



*Mother – Matter
Mater – Materia*

Sofia is the quarterly magazine of the Sea of Faith Network (UK), Registered Charity No. 1113177. The magazine comes out in March, June, September and December.

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The magazine is an excellent medium for advertisers targeting a radical and literate readership. Contact the editor at the above address.

Rates are:

£120 full page £65 half page
£37 quarter page £25 1/8th of a page

Sofia is printed by Carrick Design & Print, Treforest, Wales (01443 843 520)

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Front Cover Image: Zapatista mother and child on their march ('caravan') from the Lacandon Jungle to Mexico City in 2001. Photo by the Editor.

Back Cover Image: Guadalupe Tonantzin in the 16th century Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mexico City

sfia

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

Mother – Matter: Mater – Materia

This Christmas issue of *Sofia* has the title ‘Mother-Matter: Mater-Materia’, words which have the same Indo-European root.

Most ancient religions had both male and female deities. For example, Ken Smith writes about the many-sided Indian mother goddess Kali. Michael Morton points out that as the Christian religion initially lacked a female deity, gradually Mary came to fill that role. She was proclaimed *theotokos*, ‘mother of God’ at the Council of Ephesus in 431 and was thereby ‘theologically transformed to become formally the Queen of Heaven (*Regina Coeli*) in the West and the All-Holy One (*Panhangia*) in the East. In other words she became divine, a goddess in all but name.’ In some cultures she was identified with earlier Earth Mother goddesses (in Mexico she was identified with the indigenous Tonantzin).

But curiously, at the Reformation, Mary was violently rejected. Her shrines, such as Our Lady of Grace at Walsingham, were smashed. Why was this? Was it connected with the Protestant *sola scriptura*? In the Old Testament Yahweh abhors Canaanite fertility cults of gods and goddesses. In the New Testament Jesus addresses his God as ‘Father’. Could it be connected with the rise of capitalism (closely linked with Protestant ‘free enterprise’), which involved a very ‘masculine’ attitude of exploiting and ‘subduing’ the Earth to profit from it? A reverence for the Earth as ‘our mother’ was lost. At its outset capitalism could in some ways be regarded as a progressive force, promoting individual liberty against feudal bondage. But now in the twenty-first century, unrestricted capitalism, whose engine is continual growth, is endangering the Earth, the planet, as well as indigenous peoples and animals. And we can’t put away ‘our mother’ in a geriatric home and hope to inherit from her in due course. If she dies, we do.

Is the symbol of an earth-goddess ready for a revival? asks Morton at the end of his article. And at the end of his, Smith calls for ‘a public debate with Pagans and Hindus both of whom have a much stronger and clearer understanding of the feminine, a far more honest appreciation of the earthiness of Earth.’

If Mary is a sort of Mother goddess, why is she a virgin? In a patriarchal society a virgin wife guaranteed to a man that the child she bore was his. Even nowadays, the Prince of Wales who, we are told, at one time had two married mistresses on the go at once,

was encouraged, probably even by them, to take a virgin bride. So perhaps a virgin mother of a divine child guaranteed that God was the father. Matthew puts Joseph’s viewpoint. When he discovered she was pregnant he resolved to ‘divorce her quietly’ until an angel told him not to. Luke puts Mary’s perspective. She asks the angel how she can become pregnant since she is a virgin. The angel replies in metaphorically sexual language: ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you’ so that your child will be called the Son of God. The Church’s obsession with virginity seems misplaced. By her ‘*Fiat* – so be it’ Mary consents to this ‘overshadowing’. The Advent liturgy has some beautiful sexual imagery, such as the *Rorate caeli*: ‘Skies drop down dew and clouds rain down the Just One; Earth, open and sprout a Saviour.’ In other religions gods often beget children from mortal women and not all the indigenous mother goddesses, with whom Mary is identified, are virgins. Far from it.

As well as smashing up Mary’s shrines and images, some types of Protestants abolished Christmas Day. They did not want to celebrate the story of a mother giving birth to a marvellous child who would bring hope to the world. And I did wonder whether the practice of some sects of sitting in silence is another rebuke to women, who were often condemned and punished for talking too much, as ‘gossips’ and ‘scolds’, ducked in ponds, hunted as witches who cast spells...

We are intelligent material beings, each of us made by a mother, not out of nothing but out of herself, her own flesh and blood. So let women be praised and respected, not as pale virgins shrouded in snow, but as mothers and, like the Earth, as active producers of all kinds of goods, including as mathematicians, mechanics, musicians, priests, presidents, and poets, as rational creatures. Let them not have wilful obstacles put in their way or be excluded from fields in which they could do good work,. And let the Earth be praised and respected, poetically represented as a goddess maybe, studied by science and looked after by good husbandry; we cannot do without this mother not just for a few months in the womb and a few at the breast, but ever. It remains for *Sofia* to wish all our readers a merry Christmas.

Mary, Protestantism and Capitalism

Michael Morton looks at the Protestant suppression of Mary, the rise of capitalism and the state we are now in.

From the annals of the Christian history of Rome there is a curious legend that on the night of the 4-5 August in the year 352 AD there was a totally unseasonable and therefore miraculous fall of snow on the Esquiline Hill. The snow fell in the vague outline of a basilica, and by order of the Christian senator who owned the land a church dedicated to the Virgin Mary was constructed, the first in the West. This church is now known as Santa Maria Maggiore. It is one of the four major basilicas of Rome and yet not many pilgrims and visitors realise that its real dedication is *Sancta Maria ad Nives*, Our Lady of the Snows.

The story itself is evidence of a profound religious myth that could not be repressed. That much was demonstrated at the Ecumenical Council held at Ephesus in 431 when Mary was declared to be the Mother of God. From a minor figure in the New Testament she was theologically transformed to become formally the Queen of Heaven (*Regina Coeli*) in the West and the All-Holy One (*Panhagia*) in the East. In other words she became divine, a goddess in all but name.

In virtually every culture in antiquity there appear to have been the same seven gods: a god of the earth, of the sky, the sun, the moon, fresh water and salt water (the sea) and of the storm. This pantheon of seven is found even amongst the Native Americans. It is the reason that seven is the divine number, and also the reason for there being seven days in a week, each one named for one of the ancient gods. The chief god of this pantheon might vary from culture to culture. Sometimes, as in Greece and Scandinavia, it was the storm god who was the supreme divinity, while in Babylon it was the sun-god Shamash. But a number of these deities were also generally female, particularly the moon goddess and the Earth-mother.

