into it, through bereavement, miscarriage, betrayal, bitter disappointment, severe

illness such as Ken Smith describes in his *Carpe Diem*, loss of home or livelihood...and the point about the heart of darkness is that it is dark, with no light in it at all. Perhaps only later can art or poetry let in a chink of light, by *articulating* grief, by a sense of human communion, by restoring some kind of faith...What releases Coleridge's ancient mariner from his 'nightmare life-in-death' is seeing the beautiful water snakes:

O happy living things! no tongue
Their beauty might declare.
A spring of love gushed from my heart
And I blessed them unaware.

Their beauty arouses a 'spring of love' in him and when he 'blessed them unaware', the albatross fell off from around his neck. But maybe on some occasions what is needed is active kindness, practical help, solidarity...

Previous issues of *Sofia* have spoken about how liberation theology sees Christ's passion as a model for the poor 'crucified people' and their struggle for a better life as a struggle to rise again. And Che Guevara, for example, thought that: 'Revolution is not just a transformation of social structures but also a deep, radical transformation of human beings, their awareness, customs, values ... A Revolution is only authentic when it is capable of creating a 'new human being' (*el hombre nuevo*).

Revolution in secular Cuba and Christian Nicaragua both wanted to create this 'new human being'. The theology draws on Paul's 'new creation' (2 Cor 5:17) and 'new human being' (Eph 2: 15), a moral transformation. But then, immediately after the triumph of the Revolution in Nicaragua, well before the country's infrastructure had been repaired, the new Ministry of Culture under Ernesto Cardenal set up *poetry workshops* all over the country in a conscious effort to help create that new human being. And incidentally, many of the Sandinista cabinet were poets and became, to transform Shelley's phrase, 'acknowledged legislators'. New songs were written for the Catholic liturgy of the Mass – a re-enactment and making present of Christ's passion – incorporating these ideas of the crucified people rising and the 'new human being', such as Carlos Mejía Godoy's *Misa campesina*.

Christ's passion and resurrection became a metaphor and model for a *political* struggle for justice and for *personal* human transformation in what was probably a more straightforward way than it can be for art. Certainly art and poetry contribute to the making of humanity and remaking of damaged humanity, they *do* make something happen, but in quite a complex way and not alone. Art on its own cannot be a satisfactory religion. Kindness remains indispensable. And thank goodness, at the Conference this year, there was also a good deal of that.

Carpe Diem

Ken Smith ran a conference workshop with this title and his article offers a 'Why' to live for, can cope with any 'How'!

Fifty years ago, in those heady, hearty days of the 50's and early 60's as adolescence gave way to manhood, I was given a copy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship* by a local Anglican priest who was concerned about my exuberant Fundamentalism. It still sits on my book shelf and my eye still strays there from time to time. Particularly, I recall the sentence that even now sums up for me the theme of the book: 'When Christ calls a man he bids him come and die.' A maxim that Bonhoeffer both lived and preached.

I took the book with me into theological college – still pretty fundamentalist, and over the decades watched helplessly as such biblical certainty succumbed to confusion, doubt, often scepticism, sometimes despair. In due time I came to see it as a liberation, a freedom to be myself. I think I can see now, although I didn't then, that I was dragged half unwillingly into paid ministry. God had spoken – who was I to question or disobey? But for better or worse my life has been shaped by those early experiences. It's a wise man who can, without bitterness or regret build all his past into his present, and who doesn't lose his adolescent idealism, throw out the 'baby'. I sometimes worry about the way we demonise the opposition, especially when we used to be the opposition. Believers and atheists are often alike in this, but it's an insult to what we've been to scorn it. Worst of all it's a denial of non-duality, that bedrock of a Sea of Faith philosophy, that points out the blindingly obvious truth that all is one and, as the Hindus tell us, –'Thou art that' – we are it. So I like to think that what binds me to the past, sustains me in the present and

What binds me to the past, sustains me in the present and takes me into the future is a profound sense of shared humanity.

takes me into the future is a profound sense of shared humanity. And if I forget that, it matters not a smidgen which platform I pontificate from.

The Greek poet Pindar put it succinctly when he wrote some two and a half thousand years ago.

*Some pray for gold, others for boundless land.
I pray to delight my fellow citizens
Until my limbs are wrapped in earth.*



Even in those heady, hearty days I preferred Jesus to Paul. In my devotional life, my recital of the Lord's Prayer was always a divine ache for human kind. I continue to feel guilty about the gap between the comfort of my middle class western life style and the needs of a screaming world; latterly exacerbated by bemusement that our elders and betters can sometimes sink to depths of apathy and smallness of vision that make men like Osama bin Laden into saints.

I responded strongly to the idea that love was supreme, that priestliness was both a witness and a key, and that suffering love was alone redemptive. 'Would that all God's people were priests.' Though no longer an active priest of the Church of England, I remain one in my understanding of the nature, the essence of priesthood. The arguments going on, as I write, among the bishops of the Anglican Communion, seem to ignore the obvious truth that it's life that produces priests (as opposed to people called priests) – not the institution. Even the traditionalists must believe it is God that makes a priest. Those rare souls who give up their lives for their enemies, without a thought for the Apostolic succession, know all about priesthood. 'Father, forgive them, even though they know what they are doing,' is an even richer teaching than that ascribed to Jesus, still continuing to divide, friends from enemies.

I remember being impressed in those early years by a radical priest who boasted that his church was only open for Mass on Sundays – the rest of the time he expected his congregation to disperse and disseminate themselves in the world. He knew the layers of meaning attached to last words of the liturgy – *Ite, missa est*. He said the world was where the sacred was. Not trapped in a building, still less some institution. He would have been an admirer – as I later became – of Primo Levi, the Jewish Italian chemist, Holocaust survivor, novelist and poet, who wrote in his ‘Song of Those who Died in Vain’:

*Sit down and bargain
All you like, grizzled old foxes
We'll wall you up in a splendid palace
With food, wine, good beds and a good fire
Provided that you discuss, negotiate
For our and your children's lives
May all the wisdom of the universe
Converge to bless your minds
And guide you in the maze
But outside in the cold we will be waiting for you.*

There's an ongoing debate about the relationship between the heart and the mind in SoF circles – born perhaps in our genes, but leading us to stress one more than the other. Some accuse us of not having a heart; others fear our mind is not sharp enough. But clearly there can be no ‘either/or’. Just a challenging, demanding ‘both/and’.

I continue to acknowledge the power of the Christian myth into which I was born.

When I first sat down to pen these words, seeking inspiration I held in my hand a piece of volcanic rock I picked up on the slopes of Mount Etna in Sicily earlier this year. My mind's eye, sharpened maybe by the proximity of the date to the day a year ago when I awoke and discovered I couldn't walk nor would for some months, turned that scrap of black rock, that earth, that dust, that stuff, into a symbol of truth's essence.

I was once sneered at, by a man who claimed to be a follower of someone who said it was wrong to sneer – to cause a little one to stumble – a millstone should be cast around his neck – when I hesitantly tried to talk about my mystical, intuitive response to the world. They all say that, he said – his purple stockpiled high in the world's esteem. Not easy to be arrogant amidst such smugness. But smug I am too, and so with him, I'm working on it. The piece of lava continues to sit in my study on my multi-religious shrine, partly because no scientist can tell me what it is and traditionalist creationism leaves me unsatisfied.

Sometimes I feel that mental pain is the price people

pay for asking and rarely receiving answers to the big questions; and physical pain the spur for continuing to ask them and live with the frustration. I'm fortunate in having people around me who often tell me how much they appreciate my angle on things, coupled as it is with a great depth of feeling for humanity; my calmness in the presence of disaster and tragedy – that a few misinterpret as coldness. Inwardly of course, it's not quite like that – inwardly I've always lived (like most people if they're honest) on the edge of my own volcano.

Last year a rogue protein invaded my skeleton and bit a hole in my spine. Within a couple of weeks of starting chemotherapy, my treatment ate another hole – this time in my brain and sent messages hither and thither round what other people knew as Ken Smith. In some ways, in those awful days, that Ken Smith died and was replaced by the one who is now typing these words. In other ways it's the same me, only dragged kicking and screaming into the world that's always been.

In a variety of contexts, I've lived with dying (and the dying) for a large part of my working life. For the last 14 years it has been a very specific matter of choice, training as a bereavement counsellor and selling my heart and brain to local funeral directors. As a result I've learned to treat the dead gently – the living too – except for fools whom I find it hard to suffer. And even they get more gentleness than they deserve.

But last year I personally looked death in the face – decided I didn't like it very much, but kept looking anyway, even when it looked back with that triumphant grin, that leer, upon its face. And when I turned my back on it, I sensed it continuing to leer at me (like Yama the god of death in the Hindu pantheon) – and so confidently. Professionally I know from years of experience, that my dying may be terrible – either for me or my family, so there's every reason to postpone it as long as possible.

As Dylan Thomas said to his dying father:

*Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

Bit by bit the experience stripped me of the desire to possess (or rather be possessed by) anything, to be labelled as anyone, to be expected to do or say anything. Both belief and unbelief finally dropped away.

I turned in my days of rehabilitation (when I could only move with difficulty and discomfort) to my computer and trawled the wisdom stored there – much of it in the form of poetry – some of it my own – most of it from the many perceptive souls I've encountered on life's journey. So I'm grateful for poetry – especially I like its denseness, though strangely it was a wordy philosopher who set me on the path of trying to be a poet. It was Bertrand Russell who, when I read his work as a sixth-former, began to teach me about the insubstantiality of the empirical world and that if I wanted to talk about it,

‘Matter All the Way Up and Spirit All the Way Down’

David Paterson’s Conference workshop explored how humans have evolved as fully animal and fully spiritual. Here is his report of it.

If Dinah was right in her article *The Art of Humanity* in *Sofia* No. 88, might we be able to see matter and spirit together in every stage of evolution? It seemed worthwhile to have a Workshop at the Liverpool Conference to treat this question as a thought experiment. Here is a write-up of the result.

In writing this account, I have tried to reflect the nature of the Workshop – exploring the territory, responding to a wide variety of ideas (perhaps a bit like the evolutionary process itself). And also to reflect the purpose of the Workshop to ask questions and reveal new questions rather than to seek answers. I hope that on paper it can stimulate new thinking as the Workshop itself did, and sketch out a way of refuting the Intelligent Design hypothesis without reductionism.

I started it off with some thoughts: Energy condenses into particles, which interact, produce atoms, then molecules. ‘Life’ starts – quite simply – when there arises a type of molecule which is able to replicate itself. At once natural selection kicks in. Replication is sometimes **not quite** perfect. Molecules which are best at building their copies from their environment are the ones which proliferate most. An increasing variety and complexity develop.

science and art as emergent properties from the evolutionary process

At some evolutionary stage, molecules combine in pairs to create copies containing a new mixture of their respective genes. This immensely speeds up the process of evolutionary change, variety and complexity. Sexual reproduction means that no two of these reproducing molecules are **exactly** the same as each other. Having set the scene, may we look at what we are to do in this thought experiment? In looking at human experience holistically, we must avoid implying that, though science can explain many things, it cannot explain all, so that it needs religion (or art, or philosophy) to fill the gaps. (That would leave a diminishing role for anything which was not science!) A proper ‘explanation’ leaves, in theory, no remainder. At the same time, what we are

‘explaining’ is infinite. No **gaps**, but vast scope. However much we have brought into our ‘explanation’, there will always be more. More to explore, more to explain, more to love, more to rejoice in, more to play with, more to experiment with, more to use, with our amazing capacity for ingenuity, for our own purposes. Science, art and religion don’t fill gaps in each other, they are instead all ways in which – together – humans explore, love, worship and create. Perhaps science, art and religion are more about celebrating than explaining.

Back to looking at evolution: The way basic life-forms increase in variety and complexity looks very like exploring and creating. Sensation and reaction to stimulus develop, then immense proliferation so that each species explores its environment, usually with many failures and much waste. The few successes become the agents of the future. You can watch this in the swarms of eggs many fish produce, most of them to be eaten, many to die in unsuitable habitats, some to explore new ones successfully.

Or watch ants randomly searching, exploring. Then one of them, reacting to a stimulus, finds something useful and the whole colony organises to use it – a whole line of ants like a motorway to and from the mouldy sandwich on the shelf. Or indeed the spores of mould themselves.

Exploring and experimenting are central aspects of the process of evolution. What we are looking for is whether we might perceive the roots of what we could now call science already there in the process of evolution. Can we see in simple living cells, with their sense organs and simple means of propulsion, something which emerges as human science; and can we trace this right through its development because of random movement and selection, so that meaning or purpose do not arise from outside this process, but are inherent in it as emergent properties.

We were concerned not to appear reductive or nihilistic. It is not that meaning is **only** exploration and selection, but rather that the seeds of what we call meaning are to be found everywhere. There is no need to postulate a mysterious ‘life force’ urging biological life towards a spiritual goal. Science can explain this without remainder – i.e. with no gaps – but always aware that there remains more to explore.

The vastness of time and immense frequency of molecular events enables an amazing variety and complexity to arise. Sheer proliferation speeds the process: failure on a vast scale, with the occasional reproducible success. For instance, the swarms of eggs and young produced by fish mostly feed other organisms. A few survive to do the same for the next generation.

Flowers – scent, colour, spores, seeds mostly provide food for others, but enable flowers to spread and colonise widely and rapidly. A huge variety of insects are ready to exploit any ecological niche, and they in turn provide a niche for the development of predators. Birds display great variety and efficient exploration. Different species may use different aspects of the same environment – fruit, seeds, worms, insects – and others migrate over vast distances to find what suits them best. Bird behaviour is so complex and developed that it begins to look almost like what for us is conscious behaviour.

A question to ask ourselves: What is beauty? It's about an organism developing things that attract other beings so that they do what it needs them to do, and ugliness repels others so that they don't do what would harm it. So fish and flowers use colour; birds sing to attract mates, repel enemies and stake territory. And human beings find these things 'beautiful'.

So is that where the origins of the visual arts and music are to be found? Would there have been music if birds hadn't needed sound to control their relationships with each other? A lot of human musicians acknowledge their indebtedness to birdsong (Beethoven, Messaien...). And the other arts too are often displays which say 'this is me' or 'this is my territory'. The human foetus experiences the rhythm of its mother's heart, and perhaps the cross-rhythm arising from its own heartbeat as well. In countries where songbirds are rare, human music tends to be more about rhythm than melody. We wondered whether that was significant.

A lot of human musicians acknowledge their indebtedness to birdsong.

We moved on up the evolutionary scale to mammals. Sounds – grunts, whistles, screams, roars – naturally acquire accepted significance for a species. A meaning? A language? We felt we had made a case for describing science and art as emergent properties from the evolutionary process, but what about 'spiritual values'?

Art forms take human experience and 'condense' them in a way that deepens them (Dinah calls it 'thickening' in her article *The Art of Humanity* – from *dichten*, the German for writing poetry.) The emergence of consciousness marks a stage or series of stages in the increasing complexity of decision-making. Julian Jaynes in *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* argues that both consciousness and



Singing robin

religion stem from the ability to talk to yourself and are language-dependent. (Consciousness Studies have moved on with little reference to Jaynes. Anthony Freeman might be a good speaker for the next Conference.) But even without accepting Jaynes, we can see that the leadership of small packs might well develop to tribal chieftains and then into some sort of divine leader, as the increasing size of the group necessitates more complex coherence for its success.

We explored the roots of human consciousness in human infancy: What happens when babies become aware of their surroundings? When does that happen? What are the origins of memory? We agreed that memory could be traced back to a very early stage in the evolutionary process (genes themselves are a form of memory), but that memory and consciousness are not the same thing. Is consciousness self-awareness? (Children often refer to themselves by name before saying 'me', and 'I' may come even later. Does awareness of oneself as object precede awareness of oneself as subject?)

How would we devise an experiment to find out whether an animal is 'thinking'? What would we mean by that? Human beings cannot exist without changing their environment, and religion is a way of imposing order and meaning on the world as we perceive it. We noted that it is the essence of a living organism that it extracts ingredients from its surroundings to convert into itself, and that successful 'higher' animals change their environment to suit their needs.

Is artistic expression need-driven? Is it an affirmation of my existence – as object? – as subject? A way of changing the world? And myself? (Each bit of art makes me a little different.) Art gains value from expressing eternity in the present moment, and all creativity is related to the need to change something, to leave something for posterity. (As did all the species before us in the evolutionary process?)



Swarming fish

In the last few minutes of the Workshop we looked at imagination. How far can we go back in evolution to find an equivalent to ideas of 'how things **might** be', or 'might have been'? Is instinct a more primitive form of imagining things? Perhaps the difference between the two is language (instinct is wholly chemical – imagination is too, but it emerges as a new possibility when there's a language base.) In that case, how widely do you define language? Sounds, body language, any agreed symbolic system of communication? Agreed by how many? Will two be enough? Or just one – a language in which you talk to yourself? And is that what consciousness is? And do the roots of imagination lie in self-reflected instinct? Many questions which, if we were able to answer them, would lead to more questions still.

We were aware that our discussion kept following a variety of trains of thought and developing a variety of questions: The Western tradition of 'either-or' thinking, in which a statement is either true or false, was criticised. Eastern philosophy is – on the whole – much more about 'both-and' thinking. Science has flourished in the either-or tradition, but has recently had to acknowledge both-and as well, for instance in Quantum Mechanics (e.g. the wave/particle nature of subatomic phenomena). By contrast the arts have always used metaphor and other essentially both-and ways of expressing truth and meaning. One 'truth' does not exclude another 'truth', and in affirming something we may also affirm its opposite. Metaphor is both true and false. Anything is both like and unlike another thing. Are there equivalents to either-or behaviour and both-and behaviour in the course of evolution?

Religion seen as a human creation clearly explores human experience and assimilates it to human understanding in metaphor, story, ritual and meaning. Dogmatic religion loses the both-and and represents itself as either-or, claiming exclusive truth. (Interesting how 'bad science' and 'bad religion' have similar faults!) We felt we had explored the case for interpreting science, art and religion as emergent properties of the evolution of living creatures, and justified taking the approach seriously. And we'd enjoyed doing it!

Postscript

One of the Workshop's members – Patrick Sandford – found an interesting quotation from Tennessee Williams, and used it in his lecture later the same day:

A man must live through his life's duration with his own little set of fears and angers, suspicions and vanities, and his appetites, spiritual and carnal. Life is built of them and he is built of life. The umbilical cord is a long, long rope of blood that has swung him as an aerialist on an all but endless Trapeze, oh, such a long, long way, **from the first living organism that gave birth to another.** Define it as the passion to create, which is all that we know of God.¹

¹ Tennessee Williams: Memoirs (p.246)

This is David Paterson's report of his Conference workshop. David is a SoF Trustee and former Chair.

The Over-Reachers

Getting above themselves, they built a tower –
trying to reach the god above the sky –
and tumbled into Babel.

So Icarus, maddened with science-power,
scorched as he learned to fly.
The same old fable.

Somewhere a tribe tells of a woman who –
trying to reach the god above the sky –
piled baskets in a heap.
One basket short of heaven, she then withdrew,
imprudently,
the bottom one to place it on the top.

Always the hubris. Now although we say
there isn't any god above the sky
our over-reaching's worse.
We build a greenhouse, blast an ozone layer,
determined to defy
creation's curse.

We bulldoze forests, bid Sahara swell,
spin satellites across a godless sky
to monitor destruction.
May hope, or fear, or god-within, impel
us into action!
Wind of the world, blow through our ozone hole
and teach us to make whole.

Anne Ashworth

Acknowledgement: 'The Over-Reachers' was published in *The Universalist*.

This was one of the poems Anne Ashworth read at her Conference workshop. Anne Ashworth's publications include her poem-sequence *The Verb To Be is Everywhere Irregular*, (SoF), and her prose-and-poetry treatise, *The Oblique Light: poetry and peak experience* (Quaker Universalist Group).

From Creation to Re-creation

George Pattison argues that Christ's Passion is a better model for human creativity than the six days of creation in Genesis 1.

Notions and practices of creativity have been central to the culture that has developed in the West in the period since the late eighteenth century. Often this has involved invoking, reflecting, or applying aspects of Christian beliefs about divine creativity – as when Coleridge spoke of imagination as an echo in the finite mind of the great 'I AM'. For Coleridge, this 'echo' reverberates in all forms of human consciousness: perceiving anything at all involves a kind of secondary act of creation, but Coleridge would see the supreme exemplification of this creative capacity in the figure of the 'artist' or 'poet', so that the artist becomes a blueprint for what we all can or could or perhaps even should be or become.

This is a view of the nature of art and artistic activity that is relatively novel and relatively local. Up until the threshold of modernity, those persons we call 'artists' were largely to be regarded as artisans or craftsmen. As Larry Shiner has pointed out in this study *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History*, it is perhaps a nice irony that whereas the Greeks have been regarded from the Renaissance onwards as exemplifying the 'artistic genius of mankind', the Greeks themselves 'had no word for art' in our modern sense. As Shiner comments: 'What is strikingly absent in the ancient Greek view of the artisan/artist is our modern emphasis on imagination, originality, and autonomy. In a general way, imagination and autonomy were appreciated as part of the craftsmanship of commissioned production for a purpose, but not in their emphatic modern sense. Although the achievements of Greek naturalism in painting and sculpture of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.E. were much admired, for the most part painters and sculptors were still viewed as manual workers, and Plutarch said that no talented young aristocrat upon seeing and admiring the famous Zeus of Phidias would want to *be Phidias*'.

The Romantic hyping of artistic activity could, of course, lead to conflict with older theological models, as artists-creators came to challenge the prerogatives of God-the-Creator. Nietzsche, having pronounced the death of God and called upon human beings to a life of endless self-overcoming, also described this life as essentially artistic – a model he was as happy to apply to ethics and politics as to painting, writing, and making music. The artist was the supreme self-inventor who, having become free of the guilt-consciousness instilled by Christianity's preachers of death, became the inventor of his own values, his own world, his own life.

This confrontation still reverberates in contemporary discussions of the relationship between art and religion, as evidenced by a recent collection of essays by the critic Peter Conrad, entitled *Creation: Artists, Gods, and Origins*. According to the fly-leaf, Conrad 'describes the long

illness and eventual demise of the Christian God, and shows how artists and scientists were ready and eager to take over a creative role that was once a heavenly prerogative.' Conrad's message is, on the whole, one of art supplanting religion or (as was the case with Nietzsche) returning behind Christianity to the mythology of the ancient world. He begins his story with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and affirms the 'Promethean' implications of the story and Conrad also quotes Hazlitt's comment on Shelley's poetic ambition to be 'the maker of his own poetry – out of nothing'. But if one is looking to the religious tradition for insights to illuminate creativity, is Genesis 1 the best place to begin? I want to suggest that, if we're going to get the most out of what the Christian tradition has to offer, then there is maybe more to be gained from looking at issues of creativity in the light of central New Testament teachings on redemption in Christ.

Our models for what it is to be a good human being are vitiated by past failures of freedom.

There is a rather well-known thirteenth century illuminated picture of God creating the world that is also reproduced in Conrad's book. 'God' is recognisable as Jesus, equipped with compasses that are poised to divide the sublunary sphere into its various constituent parts. This identification hinges on Jesus being 'the Word' that was in the beginning with God and in and by which God worked the acts of creation ('God said ...' etc.). But the picture also reflects a Christian approach to what is generally called 'the Old Testament' that is usually referred to as 'typological interpretation'. According to this method of interpretation, Christ was the essential subject of each and every Old Testament text, whether this was the kingship of David, the crossing of the Red Sea, the drunkenness of Noah or the Creation itself. Now this could lead to merely fantastical interpretations, and the vast majority of them have now been discontinued as material for doctrinal reflection and development. However, the strategy of interpreting the Old Testament in the light of the New had clear merits, and we can see something of this in the case of Creation. For instead of forcing Christians to confuse the religious meaning of creation with cosmological speculations, it read the Old Testament text in the light of the believer's actual experience of Christ's birth, death, resurrection and ascension. This meant that what Christians knew of the

'new creation' in Christ provided an interpretative key to the meaning of creation and not vice versa. But if this is the starting-point for Christian reflection on creation, what happens to the 'out-of-nothing' that theologians have always insisted on as defining divine creativity and that, as we have seen, is also taken up into the Romantic view of human creativity?