Surprisingly, and perhaps unconsciously, the Christian notion of God as a Holy Trinity appears to preserve an echo of this ancient tradition. The Father can be naturally understood as the God of the sky and the sun, whilst the Holy Spirit, whose symbols are fire and the desert wind, is easily recognised as a storm god. Christ is closely connected in the Gospel with water (see John 4:14) and with the Sea of Galilee, a freshwater lake, where much of his teaching takes place

and where he has power even over its stormy waters.

But there is a feminine element missing, and a fourth divine or semi-divine figure was gradually introduced. Mary is associated with the crowned figure in the Apocalypse (Rev 12:1) standing on the moon. The idea of Mother also grew gradually from the Earth mother, to a second Eve, and thence to the mother of God and to the Mother of the Church, a title applied to her during Vatican II. The designation Star of the Sea also grew little by little as evidence of Mary becoming a guide in stormy seas and a protector of seafarers, real or symbolic. In the twelfth-century Saint Bernard of Clairvaux wrote, 'if the winds of temptation arise, or if you are driven upon the rocks of tribulation look to the star, call on Mary'. The same idea is still present in T.S. Eliot's prayer to Mary in *The Dry Salvages* part IV from *The Four Quartets*. The concept of Mary as a guiding star for seafarers has led to a devotion to Our Lady, Star of the Sea in many Catholic coastal and fishing communities. Numerous churches, schools and colleges are also dedicated to *Stella Maris*.

But in 1976, Marina Warner wrote a book called *Alone of All Her Sex*. She argued the case from another angle, about how the figure of Mary has shaped and been shaped by changing social and historical circumstances and why, for all their beauty and power, the legends of Mary have condemned real women to perpetual inferiority. In spite of the elevation of Mary, later to be the basis for her Assumption into heaven, she was always scaled down to be portrayed as submissive, loving, obedient, self-effacing yet maternal figure around which the Church-sponsored ideal of feminine holiness was to be constructed.

It was said to be one of the points of disagreement for the theologians of the Reformation that the increasing Christological imperative and a Hebrew Bible inspired monotheism meant that any hint of the female divinity as contained in the devotion to the *Regina Coeli* had to be purged. But I think that there is something more. The history of Christian art shows a move away from the great themes of Mediaeval cosmic salvation like the *Maestà* of Duccio in Siena which persisted into the Renaissance paintings of the Sistine Chapel by Michelangelo and the sublime frescoes of

Rafaello di Sanzio. The perception and valuation of ordinary life had shifted during the Reformation when the ideal of a secluded, monastic existence – waiting for heaven and fleeing the world – gave way to a different view of how life should be. It came principally from the Low Countries and the Rhineland to appear in the paintings and interiors of artists such as the Bruegel brothers and Jan Vermeer. They found holiness and peace, that is a genuine and fulfilled life, in domesticity, marriage and a hallowing of ordinary time. The high valuation of chastity and virginity which had obsessed the Middle Ages was finally abandoned. Martin Luther's own journey from enclosed, ascetic Augustine friar to marriage with Katharina von Bora and a family reflected this.

And at the same time the interior paintings of Vermeer, which appear so secretive and intimate, actually serve to open doors onto a rapidly expanding world. In his interesting book, *Vermeer's Hat*, Canadian scholar Timothy Brook has shown how secondary objects in Vermeer's paintings – a beaver hat, porcelain bowls, silver ornaments or a Turkish rug – are actually evidence of a growing web of trade that brought such luxuries to Holland from America, China, Peru and Asia. The Dutch East India Company – the VOC, as it was known – was to incorporate capitalism what Benjamin Franklin's kite was to electronics: the beginning of something momentous that could not have been predicted at the time. It also began to undermine the ordered society of the Middle Ages, where honest intentions or gentlemanly status did not necessarily have anything to do with success in a commercial economy.

Also during aftermath of the Reformation, with the religious wars of the seventeenth century and a revolution in science, theologians began to lose their certainties and the Church began to lose some of its confidence. So long as the populace in general were hemmed in by ignorance, political powerlessness and serfdom, they had nowhere else to look for guidance and comfort except to the Church. The Church had to make a great beacon of itself for the sake of the poor, by declaring its dogmas to be unchanging, its art rich and uplifting and itself infallible and necessary for salvation.

But what the Reformation and the Enlightenment did in the years from 1500 to 1800 was to offer another way. Some said a better way. Martin Luther's original aim was not to reform the Church, it was to abolish it. In his account, the guide to personal salvation would come from un-mediated religion. It was to be found in the sacred scriptures and the insightful mind of the devout believer. In a similar fashion, a search for scientific truth would derive not from ancient authority but from the clear and distinct ideas proposed by Descartes and taken up in a scientific revolution.

The Latin antiphon to the Virgin Mary, *Salve Regina*,



Vermeer: *Woman in Blue*

translated by John Lingard to become 'Hail Queen of Heaven' and the first vernacular Roman Catholic hymn tells a different story. It contains the line *gementes et flentes in hac lacrimarum valle*, ('mourning and weeping in this vale of tears'). The hymn became a kind of cry of the poor from the harsh and often cruel conditions of some Catholic communities during the early Industrial Revolution. But there was little engagement with political and social action. As Christ and Mary become more divine (as they did during the course of the first three centuries), it becomes harder to see how they could have lived human lives in time. For human social life is always a matter of mixing it, of physical, sexual and economic exchange. You have to constantly give yourself away, change your ideas and lifestyle. This divine upgrading meant that the emphasis shifted from the radical indwelling of God, and all that it might have entailed politically, to that of beings in a world to come. It was an opportunity missed.

We have to ask whether there is a possible link between some of these ideas and the thesis from Max Weber in his famous book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Written during 1904-5 as a series of essays, Weber shows that certain types of Protestantism favoured rational pursuit of economic gain because worldly activities had finally been given a positive spiritual and moral meaning. It was a by-product of the inherent logic of those doctrines and the advice based upon them that encouraged planning and self-denial in the pursuit of economic gain. Weber traced the origins of the Protestant ethic to the Reformation, because the Catholic Church had always assured salvation in heaven to individuals who accepted the sacraments and submitted to the clerical authority. But the Reformation had effectively removed such firm assurances. From a psychological viewpoint, this

meant that redemption reversed direction and slowly became bound up with prosperity. It became possible for the individual to set to work and be able to make something of his life and talents through his own efforts and eventually build up a new society, a new Jerusalem in the present age.