Now it is obvious that the passion narrative presupposes a world and a history within which and within which alone it makes sense. Precisely for this reason, the Church decided rather early on that its proclamation of salvation in Christ needed to be embedded in the specific context provided by the Old Testament scriptures. Israel, along with its history, its land, its cities, and its countryside, even its Mediterranean agriculture – the vine, the olive, and sheep-herding – thus entered into the very fabric of the Christian scheme of salvation. As Christianity moved into other cultural environments, that could prove problematic. Hegel would ask, rhetorically, 'Is Judah, then, the Teuton's Fatherland?', and would re-contextualise the Christ-event in the crisis of Greco-Roman civilisation. But the Christian message always requires some kind of context and therefore the 'new creation' in Christ cannot be 'out of nothing' in any literal cosmological sense. For it is always *new* creation or re-creation. And yet it is also, in a sense, 'out of nothing'. How is this? The key to answering this question, I suggest, is to look at aspects of the Christian doctrine of the Fall.

From early on, Christian theology drew on Platonism to help articulate its teachings and that included a certain understanding of Being and nothingness. In its absolutely simplest outline, this meant a correlation to the point of identification between God and Being and a representation of creation as the communication of Being to all possible beings. However, apart from God Himself, all other beings were marked by some deficiency in being – having an admixture of non-being, we may say – and were thus unable simply to be themselves by themselves or to sustain their own being without depending on others. The greater the admixture of non-being, the less beings are, until the point is reached at which existence simply ceases and there is pure flux such that nothing comes into or passes out of being. The fact that creatures had been made 'out of nothing' thus suggested to Augustine (for one) a kind of inevitability about their falling away from God, back into the non-existence out of which they were called into being. This thought is, of course, then taken up into what would be called the theory of evil as privation, that the nature of evil itself is not something positive but negative, namely, the lack of that measure of being appropriate to the kind of being that, e.g., human beings *are*.

Kierkegaard's pseudonymous work *The Concept of Anxiety* offered the modern world an important revision of Augustinian teaching about the Fall. Via Heidegger and Sartre, it would become a key text of twentieth century philosophy, as well as of modern theology. Although Kierkegaard himself was moulded by the Augustinianism of his Lutheran background, his ideas are, in many respects, profoundly anti-Augustinian. He not only dismisses the mythical dimensions of the Fall



Soren Kierkegaard

story, he insists that the loss of freedom can only ever be understood as a free act. Therefore, whilst a certain quantitative predisposition to sin might accumulate from generation to generation, that quantitative accumulation can never necessitate that you or I or our neighbour do actually 'fall'.

Yet at one point Kierkegaard sees a connection between the Fall and nothingness. Kierkegaard describes the situation of the soul before the Fall as that of 'dreaming innocence', a state prior to the arising of ego-consciousness and of a world upon which the ego acts. Beyond its own dream world the future self has 'nothing'. But, Kierkegaard asks, 'what effect does nothing have? It begets anxiety. This is the profound secret of innocence, that it is at the same time anxiety. Dreamily, the spirit projects its own actuality, but this actuality is nothing, and innocence always sees this nothing outside itself'. In other words, every human life – as Heidegger would later say – is 'thrown' towards possibilities it does not yet understand and cannot yet realise. Thus the self can become what it is only by creating itself out of nothing. But here's the rub: nothing 'begets anxiety'. Kierkegaard is far from attributing a causal link between 'nothing' and the Fall, since it is always possible that we do not swoon or succumb to vertigo in the face of nothing, but really do 'become who we are'. Yet the sheer infinity of the possibilities towards which we are thrown is deeply unsettling to our felt need to be something and *someone* rather than nothing and no-one, even if the 'something' is a second-rate social identity offered at the bargain price of a more or less conscious conformism.

But the situation is even more unsettling if we take into account that the world into which we are thrown is marked by a quantitative accumulation of 'sin', i.e., a socially embodied history of human beings not becoming who we have it in us to become, a history – or histories – of and a ready-made rationale for not being otherwise than we are expected to be. Our models for what it is to be a good human being are from the very start vitiated by past failures of freedom. This does not *predetermine* us to fall, but it certainly makes the task of living authentically more daunting. In situations of trans-generational family dysfunctionality, communal conflict, and war, nothingness becomes a weight under which human beings can scarcely move; the void opens beneath us at every footstep.

There might be many examples from one or other art that we could draw on to illustrate this, but the one that perhaps encapsulates the human, philosophical, and artistic issues is Neil Jordan's 1982 movie, *Angel*, a classic story of revenge, set in Northern Ireland during the recent troubles. The central character, Danny (nicknamed 'the Stan Getz of South Armagh'), is a showband sax player who witnesses the murder of the band's manager by a gang of racketeers after a gig at a local dance hall. He tracks the gang down and sets out to kill them, one by one. As the story progresses, the theme of nothingness comes more and more to the fore. At one point Danny is taken by the police to the morgue and confronted with the dead body of one of his victims. The senior detective, Bloom, asks him, 'What do you know, Danny?' 'Nothing.' 'I know nothing too. You've got to watch nothing. It can take hold of you. Be careful for those hands, Danny. You need them, don't you?' 'I'm a musician.' 'If music be the food of love... how does it go?' 'Play on.' 'You know, you can go places, Danny, where I couldn't. Do you understand me? It's a kind of poetic license.'

There is much to comment on in this exchange, but the main implication seems to be that the cycle of revenge (which really is born of 'nothing', because it is devoid of reason and purpose) can never entirely be settled by the objective methods of law and punishment. Only the artist, only the one with the 'poetic license' can find his way to the heart of darkness. But, as the film shows, Danny (the artist) too needs redemption, he too is trapped in the nothing. One night, shortly after the encounter with Bloom, his girlfriend – aware that something is going on that Danny is not telling her about – turns away from him as he tries to kiss her. 'I can't,' she says. 'Why not?' 'You have to tell me first.' 'It's nothing.' 'You're lying.' 'It's like a nothing you can feel. And it gets worse.' It gets a lot worse before, the cycle of killing over, Danny finds an anguished redemption in the ruins of the burnt-out dance hall where it all began. Over the charred ruins Danny's signature rendition of the Londonderry Air, raw and poignant, plays out the end credits.

The cycle of revenge perfectly epitomises what Kierkegaard described as the 'quantitative accumulation' of sin: it is a situation in which the individual seems helpless, a 'wheel of fire' to which we are bound, a nothing we can feel, and into which all the things we could have been sink without trace. It is at the heart of

the questions that all great tragedy proposes: can we be redeemed from the burnt-out dance-halls that strew our collective and individual pasts? Can we find an art capable of relieving the monotony of violence, the binary mathematics of action and re-action, black-and-white, good-and-evil, and liberating us into a polychrome life-world of genuine richness and depth? Is it the case that 'nothing comes of nothing' (Lear) or can there be re-creation out of the nothing of history?

Which brings us back to the cross. The new creation to which Christian theology bears witness is not a new creation out of an absolute cosmic or metaphysical nothing. It is the new creation of a world and a history degraded and diminished by suffering, violence, and every possible manifestation of sin and, as such, is also healing, restorative, regenerative, re-creational, reversing the quantitative accumulation of nothingness that has so long overwhelmed our individual and collective aspirations for something better.

Only the artist, only the one with the 'poetic license' can find his way to the heart of darkness.

Putting theology to one side, if we now understand this in purely human terms it seems to me to address the potential hubris of the high Romantic view of creativity modelled on Genesis 1. As an example of this view, Conrad describes the trailer for *Citizen Kane*, which deliberately parodies Genesis 1, with its narrator (Welles himself) playing the part of 'an all-seeing autocrat who prefers to remain unseen, a creator who pervades his creation and yet is teasingly absent from it.

But if it is unsatisfactory for God to be an invisible autocrat who answers to no-one, it is surely even more unsatisfactory when human beings take on such a role. Such artist-creators are not only virtually super-human (as Nietzsche desired and predicted) but also at risk of becoming in-human (as Thomas Mann suggested in his *Doktor Faustus*). The artist-creator may find his exemplars and apologists in Leonardo and Michelangelo, in Shakespeare's Prospero, in the poetic creed of a Shelley, the prophecies of Nietzsche, and may seem almost to be realised in such extraordinarily genial figures as Welles himself or, perhaps most god-like of all twentieth century artists, Picasso. Yet such figures actually represent only a small part of human beings' artistic creativity, and are they, in the event, what we most value? Is there not, after all, a certain inhumanity in Leonardo compared with his less masterful but ultimately more gracious contemporary Botticelli, and much as we admire Michelangelo's titanic David, does it move us to the same depths as his own flawed and death-haunted Pietà? Does Prospero offer more insight into the human condition than Shakespeare's own Poor Tom or our times' Primo Levi? Is mastery greater than

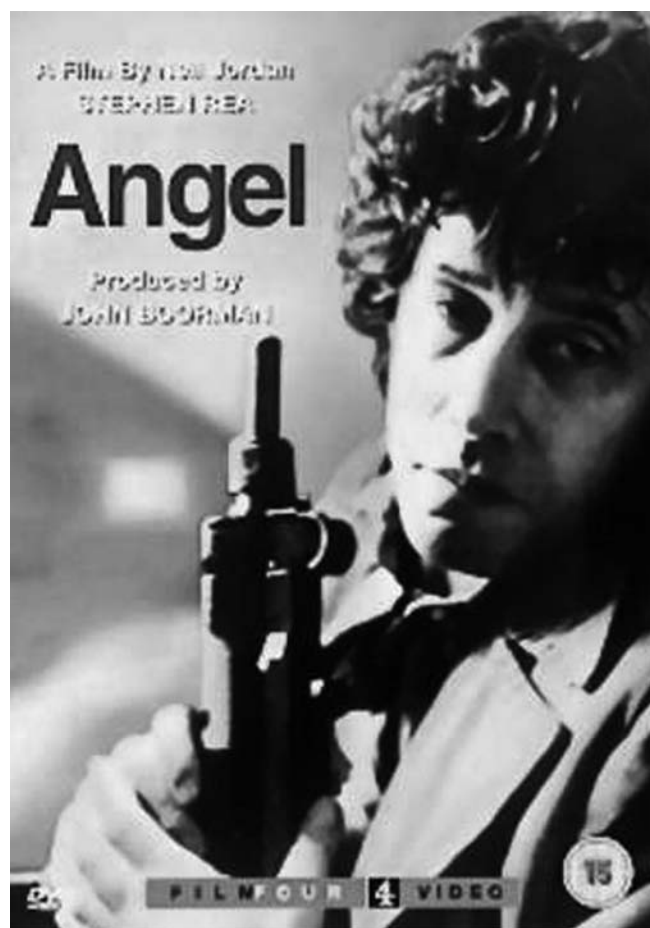
healing or power than suffering? Is it greater to save a life that has become habituated to self-destructive tendencies or to forget about such complications and invent a new world in which such awkward creatures don't exist? And note the maleness of this 'Creator' model!

There is, of course, much more to be said about each of these examples, for and against, but I offer them merely as indicative of how thinking about creativity in the light of the passion narrative might engage ideas of creativity as they are seen in some characteristic figures of modern art. Moreover, on this model there is no intrinsic conflict between divine and human creativity: working to comfort, heal, restore and give hope to suffering human beings fallen or always on the edge of falling into nothingness invites collaboration rather than rivalry.

I would like to conclude by exploring this idea of divine/ human collaboration a little bit further, and doing so in the light of some admittedly rather speculative remarks of the great Russian religious philosopher, Nikolai Berdyaev. In his 1908 work *The Meaning of Creativity*, Berdyaev directly contests the view that the designation of God as 'Creator' obstructs human beings' discovery, exploration and practice of their own creative possibilities. On the contrary, precisely because God is Creator and human beings are made in the image and likeness of God, the creativity of human beings must be a basic datum of Christian anthropology. Rather than the zero sum game played out in debates between Nietzschean Romantics and Christian dogmatists it is not the case that the more creativity and freedom there is on the one side, the less there must be on the other. Instead, the greater the creativity and freedom on one side, the more there will be on the other. The cycle of reciprocity is expansive, and each 'side' bears the interests of the other. In living creatively, I am assisting in the fulfilment of the divine will for creation: in affirming the creativity of God, I am affirming the creative potential of humanity.

In a further step, Berdyaev suggests that our own human experiences of creativity and freedom therefore offer a genuine analogy into what divine creativity itself means. With some help from the mystical tradition (Boehme and Eckhart) Berdyaev depicts God as engaged in a process of self-creation: that there is a kind of nothingness or abyss within the divine life, and that God 'becomes' Creator by self-creation out of this nothing. Furthermore, this process of divine self-creation is not conceived by Berdyaev as something occurring temporally 'before' the world, but as being enacted in and through the creative transformation of suffering and the creative contestation of the history of nothingness that is exemplified in the passion narrative and in innumerable instances of creative human living. Only thus does God 'become' Creator.

A not dissimilar vision is encountered in the novels and spiritual writings of Nikos Kazantzakis. In his best-known work, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, we see just



this inversion: that instead of a 'perfect' Christ arriving in the world to save it from itself, Christ becomes Christ through all the madness, physical suffering and human betrayal that he experiences. When Christ is also understood – as Kazantzakis understood him – as representing universal human possibilities, we may also say that, through Christ human beings become 'Saviours of God', perhaps Kazantzakis' most provocative phrase but one that (despite his excommunication from the Orthodox Church) has a properly theological meaning. Again, we do not need to be forced into an either/or, but are at liberty to understand this in terms of an expansive reciprocal process, as divine creativity calls forth human creativity that calls forth divine creativity... ad infinitum, or, better, until we experience the breakthrough to the re-creation of the image and likeness of God amongst striving, suffering, culpable human beings, to the end that is our beginning.

This is a shortened version of George Pattison's Conference talk. An uncut, fully referenced version is available from the Editor or on the website www.sofn.org.uk, together with a podcast of the whole recorded talk.

The Rev. Canon George Pattison is Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Oxford. He has published many books, the most recent being *Thinking about God in an Age of Technology* (OUP, 2007) and *The Philosophy of Kierkegaard* (Acumen Publishing, Stocksfield, Northumberland, 2005).

The Meaning of the West

Don Cupitt's Conference workshop had the title of his forthcoming book, which he introduces thus:

The meaning of 'the West' is defined by the Vatican in terms of the Catholic Church, the West's oldest and greatest institution, and by the French secularists at the EU in terms of the values of the French Enlightenment and the French Revolution. I offer a radical-Christian interpretation: Working out in history the implications of its own leading ideas, Christianity has gradually evolved beyond its 'church' form, and has become modern Western culture. This new culture, chiefly based on critical thinking and on humanitarian ethics, is now becoming fully globalised.

Scrupulosity¹

I have suggested already that Western culture has, with astonishing success, taken various features of religion and extraverted and secularised them, applying them to the conduct of everyday affairs. The upshot is that Christianity, which until the Enlightenment was a religion, has gradually become the moral flavour of a whole culture, and is now almost globalised.

One of these features is the scrupulous, meticulous, observant, finicky, punctilious, assiduous and indeed 'religious' following of prescribed routines and procedures. The starting-point here is the performance of religious rituals: all over the world complex liturgical Calendars of feasts, fasts, and other holy days are very exactly observed and complex rituals are performed, and nobody seems to have any difficulty with the idea that if the ritual is correctly done, with everything in just the right order, then it works *ex opere operato* (just by the doing of the work, as Roman Catholic doctrine has it). This nicety or punctiliousness about religious observances is the norm, and is taken utterly for granted in many a third-world country where it has so far proved impossible to persuade people that the same meticulousness, if applied to a whole range of small everyday matters like maintaining the water supply, or enforcing the building regulations, would be very highly beneficial to everyone. No: the fact is that people everywhere take the appropriateness of *religious* scrupulosity entirely for granted (it must be done, it must be done now, and it must be done in the correct order), but they simply hate the thought of being equally scrupulous about health and safety regulations, or about punctuality, or about the maintenance of society's infrastructure.

An interesting compromise-solution to this problem comes from Japan, where the making of a good sword involves a lengthy technological routine. How are people to be persuaded to remember the sequence of forging operations accurately? Answer, by interweaving the technical procedure with a religious ritual. People always remember how to perform a religious ritual in the correct order. So they are taught the whole ritual, and they are taught the associations between each stage of the ritual and

the corresponding technical operation; and now they know how to do the whole thing correctly, with the ritual sequence acting as the template and aide-memoire which ensures that the technical jobs are all done, and done in the right order.



Japanese sword-maker

This is interesting and amusing, but we are still left with the intellectual puzzle: Why is it that religion is so much more *memorable* than anything else? The best answer I can give is that religious ideas, rituals, teachings and so on are always storylike, and have the very strong memorability of the best stories and melodies.

The second feature of religion that has already been quoted seems to apply only to monotheistic religions. I refer to the great importance of being scrupulously and systematically self-critical when you examine your own conscience before God. To attain the goal of the religious life you must purify yourself thoroughly, which means that you must be ruthlessly honest with yourself, seeking out and purging every last little bit of error and self-deception. God, it is said, is holy and all-knowing, and all human hearts lie open to his gaze, so that you cannot hope to approach God unless you are inwardly completely pure. There is a simile in the background here: just as one bad apple may corrupt and spoil a whole basket of apples, so one unacknowledged and unabsolved sin is enough to make you quite unfit and unable to endure the holy gaze of God.

Extraverted and secularised, this religious self-examination becomes critical thinking, and in particular the scientific method. The only way to truth, real truth, is by a thorough and systematic investigation which considers all possibilities, and by the rigorous expulsion of all detectable errors from your system of knowledge.

It is important to stress that the one and only religious way to knowledge that is important here is critical *self-examination* in the search for purity of heart before God. Two-and-a-half millennia ago critical self-questioning was important in the development of religious asceticism, of psychological reflection, and even of philosophy itself. But all other religious ways to knowledge seem quite content to remain firmly non-critical. The custom was and is merely to accumulate and guard tradition and to treat every bit of it as more or less equally authoritative, without any critical purging. Thus in Christianity the four canonical Gospels were simply added together to produce a 'Harmony of the

Gospels', just as your School Nativity Play to this day adds Luke's infancy narrative to Matthew's, and then throws in a little embroidery for good measure. Before critical scholarship came along hardly anyone had ever said openly that the Jesus of St John's Gospel and the Jesus of St Mark's Gospel are so different from each other that they simply cannot possibly be, both of them, equally and fully authoritative portraits of one and the same man. But that is how it was: traditional religious faith often incorporated conflicting themes and materials, but people seemed not to notice it. At any rate, attempts at critical tidying-up have always been very unpopular. People do not want to have their cherished beliefs tidied up for them, and least of all at Christmas time.

For our present purposes however it is sufficient to limit our attention to the penitent and the ascetic who undertake a scrupulous, rigorous self-examination in the quest for inner truthfulness, or purity of heart. In the background is the awesome, terrible figure of an infinitely holy and demanding heavenly Father, who sets us the very highest standards. We are trying to do his Will by meeting his demands – and there I hope the reader may already have thought of two of the greatest figures in the history of science, Isaac Newton and Charles Darwin. Newton, a *posthumous* (i.e., a child born after the death of his earthly father, like Sartre), was highly-conscious of a special relationship to his heavenly Father; and Darwin gives in his correspondence a strong impression of one who is trying to live up to the exacting standards set him by a very strong earthly father. Both men, in their different ways, give some indication of the religious background and the psychological cost of the scientific method. Religious, and even perhaps neurotic, scrupulosity is turned outwards so that it becomes *intellectual* scrupulosity — with startling results. Suddenly, we have a hugely powerful new tool.

This religious self-examination becomes critical thinking, and in particular the scientific method.

Compare a traditional *Herbal* with a modern *Flora*.

The *Herbal* follows the same pattern as the Harmony of the Gospels, by simply piling up everything, good or bad, that Tradition supplies. So the *Herbal* will typically list all the names of a plant, supply a picture of it, describe its medicinal virtues and its astrological affinities, cite all the references to it in Classical literature, and so on until it has supplied several pages of jumbled, miscellaneous information. The modern *Flora* is quite different. It cuts out all the literary references, the folklore, the astrology, the medicinal properties and so on, and sticks strictly to botany. There is a careful technical description designed to help the field botanist to identify the species accurately. There is information about habitat, distribution and abundance. Here we note that, above all, the modern *Flora* contains no errors. The *Herbal* is an antique shop, a jumble of bygones, with almost none of its statements ever having been publicly tested, whereas behind the *Flora* there is a really stringent ethics of knowledge. Quite simply, neurotic



Page from a medieval herbal

scrupulosity, extraverted and applied to the construction of systems of knowledge, has proved hugely powerful. So much so that modern Western natural science is far and away the best and most powerful way to knowledge that human beings have ever devised.

Darwin's biography well illustrates the main points. As eventually published, *The Origin of Species* (1859) took the form of a lengthy cumulative argument worked up in considerable detail and over many years. In the nature of the case, much of what Darwin was proposing could at that time neither be modelled mathematically nor tested experimentally. He was attempting something like a Baconian induction, and he saw clearly that everything depended upon the facts being reliable, and all the arguments carefully considered. Darwin was diligent in reading expositions of the 'Design' explanation of adaptation, and in reading the relevant philosophers. In his letters he is collecting all the relevant facts and arguments he can get, and he specially thanks people for sending him facts and arguments that appear to tell *against* his theory. He really needs to be made aware of, to weigh, and to deal with every possible objection to his theory before he publishes it. Darwin took such pains over his great work that one readily understands his invalidism. He was very high-anxiety and he clearly shows us the connection between traditional religious and moral scrupulosity (anxiety about one's own purity of heart and motive) and modern Western intellectual scrupulosity.

The history of Western intellectual standards and their progressive refinement over the last few centuries is scarcely yet written; but one day it will be written, and it will be very instructive. Two centuries ago, and even more recently, it was sufficient for a medical pioneer to test a new medical procedure upon himself and a new surgical procedure on his patients. Today, it costs around a billion US dollars to develop an important new drug and bring it to market, because field trials have perforce become so large-scale and expensive.

In these reflections about religious scrupulosity and its transfer into various secular contexts we have learnt something about the religious significance of modern Western culture.

First, in the modern state the old distinction between the secular and the sacred realms has been transformed into the distinction between private life (in which you may, and indeed *should*, put first the interests of yourself and your own family members) and public service (in which you must disinterestedly follow prescribed routines to the letter). The public servant is an administrator, or in Greek, a 'deacon'. The public realm is like God, those who work for it are 'civil servants' or 'ministers', and the highest standards of impartiality or disinterestedness are required. Interestingly, the Greek word liturgy (*leitourgia*) means *both* public service *and* the worship of the gods. Both require the same 'religious' punctiliousness: you must be a 'stickler', an interesting old word with a long history.

Secondly, modern Western culture depends upon knowledge, knowledge acquired by critical method, and tested by critical standards that are *themselves* also subject to continual critical assessment and reformulation. A particular tenet or assertion counts as part of the body of public knowledge if it is currently accepted as such by the relevant learned society, is taught in the universities, and is acceptable from an expert witness giving testimony in a court of law. And as we have found earlier, there is an exact analogy: just as in medieval Christian piety believers were required to carry out a stringent and comprehensive self-examination to make themselves fit to stand before God, so in modern Western culture any candidate for the status of being public knowledge must be capable of surviving stringent and comprehensive critical testing before it can be deemed fit to stand in public.

The Greek word liturgy (*leitourgia*) means both public service and the worship of the gods.

Thirdly, not only does modern Western culture give great religious significance to the public realm and public service, but also its commitment to critical thinking and testing requires it to be a continuously self-critical and self-reforming type of society, which is all the time reviewing and developing what it counts as being public knowledge and publicly-established values. Unlike any previous culture, modern Western culture since the Enlightenment has attempted continual moral self-criticism and self-improvement by legislation. We have tried to make ourselves morally better by reviewing and raising our public standards for the treatment of prisoners, of the insane, of slaves, of serfs, bonded workers and day-labourers, of animals, of children, of wounded soldiers, of women, of racial minorities, of sexual minorities, of the disabled and many other groups. The Western state has become ethical; it actively works to improve the moral standards of the

population, and to this extent the modern Western state remains highly Christian, even *after* the Death of God and *after* the end of the Church. There is much more Christianity around now than ever there was in the Ages of Faith.