For the Church of the Counter-Reformation, the idea of the kingdom was deferred into the future so that the Church could become a religious object in itself – a sanctifying presence in society and a challenge to its material values. It would continue until the end of time, so the faithful no longer prepared for Christ to come to them but waited to return to him. Life was to be spent in preparation for death, and everyone's first concern was for personal salvation in the hereafter, to which the Church holds all the keys. (Keys became, and remain, the primary papal symbol). In this account, the world is devalued and remains insignificant, except as a testing ground. Which is why in Victorian hymnody it was eventually described in terms of an exile or that 'vale of tears'. Even the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, promulgated by Pope Pius IX in 1854, was a sort of pooh-bah to modernity – something that was unfortunately a feature of his latter years. Through the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, one that caused great controversy even amongst Catholic theologians, Mary became almost trans-human or in a category all by herself. The associated doctrine of the Assumption, proclaimed by Pope Pius XII in 1950, is a similar exaltation of the figure of Mary and maybe an unconscious statement of her semi-divinity through immortality. For Pius XII and Pope Paul VI later in the 1970s are deliberately vague when they come to discuss whether Mary ever died before being taken up into heaven. Paul VI contented himself with the enigmatic assertion that Mary was assumed to heaven 'when her earthly life ended'.

For theologians of the Reformation any hint of the female divinity had to be purged.

We have moved slowly over the past century, but more quickly in recent decades, into a new phase of late capitalism wherein the supernatural has faded and even the ruggedness of a work-ethic has become a danger. The command from God in the Book of Genesis to multiply, fill the Earth and subdue it was fine until the scale of human activity began to grow too large, too oppressive for the planet. We lived a long time with a religion of sin and redemption, according to which humankind would gradually move forward from the Fall to an end time of peace, prosperity and harmony

with God. But in such a religion of history, only God and 'man' are alive. Nature is dead, in that it only serves to be exploited as a quarry for petrochemicals and minerals and intensive agriculture which are means to build up human society and promote a near-universal consumerism.

redemption slowly became bound up with prosperity

As something of an antidote to all this, during the early 1970s, the Gaia thesis appeared, a notion that the Earth and the space very near to it is a living being, with all life on the surface being part of a single larger living whole. This theory has been growing in popularity since its conception and is often connected to many new age faiths. Research scientist James Lovelock came at the idea from the vantage point of envisioning a geo-biosphere which is self-regulating and self-sustaining. What he postulated is that every form of life and all of the systems that can be found on the planet Earth are in fact the subsystems of a larger single living organism, which includes not only the planet and all life on it, but all of the matter and material that is located in close proximity to the planet, a singular being he calls *Gaia*. From this vantage point, all the barriers of race and culture become inventions of man, fragmenting ourselves from each other instead of looking at human life as a singular form of existence.

It might be that the symbol of an Earth-goddess is ready for a revival just as some theologians, like the Judaic writer Richard Rubenstein, look to a return to a green, folk religion of nature in Israel after the industrial horrors of the *Shoah*. Religious faith could be distinguished by a move to discover and declare the sacredness of everyday things and become a faith that loves the Earth. No longer looking up, or beyond the present reality but looking around. No doubt some populist Roman Catholics would probably howl in protest and Reformation churches, having lost touch, would not be able to make the connections. Yet the figure of Mary is endlessly malleable, and endlessly symbolic. It might well be time for her to leave the heavens, so to say, and return to the Earth. For we recognise that in its evolution, Mary's symbolic figure touches and illuminates a variety of meanings of heaven and Earth and could be a sign of their eventual conjunction and possible harmony.

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Guadalupe Tonantzin — ‘Our Mother’

Dinah Livingstone looks at the historical and continuing role of Mexican Earth Mother goddess Tonantzin who became identified with Mary, Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Background

In 1492, after the Muslim Moors were finally driven out of Spain, the Catholic monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella sent Columbus on an expedition which reached the ‘West Indies’, in fact Caribbean islands, not, as he supposed, the Asian mainland. This led to the opening up of a New World, which Spain proceeded to colonise both for its wealth and to spread Christianity. In 1519 Hernán Cortés set out from Cuba with a small expedition of about 500 men and landed at Vera Cruz on the Mexican mainland Yucatán Peninsula. By 1521 he had conquered and destroyed the magnificent Aztec city of Tenochtitlan (now Mexico City) – then a much larger city than any in Europe with a population estimated at over 200,000; by comparison Henry VIII’s London had a population of about 55,000.

How did Cortés conquer the great Aztec empire so easily? From the large literature on this subject, we may briefly mention the following points. Firstly, the Spaniards had superior warfare technology, including gunpowder and horses, which the indigenous people had never seen. They also brought diseases such as smallpox from which the indigenous people had no immunity. Secondly, the rapidly expanding Aztec Empire was hated by the neighbouring tribes they had conquered because they exacted heavy tribute and captives for human sacrifice. Cortés succeeded in forming alliances with some of these tribes, such as the Tlaxcalans, who helped him conquer the Aztecs. Thirdly, the Aztec Emperor Moctezuma may have thought the Spaniards were the legendary god-king Quetzalcoatl, who had disappeared into the sea but promised to return.

Quetzalcoatl had been the historical king of a previous Mexican high civilisation, the Toltecs, who were famous artists, craftsmen and poets. King Quetzalcoatl was also the priest of a single god whose name was Quetzalcoatl too, a manifestation of Omoteotl, the ‘Divine Pair’ – supreme god both male and female – the ‘Lord and Lady of Duality’. King Quetzalcoatl was driven out of the city for forbidding human sacrifice and disappeared into the sea. At this point he leaves history and enters into myth (in some versions of the story he becomes the evening and then the morning star (Venus).

The Aztec barbarians invading from the North

rapidly assimilated the achievements of their more civilised predecessors and also took over their gods, so that their pantheon became very large and complex. They forgot Quetzalcoatl’s ban on human sacrifice and their most-revered god became the bloodthirsty sun and war god Huitzilopochtli, who demanded a constant supply of victims so that the sun would not fail. However a resistance group of *tlamantinimes* continued to oppose human sacrifice and honour the tradition of Quetzalcoatl.



Tonantzin as maize cob

In some ways the Spaniards were like the Aztecs, being prepared to kill thousands in the name of their god. But unlike the Aztecs, the Spaniards were not syncretists: they thought their god was not only the top god, but the only god, and all the others were demons who should be exterminated. They smashed as many shrines as possible of the indigenous gods and not only killed thousands of native inhabitants but did their best to destroy their religion and culture.