Fourth, and lastly, it is worth pointing out that the modern world *expects* Christian standards of the West. People in the poor countries *expect* the West to feel rather guilty about being so rich, and to acknowledge a duty to 'redistribute' its surplus wealth. They expect the West to acknowledge the sinfulness of colonialism and the slave trade, and to disburse annual development aid, humanitarian aid, and (nowadays) even reparations. They rather expect the West to go on about individual human rights, about democracy and the rule of law, and so on. In short, the rest of the world has a great range of moral expectations of the West, and tries hard to exploit them. But the poor countries don't have the same expectation of other religions and culture-areas. Nobody seriously expects the Turks to apologize to the Armenians, or the Egyptian Arabs to repent of their long domination of the Copts. Nobody expects Indians to dwell on the evils of the Mughal Empire as much as they dwell on the evils of the British Empire, or the Zanzibaris to demand repentance and reparations for so many centuries of slave-trading in *dhows* down the East African coast.

In short, the world assumes that the West is Christian at heart, and that it is much more susceptible to moral appeals, arguments, and even blackmail than is any other religion or culture-area. The world assumes (rightly, it seems) that Christian values do still greatly influence Western behaviour. Many commentators assume that Christianity is a dying faith, whereas Islam is very much alive. Because other faiths and cultures show absolutely no inclination to be self-critical in public, they can confidently assert their own moral superiority and the West's relative decadence. But are rich oil sheiks apologizing to black East Africa for slavery, and offering aid without strings? Seemingly not, despite the fact that Almsgiving (*Zakat*) is one of the Five Pillars of Islam. On the whole, the world notes that only the West, along with some institutions created by it such as the UN and the great humanitarian charities, still takes religious values sufficiently seriously to be persuaded to give money and personal service, unconditionally and on a large scale, over many years, to the needy.

Again I am led to the view that Christianity is doing better in its afterlife as 'Western culture' than ever it did as a religion – if you will allow me to reckon an organization like *Médecins sans Frontières* as belonging to the history of Christianity.

¹ 'Scrupulosity' is a chapter from Don Cupitt's new book *The Meaning of the West* forthcoming from SCM Press in November 2008.

Don Cupitt made the original BBC 1984 television series *Sea of Faith*, from which SoF Network takes its name. He is a Life Fellow and former Dean of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, who has published more than thirty-five books, with two forthcoming: *Above Us Only Sky* from Polebridge Press, USA and *The Meaning of the West* from SCM Press in England.

Creativity

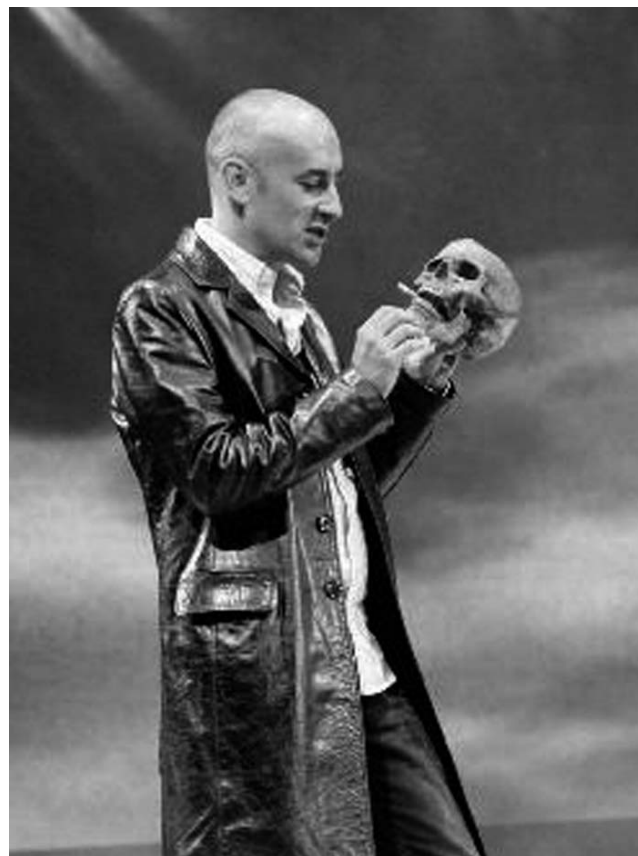
Theatre Director Patrick Sandford entertained the Conference with an unscripted talk, or rather, performance. Here are two edited extracts.

I

So what is going on here, now, in this room? Somebody tell me. Well, I'm talking and you're listening. Only, of course, it's not that because you are pretending to listen, but actually you're noticing the person who's come in, and so am I. You're thinking, 'Oh dear, I had too much lunch, I'm a bit tired, I'm in the afternoon slump,' or 'I didn't have enough lunch, I wish I had had some more biscuits at tea,' or 'Oh God, perhaps I won't get a taxi tomorrow,' or 'I hope my wife's all right,' or 'I hope my daughter's all right,' or 'I hope my husband's all right,' 'I hope the dog's all right,' or 'how am I going to get home?'. All that is going on in your head. Or, 'My God, my ankle hurts' or 'my brain hurts.' All that is going on and I am trying to talk to you, but I am not just talking to you, am I? I'm watching you and I'm looking at you as well, you are not the nameless audience; I am noticing the people at the front, the keen ones, the ones who got here because they were interested in what I had to say, who have chosen to sit near enough and some of them have got notepads out already. I'm noticing the ones in the middle. And the ones at the back, the dangerous ones, the radicals – 'come on then, Sandford, entertain us' – or else they just want to go to sleep ... and those are the interesting ones and, actually, when it comes to questions, the difficult questions will come from back there and there's the people who've got a quick exit in case they get bored... and the man who came late. What has he been doing that is more interesting than listening to me? What *has* he been doing that is more interesting than listening to me? So all that is going on.

We are swimming in creativity, we are all part of it.

Now, I have invented all that. Is there any truth at all in my description of this audience or is it a created conceit to make you laugh, to give you something to latch on to? Or is it somewhere in the middle. Somewhere in the middle. So we admit that even in something as basic as a lecture we are in between truth and creativity, we are in between truth and fiction all the time. And actually that is true for our entire lives.



'Fiercely intelligent' Hamlet directed by Patrick Sandford at the Nuffield Theatre, Southampton

So, oh, look – I don't want to embarrass the person – but I have noticed that, up towards the back, there is a man who's so clearly in lust with a lady two rows in front of us. He has been watching her much more than me and, look, you turned round, immediately, because you want to see ... Our friend is looking at the back of this dear lady's head and what happens. She turns, she looks at him, their eyes meet, he stands, he steps over the seat, he kisses her deeply, passionately... Everybody in the room has turned round by now; men and women sigh and over there somewhere Tennessee Williams looks on and says, 'Oh God, I wish I was that women,' or maybe it's Gene Robinson, I don't know. Or maybe she doesn't. Maybe he steps down to her and she stands up and she gouges out his eyes and the blood pours from them and all the women in the room sing praises to the Lord and ninety percent of the men turn away in pity and fear and go home to their houses and the other ten percent take out their mobile phone and take photos and send them to *The News of the World* and make a lot of money.

And I invented all that and we are all inventing things like that. What if ... We are swimming in creativity, we are all part of it. We are like a group of children in a swimming pool splashing around and until you acknowledge that you are splashing around in the water and enjoy it over you, you don't know what strokes... There is no point in trying to teach creativity on the side of the pool – you have to wait until you're in the water.

2

Our two volunteers are going to look at the picture, so you just talk among yourselves. Would you like to just hold it... Now this is not a fine art class, this is not a Monet, this is actually a painting by, I would say, an amateur artist and that's all I want to say to you. Now, what I want you two volunteers to do is describe to the room this picture and what it says to you. And we're not a fine art class, I don't want you to say it's a post-impressionist, or it's gouache or it's got a bit of Odilon Redon or something. I want you to describe it as a picture. What do you see, maybe a sentence at a time?

V1: *'It's a girl in profile.'*

V2: *'With bare shoulders and red hair'*

V1: *'And some red and some yellow flowers'*

V2: *'And you'll see also her hand at the bottom of the picture and apart from that it's all kind of vague pink.'*

OK, talk a little bit more about the girl.

V1: *'She's slightly smiling – lips turning up rather than down – it's a line drawing with colour on it. She's gazing out of the frame.'*

What does the picture make you feel, if anything?

V2: *'It's a strange expression. She looks a bit inquisitive, but you can't tell really whether she's happy or sad. You can't tell.'*

Anything more, ?

V1: *'I think she's probably looking more thoughtful.'*

Do you like it? No obligation.

V1: *'I wouldn't rave about it.'*

V2: *'It's acceptable, but I wouldn't pay money for it.'*

I'm not selling it. Actually it's not mine to sell. [To the audience] Would you like to see it? Is it what you imagined? Do you prefer this picture or the picture that is in your head. Hands up those who prefer the one that's in your head. Hands up the people who prefer this one. About half and half.

What is interesting is that some of you would prefer the picture that is in your own head.

What is interesting is that some of you would prefer the picture that is in your own head. What does that show? It shows that your creative imagination is every bit as rich as this painting. Now you may say I don't have the draughtsmanship skills, but these are fairly basic, this is not a highly skilled painter. It's actually a portrait of Ellen Terry, the actress. You may not have those actual practical skills, but that's a slightly separate matter, you have the creative ability. So, what are you going to do with it?

I want to say to you: your creativity has nothing whatsoever to do with successful art. Your art may be successful, it may not. Look at Van Gogh, it was only after his death wasn't it. Look at Emily Dickinson, probably the greatest female poet ever. She published six poems in her lifetime and left how many thousand?

Athene Seyler, a great actress who lived to the age of 101; she published a book called *On Comedy*, which was actually a guide for actors on how to behave and she said in it: 'The world grants you your success; only you know your achievements and which is the most important?' As far as creativity is concerned it's so crucial that we understand this. Success in the theatre is a four-star or a five-star review from Michael Billington. It's your name in lights in the West End, it's, even more, your name above the title of a sitcom and you're earning a fortune, it's winning an Oscar. Achievement might be getting an audition, or getting the part, or remembering your lines, if you're over 65. Of course, we all have extraordinary achievements in our lives, we are made of them. An achievement might be giving up smoking, an achievement might be getting divorced, an achievement might be staying married, an achievement might be recovering from rape or sexual abuse or a burglary. A great achievement just to get here, if you were caring for somebody or had a particularly difficult journey, that is a great achievement.

Now there are some artists who have it easy, people like Tennessee Williams, because, you know, he was the first out, gay writer in America and he couldn't have done what he was told to do if he tried; he was sort of exposed before his day and therefore he became an extraordinarily creative person not only in creating his own work but also in creating his own life. And it's interesting, I've got a quotation from him which I will finish with, this is from his memoir. He says: 'A man must live through his life's duration with his own set of fears and angers, suspicions and vanities, and his appetites, spiritual and carnal. Life is built of them, and he is built of life. The umbilical cord is a long, long rope of blood that has swung him as an aerialist on an all but endless trapeze, oh such a long, long way from the first living organism that gave birth to another. Define it as the passion to create, which is all that we know of God. Is that an agnostic thing to say? I think not, and perhaps you will accede to my claim of exceptional honesty both as a writer and a man.' And very touchingly he adds, 'and if you knew me, you would find me a man who values kindness and patience with others.' Thank you very much.

A podcast of this recorded talk will be available online at www.sofn.org.uk

Patrick Sandford is Artistic Director of the Nuffield Theatre, Southampton. He won the Theatrical Manager's Association regional theatre award for Best Director, for productions of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* and a new play about Katherine Mansfield, *The Winter Wife*, by Claire Tomalin.



Please send your letters to:

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Anti- art

Dear Editor,

Don Cupitt in 'Catching Sight' suffers from some grave visual omissions. Significant 'anti-art' was created in Europe long before his 'watershed moment' of 1800 or 1850. Consider the work of Hieronymous Bosch (died 1516): great art, by definition, tends to the subversive, and more examples could be found. Botticelli, for instance, was subversive, the point of the Italian Renaissance being that it was implicitly secular. Cupitt's generalisation 'Painting became critical, secular and more democratic...' defines the breakthroughs to be seen in the innovative work of the first 'great' English painter (and engraver) William Hogarth (1697 to 1746) who predates Cupitt's 'watershed.' Art was 'up to date' in all those periods. Islam, in banning visual art, never evolved any 'anti-art' and thus a critical visual discourse, hence their current crisis, and our woe.

Yours sincerely,
Christopher Truman

39 Marsden Street, London NW53HE
TRUMAN433@aol.com

Mind and heart

Dear Editor,

The long letter entitled *The Great Oak* by Stephen Broughton published in your June magazine very much expressed views I have felt for some time about the direction in which Sea of Faith seems to be going. Like Mr Broughton I remain basically atheistic or non-realist, but have felt the growing need to return to some kind of religious life even if, as Mr Broughton reminds us: 'The great religions are not "true" in an intellectual sense but they can work "as if" they are true.'

The central issue, so well expressed by the lady quoted in Mr Broughton's letter, is indeed 'but what about the heart?' I have been reading your magazine for many years and attended meetings of SoF Birmingham when I lived in the UK. It has been stimulating and supportive to be aware of the growing existence of the view of 'religion as a human creation.' But increasingly the impression is given that it is all, or at least predominantly, about the intellect and expressed in a way which is really only comprehensible to people who are educated at least to university level and are extremely widely read..

This was particularly highlighted for me in the article about poetry by Dinah Livingstone, interesting and profound as it was in many respects. She writes: 'We can also have *rhythmic metaphors*. Perhaps the one everyone

remembers
(and young
children love)
is the galloping
anapestic
tetrameter:
"I sprang to the
stirrup..." etc.
I like to think that
I am reasonably
well educated

even if my reading of poetry was damaged by poor teaching at Grammar School in the 1960's and 70's. But I have never before heard of an anapaestic tetrameter even if 'everyone' is supposed to remember the one quoted, and I have never come across anyone, child or adult, who has known the galloping one.

Sadly this illustrates a trend in so many of the articles published and discussed in the Sea of Faith, valuable as they are in their own context. They all seem to be written (or spoken) for an audience of people who have received at least a degree level of education. There is nothing wrong with that, as such, if the Sea of Faith wants to remain a largely academic network. But I am sure that many, like Stephen Broughton and myself, must feel that the audience will remain very limited unless we can find a way of being less cerebral, less academic, and above all answer the question 'but what about the heart?' I hope he is wrong in thinking that the Sea of Faith has 'had its day', but I am increasingly afraid that the most important question will remain unanswered and that people will indeed look for answers elsewhere.

Yours sincerely,
Nicholas Smith,
Maussane Les Alpilles, Provence

The Purpose of SoF

Dear Editor,

The formal objective of the SoF is currently expressed thus: 'The objects of the charity are to advance the education of the public in religious studies, with particular reference to religious faith as a human creation'. (SoF Treasurer's report, 2008). No doubt it is essential, if the SoF is to retain its status as a charity, to make public education central to its objective. But it is my belief that the need of a substantial 'public' today is a clarification of the essential role of a 'religion' in human life. We no longer need to believe in a super-human 'first cause', or a divinely ordained ethical code, or access to a power which can alter the sometimes catastrophic course of the Universe. What we need is a promise of personal serenity, of an ultimate consent to 'what is', if only we can radically change our innate human 'self'-ishness.

So our revised objective, under the sole new title, I suggest, of 'Sofia', might read: 'The object of the charity is to foster the search, by public discussion, for an understanding of the core belief in all traditional religions, hidden among the metaphors involving super-natural entities or powers, in the capacity of every human being to reach serenity of mind.'

Yours sincerely,
John Bulman
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Current Affair

Comment by Owl

Owl is fresh back from Conference – a packed programme if ever there was one. No, not Lambeth! – the important one, the one in Liverpool, currently City of Culture. While the summer sun beat down, SoF attendees were busy, busy, busy.

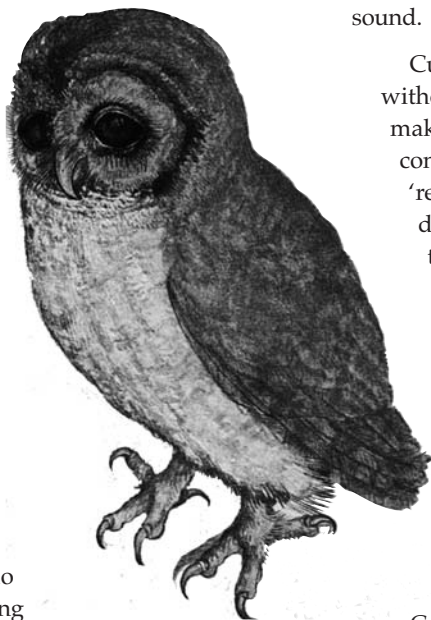
There was music and song in profusion, naturally. There were outpourings of poetry, dramatic moments, spiralling dances, expressive paintings, emotive films. Owl wasn't surprised to spy a few odd goings-on, featuring fans and swords, say, or bunches of twigs. But perhaps never before in the history of SoF have conference participants actually been instructed in laughing out loud or exhorted to mould clay elephants behind their backs. Was it art? That was the question. Or was it?

On the classical side Pity and Fear got a good airing. A whole lecture-room quaked at the thought of what they might be asked to do next, trembled in dread at the prospect of being picked to 'volunteer'. It was easy to laugh, yes, but when your body-language was under scrutiny, your motives were being examined. Catharsis – now that was more of a problem, or in relation to theology and art it was. For most artists, it was apparent, the glorious Genesis 1 build-up failed to cut the mustard. (Surprisingly the human drama of Genesis 2-3 was never mentioned.) We contemplated the Passion story's perennial power to inspire art in the exploration of tragedy and redemption. In the evening, harrowing films such as 'The Kite Runner' and 'Babette's Feast' offered their own slant on the finding of 'closure' if not reconciliation.

Life, and how it finds expression 'in the making' – maybe that's what the bishops should have been using their collective wisdom to debate at Lambeth, rather than agonising over what gender they all are, might be, should be. Many SoF Conference members were able to report by the close, sometimes to their surprise, that they had glimpsed some new insights on the 'making' process, as identical to 'living' or 'Life'.

'Make' and 'do' are the same word in many languages, so the identification of 'making' with 'art' should be no surprise. *Poiema* in Greek means both 'something made' and 'something done'. 'I too will something make, And joy in the making': Bridges' lines are widely quoted. But in the business world, people who have never heard of Arthur William Edgar O'Shaughnessy (1844-1881) are all too keen to advertise themselves as 'movers and shakers' without realising that, in this poem, those 'actors' are also the 'music makers' and the 'dreamers of dreams'. The mediaeval Scots poets called

Makars have been criticised for tending to 'regard the patterns of meaningful utterance as something almost incidental to the creation of a beautiful artefact', which reminds us that we have to make sense as well as sound.



Currently no televisual day is complete without a 'makeover', preferably an 'extreme makeover'. Yet 'makeover' is worth considering as an advance on metaphors of 'redemption', 'salvation' and so on, which do not resonate with younger people today. While we are at it, we can think about making good, up (with horrid people), love-not-war, time (for friends), friends, peace – all sorts – rather than just making money, out, waves.

Here's Owl's proposal, then, for Lambeth next time, for a really useful Conference like SoF's in Liverpool. Let it be inscribed on a tablet of some sustainable material guaranteed to last ten years. 'Every bishop attending Conference shall be required to attend one session of laughing out loud, and one of making a clay elephant behind his or her back.'

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

6th London Sea of Faith Conference *Living with Difference*

If multiculturalism is a balancing act between diversity and integration have we lost our footing and slipped off the tightrope?

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Michael Morton reviews

The Meaning of Life

by Terry Eagleton

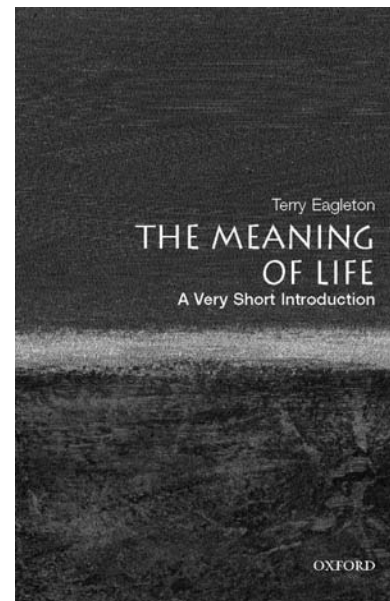
O.U.P. 2008. Pbk. 144 pages. ISBN: 9780199532179. £6.99.

When someone asked 'why is life so hard?' Groucho Marx replied, 'compared to what?' So questions about the meaning of life can appear to be meaningless, like lines from Monty Python which are so fanciful that they are funny. But not to Terry Eagleton. He made his name during the Sixties as an interpreter of Marx – Karl, not Groucho – and although he abandoned the Catholic faith of his early years he still takes religion and the questions it raises seriously.

Terry has been something of a rebel all his life. In the aftermath of the Ecumenical Council of Vatican II (1962-65) he edited a radical magazine, *Slant*, as a 24 year-old Fellow of Jesus College Oxford. A book, *The New Left Church* in 1967, proposed that Christian faith involved commitment to imaginative culture and the political left. By the early 1970s, however, it became clear that the reforms proposed by Vatican II were far too wide-reaching. The Church authorities, notably the Roman Curia, went into reverse gear when they saw that political and critical thinking must eventually lead to conclusions more radical than they could reasonably be expected to countenance. Soon most of the initiatives (and the opportunities) were lost. It is clear, though, that in *The Meaning of Life* Terry Eagleton has returned to many of the major themes he had developed in the 1960s (minus the notion of a sacramental community presented as a model for the Kingdom of God). This does raise the question of what Terry was meaning to achieve by reworking his ideas into a small book in the *Very Short Introduction* series. He himself confesses that he offered the title to OUP when they asked for a contribution and 'there was a very long silence while they wondered whether I was serious'.

Yet on the way to taking stock of what life could mean, Terry suggests that the question has become much more pressing with the decline of religion and the dawn of the modern age. The book is also, I think, an attempt to move cultural theory into a close engagement with modern society at a time when there is an over-abundance of New Age guides and Louise B. Hay-style manuals of affirmation of the self at all costs. This last is itself part of a process that Terry traces as a product of modernity where 'books with titles like *Metaphysics for Merchant Bankers* were eagerly devoured'. The only question here might be whether the intellectual desert that produces this meaning-of-life industry would actually smother books of the *Very Short Introduction* genre: philosophy without much seriousness or commitment to thinking.

On the other hand, although Terry denies on page one that he is a philosopher, his speedy journey through literature and philosophy does take up all the usual suspects – including difficult characters like



reviews

Wittgenstein, Nietzsche and Derrida – and is able to sum up their ideas succinctly. He explains that because of language, we humans are capable of objectifying our lives in a way that other animals cannot. So language has become both intensely problematic for us and the source of a lot of questions that have to be tidied up.

Later in the journey, Terry also examines and discards a number of candidates for the meaning of life: power, wealth and desire. He prefers happiness, only a more virtuous form than just pleasure, and love which is the means to make other people happy. And this, as the Marxist in him points out, re-introduces a political dimension. The good life is one established in the dialectic between the individual and society. The allegory that he offers is that of a jazz session wherein each member of the band improvises but does so with a sensitivity to the other members so as to produce a complex harmony. Similarly, the task of politics would be to create this sort of spontaneous community on a wider scale.

Of course, practical politics famously will have little to do with philosophy of any sort. Bryan Magee found this out during the 1960s when he encountered the 'football fan' attitude to party affiliation and the fact that politicians are not really interested in reflective ideology. In a similar fashion, we could also say that questions about 'meaning' in life only ever seem to occur to intellectuals.

But the book has an inalienable quality of humour, wit and an engaging style that always makes Terry Eagleton so easy to read. His political ideas, too, although they may now seem to have been superseded by global capitalism may even become a shelter, a place of refuge in the storm of contemporary history. To this end, Terry has always moved and he has contributed more than most to its fulfilment. Read this intelligent book and you will see why.

Michael Morton is the Catholic parish priest of St Winefrides Presbytery in Sandbach, Cheshire and a former SoF trustee.