The Appearances of ‘Our Mother’

In December 1531, ten years after the destruction of the city of Tenochtilan, a poor indigenous man who had been converted to Christianity by the Spaniards and given the Christian name Juan Diego, was on his way to church and passing the hill of Tepeyac on the outskirts of what is now Mexico City. Tepeyac was the holy hill of the indigenous great mother goddess Tonantzin (which means ‘Our Mother’). On Tepeyac Juan Diego encountered a Lady, dark-skinned, indigenous and very beautiful. She spoke to Juan Diego in Nahuatl, his mother tongue. She tells him: ‘I am the Ever Virgin Holy Mary, Mother of Great Truth, *Teotl Dios* [God in Nahuatl and Spanish] Mother of the Life-Giver, *Ipalnemohuani*; Mother of the Creator of

Humanity, *Teyocoyani*; Mother of the Lord of the Near and Together; *Tloque Nahuaque*; Mother of the Lord of Heaven and Earth, in *Ilhicalhua in Tlalticpaque*. She identifies herself with both the Christian Mother Mary and the indigenous Mother Goddess and equates the two. She asks Juan Diego to go to the bishop and say she would like her holy house built on Tepeyac Hill.

The story is told in the *Nican Mopohua*, a poem written in Nahuatl (the Aztec language). According to Nahuatl expert Miguel León Portilla, the poem was most probably written in 1556 by the Nahuatl native speaker Antonio Valeriano, who was a student at the Santa Cruz College founded by the Spaniards at Tlatelolco, where the students became trilingual in Nahuatl, Spanish and Latin. The poem goes on to tell how at first the Spanish bishop Juan de Zumárraga did not believe the poor Indian Juan Diego (who belonged to the *macehual* class of 'commoners'), but finally became convinced on Juan Diego's third visit by the out-of-season flowers the Lady had told him to gather on the cold top of Tepeyac Hill, which he carried to the bishop's Palace in his poncho or *tilma*. When he opened the *tilma* to show the flowers, it bore the Lady's miraculous image on it. A house, later a large church, was built on Tepeyac Hill in honour of the Lady, whom the Spaniards called Our Lady of Guadalupe and the indigenous continued to call Tonantzin. Certainly by 1556 large crowds of both Indians and Spaniards regularly came to honour the Lady at Tepeyac and have done so ever since.

In the poem the Lady not only appears as an ordinary dark-skinned indigenous woman and speaks to Juan Diego in his Nahuatl mother tongue but she treats him with affection and respect, as an equal. (She speaks to him standing up; if she had been a noble, she would have received him sitting down.) She addresses him in familiar language, using many diminutives, like a mother. The indigenous Nahuatl people had seen their world destroyed, their great capital city in ruins, their culture and religion smashed. An estimated population of 25 million when the Spaniards arrived declined by the end of the century to 1 million from conquest, disease and suicide. The psychological trauma must have been devastating. But the Lady tells Juan Diego she is the Mother *both* of the Christian god (*Dios*) and the supreme Nahuatl god and she repeats some of that god's highest titles (Life-Giver, Creator of Humanity, Lord of the Near and Together, Lord of Heaven and Earth). When Juan Diego says he is of too humble status to speak to the bishop, she insists he is her chosen messenger and he ends up carrying the good news to the bishop ('evangelising' him). The Lady represents the female aspect of the divinity (the Nahuatl supreme divinity Omoteotl being both male and female – the Divine Pair), the nurturing Earth Mother. She tells Juan Diego: 'I am your kind mother and the mother of all the nations that live on this Earth who would love me.' She accords the poor equal, or even greater, dignity than the rich and equally assumes both Christian and Nahuatl names of the great 'Life-Giver'.

The sixteenth century Franciscan friar Bernardino

de Sahagún condemned the cult of the Lady at Tepeyac as an undercover continuation of the old religion at a Christian shrine and others since then have repeated that condemnation. On the other hand, some called it a Christian plot to 'subsume' and thereby overcome the cult of the indigenous Tonantzin and replace her with Mary. Nevertheless, today an estimated 10 million worshippers visit her Basilica annually – still whispering 'Tonantzin Guadalupe, hear our prayers' (with no difficulty combining them) – making it the most popular shrine to 'Our Lady' in the world.

Her symbolic power operates for those who do not think she is real, as well as for those who do.

Guadalupe in Mexican History

Our Lady of Guadalupe became closely bound up with struggles for Mexican independence and identity, including the struggles of the indigenous population. In the war of Mexican independence from Spain (1810-21) the rebels' banner had her image on it and their rallying cry was '¡Viva la Virgen de Guadalupe! ¡Viva la Independencia!' The first President of independent Mexico changed his name to Guadalupe Victoria. During the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) followers of Zapata (mainly indigenous peasants) also called upon Our Lady of Guadalupe and their rallying cry was: 'Land and Freedom!'. They demanded agrarian reform and redistribution of the agricultural land owned by the great rich landowners. It seemed natural to them to call upon the Lady who had appeared to Juan Diego; she represented Mother Earth, was an indigenous commoner and chose an indigenous commoner for her messenger. It is not surprising that for theologians like Virgil Elizondo (*Guadalupe, Mother of the New Creation*) she is a major figure in liberation theology.

Guadalupe and the Zapatistas Today

In 1994 the Zapatistas, who are mainly Mayan Indians from the Lacandón Jungle in Chiapas, South East Mexico, rose up and briefly took control of the nearby small city and bishopric San Cristóbal de las Casas in protest against NAFTA, the newly ratified North American Free Trade Agreement, which massively benefits large US corporations against the Mexican poor and indigenous. The Zapatistas were also demanding land rights and some autonomy. They retreated to their Jungle and named their first Zapatista base Guadalupe Tepeyac, because this Lady was an indigenous woman like them, who had proclaimed herself mother of all. As Tonantzin she

is Mother Earth and these poor Mayan peasants claimed their share of the Earth's bounty. In their culture they treat the Earth as holy and there are lessons to be learnt from them about sustainable agriculture.

According to Luke in the New Testament, the pregnant Mary is the first to proclaim the gospel in her song, the Magnificat: the mighty put down from their seats and the poor raised up, the hungry filled with good things and the rich sent empty away. (Incidentally, Bach's *Magnificat* in D is very expressive and attentive to the meaning.) Mary gives birth in a lowly stable to Jesus, 'a saviour who is Christ the Lord' – the angel told the shepherds. The humble shepherds are the first to hear about it, just as the poor indigenous Juan Diego was the one chosen to receive the Lady of Guadalupe's message. In Luke's Gospel Mary's son Jesus says plainly: 'Blessed are the poor' (not 'poor in spirit' as in Matthew) for yours is the reign of God and 'Blessed are the hungry' (for food) for you will be filled.