Tim Jackson reviews

A Moral Climate – The Ethics of Global Warming

by Michael Northcott

Darton, Longman and Todd (London, 2007). Pbk. 224 pages ISBN: 9780232526684. £12.95.

The most 'inconvenient truth' of all, according to Michael Northcott's extraordinary book, *A Moral Climate*, is that climate change is a moral issue. That human beings have a responsibility for climate change is at one level obvious. The common wisdom emerging from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is that carbon emissions from human activities are responsible for climate impacts that damage other species and other human beings. Someone has inflicted damage on someone else; culpability, though complex and contestable, might be expected to follow. There is clearly room for a book which explores these issues.

A Moral Climate is a far from conventional exposition of this basic responsibility. In fact, it is really three separate books, I suspect. One of them is a book about climate change science and impacts, drawing heavily on the outputs from the IPCC. The second is a book in the tradition of critical theory, exposing the unjust power relations in industrial capitalism, and their impact on the earth and on others. The third is a book in the hermeneutical tradition lending modern interpretations to ancient biblical texts. Northcott's achievement is to weave these themes together in an attempt to illuminate the question of moral responsibility for climate change. Broadly speaking, we are urged to believe that climate change represents a judgement, in the biblical sense, on an unjust world, and the way to evade this judgement is to revert to a new ecological localism that eschews the accumulation of power through capital and respects the integrity of God's creation. It's entertaining, provocative, and intellectually acrobatic as a thesis, but ultimately, I would argue, flawed.

I feel bad about feeling bad about a book like this. There is much to admire and be inspired by in Northcott's writing. Anyone familiar with the climate science he seeks to convey can see that it is a good, accessible treatment of the subject. Anyone broadly in agreement with his critical perspective on capitalism can see that he makes a good case for the tragic disconnectedness of human economic interactions from social relations and the environment on which they depend. These two 'books' sit relatively comfortably with me. It's the hermeneutics that I find more than a little worrying. Specifically, I suppose because these are very 'old testament' hermeneutics. Climate change is the wrath of Jehovah (or sometimes Gaia masquerading as Jehovah) in response to (alleged) human disobedience. Global warming witnesses to the 'same truth that Jeremiah uttered; economic relations that neglect justice and the health of the land ultimately bring ruin to all.'

What worries me of course is that Northcott's God seems indiscriminate in his punishments. While the old testament God saw fit to save Noah and his family – admittedly more on account of his foresight than his obvious virtue – Northcott's God punishes indiscriminately at best, and regressively at worst: the ethnic poor of New Orleans (the book kicks off with an account of Hurricane Katrina), the peasant islands of the South Pacific and the untouchables in Bangladesh are held to account for the sins of Western capitalism. To be honest, I've never had a lot of sympathy with this kind of God and I don't fully understand what is to be gained by paying so much

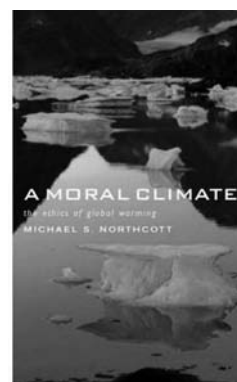
homage to Him. At the end of the day, He appears to be feared and respected only because he is powerful and wrathful, not because he is just and kind; and as such He ends up being as steeped in unpleasant hegemonies of power as the capitalist system Northcott sets out to criticise. Strange for a man to be as blind to the abuse of power in one place as he is alive to it in another.

I have much more sympathy when the arguments take a 'new testament' turn. Love of other, self-sacrifice, concern for the poor and the dispossessed: these are surely the virtues that should inspire us to forego the comfort, aspiration, luxury and inequity of modern materialism in search of something more just and more sustainable. The book is at its hermeneutical best, I think, when it follows this path. Northcott's discussion of pilgrimage and mobility has some of this subtlety in it. The economy of speed incites injustice because it distances us from our neighbour and renders impossible the Christian ideal. A society in which those with access to material goods are not only distant from but superior to those without, does seem to echo the concerns of Wendell Berry, Aldo Leopold, Val Plumwood, Vandana Shiva and others who place justice and connectedness at the heart of sustainability.

The final chapter of the book contains the most extraordinary claim of all. Northcott identifies two kinds of 'climate denial' – one is to refute the science, the other is to urge a technological fix. In doing so, he raises an uncomfortable possibility. What if the science is wrong and climate change has nothing to do with human activity after all? For Northcott, astonishingly, it doesn't matter. Mitigation responses are good 'in themselves'. 'Turning off the lights, turning down the heating, cycling or walking instead of driving, holidaying nearer to home, buying local food, shopping less and conversing more' – are good because they are 'intrinsically right'. Such actions 'correct modern thoughtlessness', claims Northcott. 'They sustain the moral claim that it is wrong to live in a civilisation that depends on the systematic enslavement of people and ecosystems to the high resource requirements of a corporately-governed consumer economy.'

I have a lot of sympathy for this position. But I still don't see that it justifies dishing out indiscriminate punishment – if that's what climate change really is. In my view, the judgement of the deluge puts God in the same role as the transgressors, visiting punishment on the least deserving, just because they happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Still, don't let my theological squeamishness stop you reading *A Moral Climate*. Books 1 and 2 are still great stuff and, as the old song says, two out of three ain't bad.

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



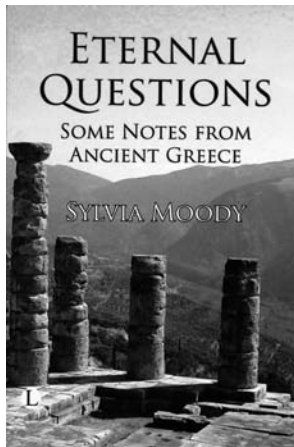
reviews

John Seargeant reviews

Eternal Questions

by Sylvia Moody

Lutterworth Press (Cambridge 2007). Pbk. 108 pages. ISBN: 9780718830786. £15.z



Sylvia Moody's questions range from 'where did I put my keys?' to 'what is the purpose of Life?', and it is of course this latter type of question which she defines as the Eternal Questions of her title. She adds further questions on God, morals, happiness and death, but she points out that these

days people are disinclined to commit themselves to particular belief systems but make use of beliefs from a variety of different traditions.

As her contribution to the debate, she invites us to study the traditions and culture of the Ancient Greeks, especially those of the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. She gives a historical background and then goes on to consider their philosophy and religion, their myths and morals, their politics, including Athenian democracy, their views on death and, what is probably their crowning glory, Greek tragedy as written by the fifth century dramatists Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides.

Obviously in a book of only a hundred pages, Sylvia cannot go into great detail. Indeed she subtitles the book *Some Notes from Ancient Greece*. However, for anyone seeking an overview of the Ancient Greek civilisation, this would make a very good starting point, as Sylvia covers a very wide range of topics and gives many examples of Greek thought which makes one want to investigate the topics further.

As an added bonus she ends each chapter with a word in the original Greek and by the end of the book she has explained all the letters of the Greek alphabet, so that one can understand a word like *μυθολογία*.

As a footnote, I would mention that Sylvia Moody is a member of the North London group of the Sea of Faith.

John Seargeant hosts the North London SoF group, together with Janet Seargeant. He is a keen student of classical Greek and a theatre aficionado.

reviews

A Bunch of Honesty

After the damp proofing,
after the rewiring,
the carpets laid, the buckets put away,
the cottage turned to pose its own questions.
Essential first furnishings?
What are the new criteria?
Pare down, decrease for strength, like Gideon's men.

Listen carefully, Martha:
one thing is needful
before you take possession of the house –
a bunch of honesty set in a glass vase.
This, before chair and table.
This, before bed and wardrobe.
This, before telephone and typewriter.

Honesty's cheap to buy.
Honesty needs no water.
Like everlasting flowers, it keeps for years.
The trouble is, it's so intractable,
declines to be arranged,
imposes non-patterns,
scorns aesthetic ploys and fine adjustments.

Let it stand for itself.
Stop looking for shapes.
Concentrate on those translucent ovals:
interplay of planes in white light,
shadows and sheeny highlights,
pearlised shot satin.
Can such fragility be durable?

This time we got it right,
installed the honesty first.
Someone said, 'This room is full of truth.'
That was later, after many tales,
confessions, understandings.
It doesn't matter now
that no one notices the accustomed vase.

Anne Ashworth

Anne Ashworth read this poem at the Conference workshop. Acknowledgement: 'A Bunch of Honesty' was first published in *Pennine Platform*.

John Nurser reviews

The Religious Crisis of the 1960s

by Hugh McLeod

Oxford University Press (2007). 282 pages. Hbk.

ISBN: 978019-9298259. £45.

A principal thread of Hugh McLeod's career in the University of Birmingham has been the history of Christendom and its secularisation (principally in Western Europe and North America) since the mid 19th century. By 'Christendom' he understands 'a social order in which, regardless of individual belief, Christian language, rites, moral teachings and personnel were part of the taken-for-granted environment'. That is now dead (at least in that definition), and the convulsions of the 1960s signified its passing.

It was a 'religious crisis', in the sense that Reinhold Niebuhr chose to call the newsletter he launched in 1941, *Christianity and Crisis*, in order to highlight the epochal challenge to Christian faith with which Hitler and Stalin had confronted the western democracies and their institutional churches in a way that 'Christendom' was no longer helpful in answering. World War II ended in a 'global order' that Hiroshima (and universal human rights) had heralded. The crisis of the 1960s was largely within Christianity but it erupted – astonishingly – within a handful of years in every part of this globalised scene. Baptism into national identity of the traditional European kind had become intensely inflammatory. It was an affront to 'personal authenticity'. It precluded the blossoming (and savouring) of other ways of living-out religious (and following Bonhoeffer 'religionless') faith commitments. The WCC's 'Church and Society' conference at Geneva in 1966 marked the 'radical Christian' multi-cultural elite grabbing the microphone. At the same moment the bishops of the Catholic church were back home from Vatican II to apply their manuals of *renovatio*. Eventually the fever of the 1960s subsided, and wan convalescents had to face the oil crisis of 1973 with – in Britain – only an Austin Allegro to comfort them.

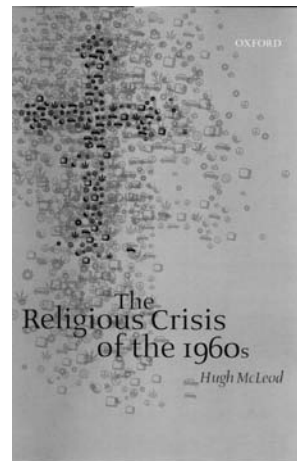
An outsider can perhaps comment that Pope Benedict XVI and the 'Sea of Faith' are only explicable from that decade. The point at issue was and is important. Were the 1960s more like the 16th century 'reformations' within Christian self-understanding or the life and death conflicts within Judaism (and among Gentile congregations) in the 1st century over Jesus of Nazareth? Who had he been? What was his relation to the God of Moses (whose image, it was widely proclaimed in the 1960s, 'had to go' and who might even be 'dead')? It is too early to say. If the latter comparison is nearer the truth, then our continued struggling to grow corn from the seeds of our tradition away from home makes sense. The title of 'Christian' remains a vigorously claimed (and contested) identity, and Christopher Evans's *Is Holy Scripture Christian?* (1972) remains required reading.

To someone who lived through 1955 to 1972, McLeod's narrative and analysis ring true. The 'long 60s', began with Suez and ended with Vietnam. The Cold War was at its most immediately dangerous. In millions of homes, the intimate conventions of how old and young, male and female, teachers and taught, behave to each other were stretched and snapped. Yet we'd 'never had it so good'. Television, a washing machine, and a family car became normal. Sunday worship was ill-equipped to fight off this competition for a weekly time-slot. The strength of McLeod's history is first, that it uses the oral-history experiences of ordinary people, in a variety of national cultures, who lived through these years, and second (and perhaps for the first time among those who have engaged with this decade), that it takes seriously the complexity of the changes that came and the significance of their sequencing and social contexts.