The struggle for land is real and continuing. To give just one example, a self-styled environmental group called Conservation International, sponsored by many large multinational corporations including Citigroup, Exxon Mobil and McDonalds, and closely linked with Starbucks in exporting token amounts of organic coffee from the Monte Azules region of the Lacandón Jungle, has made concerted efforts to clear the Zapatistas from the area. Its activities include bio-prospecting for private sector partners (which may involve biopiracy for pharmaceutical companies); they have bought the right to set up a genetic research station in Monte Azules and have co-operated with the Mexican government in a repressive military campaign against the Zapatistas, whom the Mexican government has described as an 'international security matter' and a problem of 'serious ungovernability'. Conservation International's programme of flyovers – part of the USAID-supported international monitoring programme – uses state-of-the-art geographical information systems technology, including high resolution satellite imaging, which could be used to identify the location of natural resources attractive to commercial interests. A June 2003 report by the Mexican Chiapas-based Centre for Political Analysis and Social Investigation dubbed Conservation International 'a Trojan horse of the US government and transnational corporations'. And other independent agencies have described the 'environmental' concerns of the Mexican and US governments in the Lacandon Jungle as being military and geostrategic 'alibis'.

In 1995 the Mexican army smashed Guadalupe Tepeyac and the Zapatistas were driven out of their first base. Guadalupe Tepeyac now became a 'migratory' community and in a communiqué of March 1995 (published in *La Jornada* and other Mexican newspapers, and posted on the internet) their leader subcomandante Marcos gives a humorous description of a long discussion they have when someone from the city has sent them a present of an image of Our Lady of Guadalupe:

A few days ago in the now 'migratory' village of Guadalupe Tepeyac, there was an argument. A



Zapatistas marching into San Cristóbal de las Casas in 2001

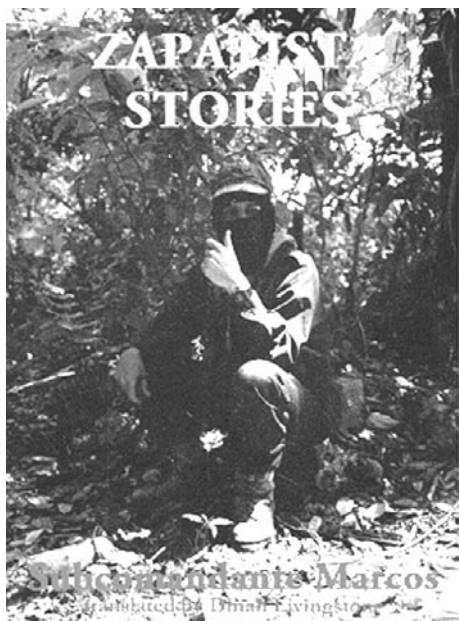
gift came to them from the city. Among the scant humanitarian aid they receive, the 'Guadalupean Zapatistas' (as they call themselves) found an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe. From what they tell me, the image measures about 30 centimetres, has some golden cords and coloured candles.

They decide to hold a general assembly to discuss whether the image should go with them when they try to go home or whether it should stay in their present host village. Marcos continues:

Doña Herminia begins to clear her throat. Everyone falls silent. This means that the foundress of Guadalupe Tepeyac, and its oldest inhabitant is about to speak. With the weight of her hundred years, Doña Herminia begins to speak slowly and quietly...She says that the Virgin of Guadalupe has come again from the city to find her sons and daughters, the Guadalupean Zapatistas, and as she did not find them at home she searched for them uphill and downhill, and reached them after much travelling up and down from one place to another.

She says that the Virgin must be tired of so much trudging up and down, especially in this heat that dries up saints and sinners alike, that a little rest would do her no harm at all and that now she is with them it's good that the Virgin should rest a while with her own. But she ('mother Lupita') did not come from so far away to stay here, she didn't travel all over the place looking for us, just to stay here in this place if the Guadalupean Zapatistas leave it and go somewhere else.

Doña Herminia thinks (and here all the women and the odd man nod in agreement) that the Lady of Guadalupe will want to be with her sons and daughters wherever they are, and that her tiredness will lessen if she rests together with them, her family, and her sadness will hurt her less if she suffers together with them and joy will shine out more if it shines on her with them.



Swarming fish

Doña Herminia says she thinks (and now there are more who agree) that the Virgin will want to go wherever the people of Guadalupe Tepeyac go, that if the war drives them into the mountains, to the mountains the Virgin will go, turned soldier like them, to defend her dark dignity; that if peace brings them back to their homes, the Lady of Guadalupe will go with them to the village to rebuild what was destroyed.

'So I ask you, *madrecita* [little mother], if you agree to going where we go...' she asks, addressing the image that is in front of the assembly. The Virgin doesn't answer, her dark gaze keeps on looking down. ...The assembly leader asks if anyone else wants to speak. There is a unanimous silence. 'There will be a vote,' he says, and takes the vote. The women win. The Virgin of Guadalupe will go wherever the Guadalupean Zapatistas go. After the assembly there will be a dance. A marimba and the dark-skinned image preside over the festivity.

Marcos's attitude to the image is 'sofish' – one of affectionate respect but he in no way treats her as supernatural. In similar vein, he often recounts old stories about the Mayan gods. Marcos knows that Our Lady of Guadalupe is an immensely important symbol of a real struggle for a just share of the Earth's treasury, as a mother providing for all her children. He is able to joke about her in a light-hearted way, but knows her symbolic power operates for those who do not think she is real, as well as for those who do. He is an 'object lesson' for SoF in discerning and absorbing the wisdom of traditional religious stories and symbols, without pretending that they are anything but 'poetic tales'.

On the other hand, in 2002, boasting that this was the Catholic church's first indigenous saint, Pope John Paul II canonised Juan Diego, to whom the Lady of Guadalupe appeared. The Pope did not mention the fact that Juan Diego may not actually have existed; he is the hero of a poem!

SoF and Religious Traditions

In exploring religion as a human creation SoF can learn from Marcos's affectionate respect to discern the wisdom in old religious stories and traditions. But we should not be uncritical. Just because a religion is 'ethnic' or 'exotic' does not mean we should 'lay off' out of a misguided multicultural 'correctness', tolerate it as 'quaint' or treat it with 'folksy' acceptance. All religious traditions must be judged by humanist criteria. For example, in his poem *Quetzalcoatl*, Ernesto Cardenal roundly denounces the horrendous human sacrifices practised by the Aztecs, whom he regards as a more barbaric culture succeeding the high culture of the Toltecs. He describes the resistance of the *tlamantinimes* who continued to oppose human sacrifice and honour the tradition of Quetzalcoatl, as *anti-fascist*.