What is often forgotten is how positive was the 'adult education' interest in Christianity among the population at large in those years. McLeod argues that until 1967 it would be more accurate to speak of an eager 'religious ferment', which only became 'crisis' in the succeeding five years. The congregational scene was often not of a mind to receive this 'new wine'; and in truth new wineskins are still hard to find. McLeod puts great weight on Vietnam. My hunch would be – at least in England – to major on 1950s apartheid. If whites in South Africa were getting more ideologically fascist, and US America was so painfully slow in enforcing colour-blindness, then it became a kind of litmus test of Christian discipleship in Britain to prove we could do better. My first experience of the 1960s was at Wells Theological College in 1958. The lady from Church House who came annually to whisk us through teaching Sunday School was flummoxed entirely when one of us refused to consider 'duty', but only 'love'.

I hope this book will soon be published in paperback and read widely. It is the 1960s that locate us all.

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



reviews

Cicely Herbert visits
the National Army Museum and the Royal Army Pensioners' Hospital in Chelsea



Chelsea Pensioner

There can be no simple answers in a time of war. As weaponry and methods of destruction become ever more accurate and deadly, so the moral questions facing human beings become more complicated. It was with this thought in mind that I visited the National Army Museum in Chelsea. Although a museum devoted to the armed forces is most likely to appeal to the young male visitor, there is plenty for even the most ardent pacifist to consider when viewing this excellently curated collection, and it serves as a reminder of just how many conflicts, world-wide, British troops have been involved in over the centuries. I was intrigued by a large notice-board where visitors are invited to pin up notes on which they express thoughts evinced by a viewing of the collection. One, in particular, caught my attention: 'Only The Dead Have Seen The End Of War'. This chilling observation has been attributed to Plato and is engraved on the wall of the Imperial War Museum in London. One can only pray that one day human beings may find another way to resolve conflicts.

In contrast to the museum, the nearby Royal Hospital for Army Pensioners strikes one as a haven of tranquillity. The famous Christopher Wren buildings, set in the beautiful grounds of the Chelsea Gardens by the embankment of the river Thames, must indeed provide 'Succour and Relief for veterans broken by age and war', as demanded by the warrant issued by Charles II. Wren's most famous building, St. Paul's Cathedral, was almost completed when he was commissioned to design a hospital for soldiers in the form of 'a college or monastrie' and he based his design on that of the *Hôpital des Invalides* in Paris. Today, the Royal Hospital stands essentially as it was when first built, although it suffered some bomb damage during the Second World War. The magnificent building houses some 350 soldiers who all wear the red uniforms by which they are known. When

a soldier enters the community he must give up his army pension and any war disability pension he has received in the past, but he can retain a pension earned from civilian employment.

There is a well staffed hospital within the building where the seriously ill and old are cared for, and I met one delightful young Rumanian woman whose job was to look after a wheelchair user as part of her training as a nurse. I was irresistibly reminded of the last chapter in Dickens' *Oliver Twist* when, after his final visit to Fagin in the shadow of the gallows and all the horrors the boy had experienced, he was adopted by Mr Brownlow and thus joined a little society where conditions approached 'as nearly to one of perfect happiness as can ever be known in this changing world.' The Royal Hospital's recreation rooms are pleasant and spacious and the dining hall is quite stunning, especially, as when I saw it, the uniformed men were all seated at table taking lunch, beneath some impressive portraits of great figures from the past. There is a recreation room with a bar, a billiards room, library and television. Live entertainment is provided every weekend and the Pensioners are free to opt in or out as they please. Many seem to be particularly enamoured of the young Welsh soprano Katherine Jenkins, a twenty-first-century version of Vera Lynn, who has formed a special relationship with the men.

At the end of the Crimean War, that great champion of the soldiers' cause, Florence Nightingale, wrote, 'These people who talk to us have all fed their children on the fat of the land and dressed them in velvet and silk, while we have been far away. I have had to see my children dressed in a dirty blanket and an old pair of regimental trousers and to see them fed on raw salt meat and rum and biscuit – and nine thousand of my children are lying from causes which might have been prevented, in their forgotten graves. But I can never forget. People must have seen that long, long dreadful winter to know what it was.' Florence Nightingale would surely be happy to know that many brave men, who have in our times experienced at first-hand the horrors of warfare, and survived, are able to end their days in such a comfortable and peaceful environment.

Peace Tax Campaign website: www.peacepays.org

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.

Kathleen McPhilemy reviews

Antarctica

by Dilys Wood (Greendale Press, London 2008).

95 pages. £5.95.

Why would a poet spend eleven years writing about a region she had never seen? Because she needs a country of the mind, where she can explore imagination beyond her personal limits. Dilys Wood's collection, *Antarctica*, yokes together two imagined territories: the first part contains poems about the White Continent; the second is a verse novella set in the West of Ireland but featuring two Antarctic heroes. Although this link serves to justify the novella's inclusion, the most important character is Nell Crean, wife of one explorer. She and the tale of love and adventure in which she is involved are entirely fictional.

The liberties which the poet takes with fact and reality are unsettling because the less informed reader cannot know when events or details in the poem are based on the writer's research, or when they are invented. Perhaps the opening poem, 'The Ancient Mariner's Last Voyage', offers some clues to the poet's project. The title is clearly a reference to Coleridge's poem in which we know the protagonist 'wounded Mother Earth' by killing the albatross. However, the 'I' in this poem cannot satisfactorily be equated with Coleridge's mariner. This 'I' is travelling on a ship called 'Sleeping Beauty', a ship which seems simultaneously to represent the White Continent and the speaker's mother.

Sleeping, she appears calm and lovely
but, under many deep layers,
is an old woman, coarse and slovenly –

The speaker claims to want to test the 'ice, the blue ice' but is ambivalent about this quest. 'Oh do not wake her' is a plea which could equally be attributed to the poem's speaker or an interlocutor. Perhaps this is a voyage of self-discovery but the speaker is afraid of what may be discovered. We recognise that this ancient mariner is probably a woman – a woman searching for herself but afraid what she will find is her mother. The poem subverts male icons in order to engage in a feminist concern – the relationship between mothers and daughters.

So what is the attraction of an area and a period of discovery which is so stubbornly masculine? There's a male bonding thing/women not 'right' here' ('Chauvinist on the BAS'). The poet does explore the experience of women in the Antarctic, as in the poem based on Sara Wheeler's, *Terra Incognita, Travels in Antarctica*, which celebrates a woman who has been enabled to escape from herself: 'happy, though I somehow broke the circuit/that linked me to old loves, to old, old flames.' The image of the 'ice-lens', ice as a lens which allows solar heat to be trapped in deep under-ice lakes, also appears in the attractive sequence

'Love in a Freezing Climate'. These poems, too, are highly ambiguous.

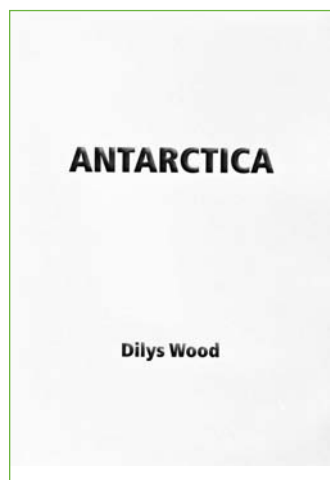
Again, there is doubt over what lies beneath the ice: 'Is it something soft, bright, rich, gorgeous, / or ice, more ice, and under ice, bare rock?' In 'He Builds Her an Igloo' the last lines are wry, chilling at every level: 'Try out my ice-bed? Want to be the first?'

I believe Wood is attracted to these early twentieth century heroes and to this unyielding territory, not because she wants to present the female experience, nor even because of worthy environmental concerns, but because this topic allows her to escape from herself so that her imagination operates more freely. This is seen to good effect in 'Future', where the extraction of a tooth triggers a vision of global catastrophe followed by a hint of renewal: 'Creeping on my hand / is the smallest snail... *The snail's your tooth transformed!*'

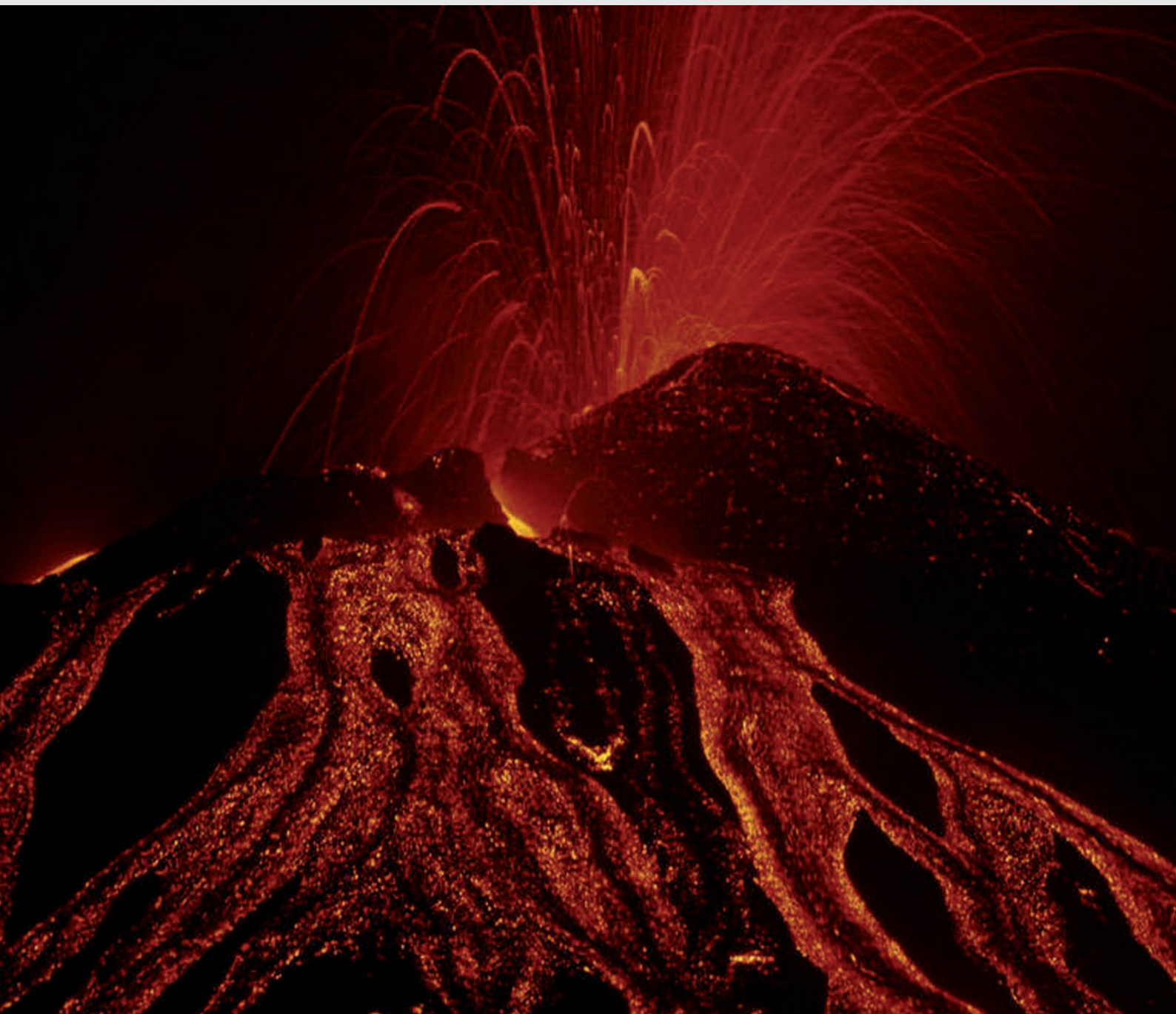
In *The South Pole Inn*, the verse novella which forms the second, much longer part of this collection, we see more results of this liberated imagination. The village of Anascaul, the West of Ireland, the characters, their dialect and the adventures which befall them are all unreal. This move away from reality allows the poet to create a language which is robust, sometimes comic, and often surprising: 'Begob, the nipple on that side / comes up fat as a cigar-butt!' The narrative comprises a series of monologues by different characters, sometimes including dialogue. This can be confusing and there is some lack of differentiation in the voices. I was intrigued by this poem but a little uncertain how it might best be delivered; perhaps it would work well on radio.

Intriguing is perhaps the best word for the whole volume. It asks a lot of questions, but perhaps does not have quite enough space to provide some of the answers. I felt the poems in the first part were a selection from a much larger work and would have liked to see the novella embedded in a bigger collection. However, the desire for more must be a tribute to the quality of writing.

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



reviews



Mount Etna: Vulcan's Forge