And if we oppose human sacrifice in the religion of the Aztecs, a former American super-power, we must continue to oppose it today. The USA, the present American superpower, has parallels with the Aztecs. The Aztecs practised human sacrifice to keep the sun burning. The US is engaged in wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, in which the geopolitics of oil are a major factor. Over a million people have died, sacrificed in the Iraq war and its aftermath. As well as learning from the wisdom of old religious traditions, we can learn from their *unwisdom* and become part of the resistance to human sacrifice.

We can also learn from 'Our Mother' Tonantzin Guadalupe that the Earth is alive and should be treated with reverence, not over-exploited, poisoned and endangered; she is mother to all and her wealth must be fairly shared. We cannot say the West has achieved the realisation of Christianity when so many people are still poor, hungry and dispossessed, for which Western capitalism bears a large responsibility. 'Our Mother's' Magnificat 'raises up the lowly' and 'fills the hungry with good things'. Her son Jesus says the reign of God belongs to the poor and will not be here until they have come into their own ('inherit the Earth': have land), when the hungry are blessed, because they will no longer be hungry but filled, not with any old rubbish, but with *good things*.

Guadalupe, Mother of the New Creation by Virgil Elizondo (Orbis Books, New York 1997) has an English translation of the full text of the *Nican Mopohua*. Miguel León Portilla's *Tonantzin Guadalupe* (El Colegio Nacional: Fondo de Cultura Económica, Mexico 2000) has the full Nahuatl version with Spanish translation. Zapatista communiqués are posted on <http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/> (Spanish with some English translations.

A search will produce other sites with English translations.)

Dinah Livingstone was in San Cristóbal de las Casas in February 2001 to greet the Zapatistas on their great march ('caravan') to the capital, Mexico City. She collected, edited and translated *Zapatista Stories* by Subcomandante Marcos (Katabasis, London 2001).

Kali Durga Sati Parvati

Ken Smith introduces the Indian Great Goddess with her many names.

In 1969 Wyatt and Billy – in the film *Easy Rider* went looking for America and found it impossible to find her anywhere. The same, of course, is true of anywhere that the modern globe trotter may head for. I've certainly found it to be true of India. With a population of a billion, it's impossible to point and say: 'That is India'. But here are a few tastes.

Colonel William H. Sleeman (1809 - 1856 A.D.) served as the government tax collector at Jabalpur (in present day Madhya Pradesh). Among his diaries is a graphic account of a Sati ritual suicide. 'I received word that one Umed Singh Upadhyaya had passed away in the village of Gopalpur and his wife wanted to go Sati. So I travelled seven miles by horse to Beraghat and then walked three more miles to reach Gopalpur. The widow was sixty years old and wanted to die on the funeral pyre of her husband. By this time, the practice of Sati was banned by the British and she had to obtain permission to commit suicide, which so far had been denied. She had refused to consume even water and would not move from the place of cremation. She declared to me that her decision to immolate herself was final. She had discarded her jewellery and was holding a coconut in her hands. She was wearing red. She had gathered some flowers, rice in a basket as if to go somewhere. She then said to me: "My husband has reached the Sun God (Surya) now. I have died with him in my past three lives; it is impossible for us to be separate. He is right now waiting for me at the wedding altar in heaven." I noticed irregularity in her pulse and gave her permission. Upon this, her joy knew no bounds. She asked for betel juice and made her lips red. She dedicated flowers to the pyre and jumped into the fire apologizing: "I am sorry that these men have kept me away from you for three days." She turned into ash in no time.'

Add that to the debate about assisted suicide?

An enduring and erotic image of India comes from the sacred Temple town of Madurai in Tamil Nadu. It is the earthly home of Meenakshi (or Parvati), the Shakti (power) of Lord Shiva (known in Tamil Nadu as Sundaeswar) and dramatically a temple where you are left in no doubt about the superiority of the feminine. In all the awesome, age-old rituals she is always honoured before her spouse. Queues of hopeful women, wistful to be pregnant wait their

turn to adore and anoint the sacred lingam/yoni. Even Sundaeswar her spouse had a mother. Every chav has come from a womb and let none of us ever forget it. The queue's great hope of course is that pregnancy will follow.

Add that to the services offered by the NHS to women who long for a baby?

I've recently re-read Kevin Rushby's *Children of Kali*, a fascinating investigation of a bizarre episode of Indian social history – the murder of more than a million people with nothing more than a rumal – a handkerchief, but also sometimes a cover for dishes used in sacred or cultic activities. But also, too, and fearfully a weapon that the Kali-driven thuggee cult used to murder randomly and supposedly as a sacred offering to Kali. Don't idealise the mystic east, I was warned by Dinah when talking about India. Well, there can be few things less idealistic than thuggee murder, even though the reality was probably more to do with poverty and petty crime, than some glorified ritual sacrifice to provide blood to feed the unquenchable Earth Mother Kali.

She's called, among other things, Kali. She's the primeval energy that keeps everything going.

Add that to the debate about serial killers?

'But first the possessed person must be in a state of trance. She must be seized by Parashakti, and then she will feel nothing. For the goddess to do that she needs to be fed twelve basins full of blood.' Her names are as many as her devotees, though sometimes she is called simply Mahadevi – the Great Goddess – for the world was created when she opened her eyes, and it is destroyed whenever she blinks. Some call her Jagatikanda, the Root of the World. Others know her as Supreme Ruler, She who supports the Galaxy, She who is Ruler of All the Worlds, Mother of All. Her most sacred title is the Root of the Tree of the Universe.

Yet if Parashakti is Life itself, she is also Death.

She can destroy all she creates, and for this reason many of her devotees choose to worship her as Pancapretasana, She who is seated on a Throne of Five Corpses. She is also known by the names 'She who is Wrathful, She who has Flaming Tusks, She who Causes Madness, She whose Eyes Roll about from Drinking Wine, the Terrible One, The Night of Death'.

Though she is fierce, terrifying and destructive, the goddess is said to be quick to come to the aid of her devotees. In times of drought she appears in a form having many eyes. When she sees the condition of her creatures she begins to weep, and her woe has the force of a hundred monsoons. Soon the rivers begin to flow, the ponds and the lakes fill to overflowing, and verdure covers the earth. Through Parashakti the world is reborn.

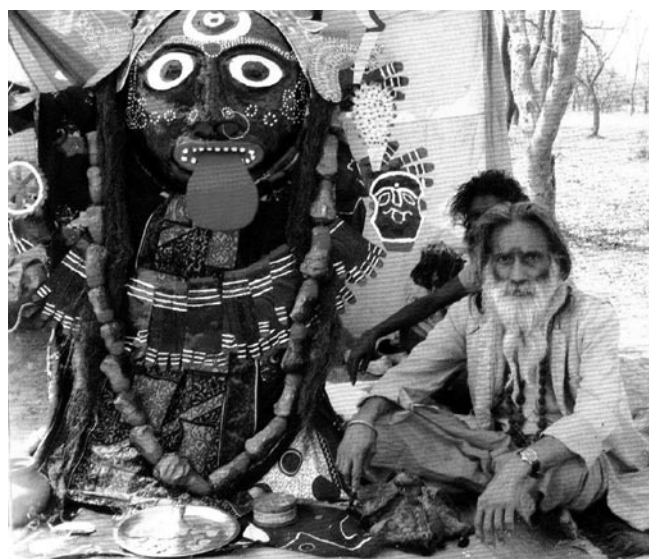
Add that to the debate about religious experience?

One of the most memorable visits I've ever made to a place of worship was in Old Delhi, worlds away from India's centres of government and western style shopping malls. The Kali Temple is nothing much to look at from the outside – nor from the inside either! But be in there when the crowds press in – something indefinable happens and you become part of it – devotee and observer alike. Even now after my first visit some 14 years ago, I can hear the noise, smell the smell, taste the smoke and the sweat, be reminded that my separateness as an individual is a myth.

Just down the road the modern Lotus Temple constructed by the international Bahai community has a clinical artificial feel to it. You feel you should be properly dressed, the collecting boxes shout their insistence that money is the most worthy offering you have to make. Further down the road, the gaudy Krishna Temple with its riveting pantheon of images, its orderly queues, its urgent clusters of shaven devotees, remind one of a hit West End popular show.

Here at home we are in the Christian season of Advent – a time that will resonate in different ways for, at one extreme those 'end-timers' who think we are living in the very last days and for, at the other, those who think that preparation for celebrating the birthday of one of the world's great moral teachers is no bad thing. Maybe for Sufis a more suitable Advent discipline might be, however briefly, to try and think outside the box of our own language, our own cultural or religious persuasion.

It's an Indian cliché that if you ask a Hindu holy man 'how many gods are there?' he will initially reply – 'millions'. If you persist he will eventually say – 'One'. And millions of Indians, from the most ignorant to the most profound will agree with both



Kali and Holy Man

answers. More than that, many of them will also persist in stressing that she is female. For them all, a sexless deity is almost inconceivable. What did, here in the west 'without body, parts or passions' ever really mean? And she's called, among other things, Kali. She's the primeval energy that keeps everything going. As Parashakti, she is that without which the testosterone driven male is nothing.

With all due respect to the Christian church's Virgin Mother, we have nothing resembling the fearsome and ferocious Hindu mother goddess Kali. She assumed the form of a powerful goddess and began to be popular from the 6th century AD. Images of her depict her as having been born from the brow of the earlier goddess Durga during one of her battles with the evil forces. As the legend goes, in the battle, Kali was so much involved in the killing spree that she got carried away and began destroying everything in sight. To stop her, Lord Shiva threw himself under her feet. Shocked at this sight, Kali stuck out her tongue in astonishment, and put an end to her homicidal rampage. Hence the common image of Kali shows her, standing with one foot on Shiva's chest, with her enormous tongue stuck out.

One of the reasons why some people feel uncomfortable about visiting India is that by western standards, it is such a messy place. Things are never tidied up, never truly disposed of, thrown away. Hygiene is problematic; jobs remain – sometimes for years, sometimes forever, unfinished, heaps of stuff everywhere, waiting to be recycled, to provide work and income for the destitute, or be eaten by sacred cows and vultures. To a certain extent this is the result of climate, or just human laziness. But philosophically the reason for it is rooted in a different understanding of both time and matter. No straight line here; endless circles where each moment encapsulates, absorbs, depends on, stems from all previous moments.

What goes around comes around. In a mythology where the gods traverse in a twinkling of eyes, myriads of universes on eagles and vehicles of every description, there is so much to exercise and occupy the imagination, distract the mind from the mundane. There's a memorable passage in *Ka* by Roberto Calasso – described by one critic as the very best book about Hindu mythology that anyone has ever written – where, almost incidentally he draws attention to a discarded piece of pottery and says: 'that's Prajapati' – the name of one of the precursors of the current Trinitarian orthodoxy of Brahma, Shiva and Vishnu – still there albeit in an abandoned and often unacknowledged way.

her woe has the force of a hundred monsoons

So here we are again, nearly Christmas. In our reckoning – the year is 2008. The terrestrial ball hangs in a human-made sky. Globalism is the buzz word as though it were something new. As I write these words the business world is in tumult, even torment as Mammon once again fails to deliver all that it appears to promise. In six weeks time, when I imagine you might be reading these words, I hazard a guess that – in a world in the grip of a crisis brought about by its inability / unwillingness to truly order its house (*oikonomia* – whence economics) – many of us will find it a source of considerable disappointment that monetary dialogue still largely consists of the rich talking to one another.

Whatever the politically correct scientific theory about our geological origins may be, the reality is that we've always been a globe and the surface of the planet has always been inter-connected and intra-causal. Seas and mountains, forests and deserts, ice fields and the sheer fear of the unknown and the different, to say nothing of the curse Semitic man thought God put on the earth as a punishment for those who built a tower to become gods themselves, has kept and still keeps human tribes apart from each other. But the piecemeal attempts to make cosmic sense have continued unabated, and both fools and the wise have done their bit.

In my recent visit to Africa I had the opportunity to look round an ultra-modern funeral business in Ghana's capital Accra. The firm's shop window had an extensive display of coffins. As I gazed in wonder at the satin-lined mahogany beds for the dead, wondering how, in such a poor country, the money might be raised for such luxury, my mind flashed

back to the holy city of Puri in the Indian state of Orissa where earlier this year, smoke from a burning corpse stung my nostrils as my auto rickshaw drove me along the sea front. A few hours previously the corpse would have been breathing. When combustion was (more or less?) complete, the dead person's ashes would have been lovingly collected, and maybe scattered in the sea. Equally possible is that the ashes would eventually be taken to the River Ganges with an elaborate ceremony as old as time, led by a priest learned in the Vedas and chanted in Sanskrit. Mother Ganga – she too is Kali, the irritating woman in Lord Shiva's hair, has claimed her own for the billion, billionth time.

Let's leave aside for a moment, the practical pros and cons – burial versus cremation – as ways of human rubbish disposal. We know that the future has to lie with burning rather than burial. Instead let's contemplate the more philosophic, symbolic differences. Those expensive caskets, those state-of-the-art deep-freeze cabinets (if you're really important it can take up to three years for preparations to be put in place for your funeral!) – while not quite cryogenic, are a symbol, a statement about a god-intended individuality, scripturally linked with the burial of Jesus and the hope of resurrection for all those dead in Christ. On the Indian sub-continent, by contrast, mostly within 24 hours, those cloth wrapped corpses with greater or less ritual from scriptures older than anything here in the west, offered, (preferably but not necessarily on the banks of the River Ganges), to Agni (Kali too) the deity who, for Hindus, burns at the heart of the atomic structure of the physical world. The illusion of separateness stripped away, the maya of permanence exposed in its rawness, its folly and its finality.

Maybe tomorrow (and this is far from certain, given the modern twist to the idea of globalism and our self-interest driven and as yet totally inadequate response to so called Green Issues) we may eventually see a public debate with Pagans and Hindus, both of whom have a much stronger and clearer understanding of the feminine, a far more honest appreciation of the earthiness of earth, and who, lacking a classical western metaphysic – the sort that makes Richard Dawkins and his ilk rub their hands with smug glee – have a much better chance of rescuing the cosmos from bankers and tribalists. In an age of reason and with the rise of science, the otherness of the western god has been his downfall and is why rightly the Atheists will have none of it.

Ken Smith is the Editor of *Portholes* and *Sofia* Letters Editor.

The Stain That Won't Wash Out: The Persistence Of Religion In Our Cultural Fabric

Penny Mawdsley gave this talk to the Chester Humanist Group on 21st July 2008.

For the first section of my talk – looking at the subject from a historical perspective – I'm indebted to the theologian, Don Cupitt's book, *Sea of Faith* (first published in 1984, following the broadcast of the TV series of that name).

Cupitt writes that:

When Matthew Arnold's poem *Dover Beach* was published in 1867 it expressed the sense, common at the time among the intelligentsia at least, that the ancient supernatural world of gods and spirits which had surrounded mankind since the first dawn of consciousness was at last inexorably slipping away. Twenty years before Nietzsche in Germany was announcing the death of God, and eight years after the publication of *The Origin of Species* here at home it was becoming apparent that the English social and religious order could no longer hold out against the encroachment of unbelief; the long rear-guard action was being lost.

Cupitt continues:

However, despite all the predictions of its inevitable demise in the West, Christianity has refused to lie down and die. Liberal Christianity may be arguably fighting for its life, but Fundamentalist versions of the faith, bolstered by huge cash donations from wealthy sponsors who have a vested political interest in seeing it spread, appear to be stronger than ever – especially in the Americas and in parts of Africa.

Now what exactly do we mean by 'religion'? As Cupitt points out: 'The root of the word, via the mediaeval French, is thought to come from the Latin *religare* – to bind (back). It seems, therefore, to have more to do with 'belonging' – to the extended family, the tribe and the demographic group sharing the same language and culture – than with 'believing'. There is mutual benefit to be derived for the individual from belonging to a group.'

Now to my own observations: Being a religious adherent is, needless-to-say, a far more complex matter than being born into a practising religious family, or deciding in adulthood to stay in the same religious group or to join one from choice. Firstly, there are those who exhibit what might be termed a 'religious' or loosely 'spiritual' outlook. They may eschew organised or institutional religion, and may or may not practise anything that might be construed as formal religious observance. Such people indeed are often temperamentally unsuited to any sort of collective religious practice. They may well be able to live a disciplined contemplative life, often in a regular worldly setting but foregoing the support of a regular religious community.

Then there are those who rate 'religious experience' particularly highly, by which they presumably mean a heightened emotional response to life. They all-importantly interpret this experience for themselves as that of being in a close relationship with what they describe as 'the Divine', or as feeling a strong sense of oneness with the universe. Such an interpretation of course is determined by the fine balance of cultural tradition, language and religious understanding that the individual has acquired from the society and social group in which he or she has been nurtured and the breadth of education he or she has received.

To get to the bottom of why religion persists inevitably requires us to find out what makes a religious person tick. What does a religious person value? What does a religious person do that he or she regards as important, or is prepared to go along with as part of the price of belonging to a religious group? A religious person may or may not directly experience a strong sense of the sacredness or ultimate value of life and all that springs from it, in the area of relationships, guiding principles or sense of purpose. One suspects that many – perhaps most – religious adherents are prepared to accept the received wisdom of their tradition more or less uncritically and to go along with its customs, rites, rituals and other cultural codes and practices as an acceptable part of the deal. Temperamentally some of the more 'spiritual' adherents may find themselves moving into opposite camps: some to go unquestioningly further and deeper into traditional practices, others to sit lighter to the tradition and to follow a more individual and less conventional path.

On approaching adulthood, those brought up in a faith reach a watershed. They will find themselves continuing to value it, choosing to reject it outright, or losing interest in it altogether. Those who continue in the tradition are usually those for whom the whole package still makes sense, or for whom the package itself may no longer be meaningful but some aspect of the belonging experience – for example, the vibrant and supportive youth culture to be found there – continues to be important. Strong social and emotional relationships formed with particular clergypersons, church officials or fellow lay-members can sustain a person in a religious community long after intellectual and aesthetic nourishment from the place of worship has ceased.

It should also be borne in mind that the upheaval of taking a stance and moving away, turning one's back on familiar habits and people, is often a step too far. The desire for such a move may be hard to articulate and frankly, for many people, older as well as young, I guess it is easier to stay in and not to rock the boat than to move on. Indeed,

All religions have the capacity to change and adapt, and most have done so many times.

there are many, particularly in older age groups, for whom sitting attentively in a pleasant church building, old or new, and enjoying the aesthetic delights of the surroundings and the familiar liturgy, listening to beautiful and good memory-inducing music and (more rarely these days) hearing the rich language of earlier centuries read aloud, is of exquisite value.

Such people have a high boredom threshold. They are not easily put off by listening to an endless repetition – over a life-time for many people – of a limited number of ‘approved’ Bible passages, of dull sermons devoid of intellectual challenge or stimulation, by banal hymn words espousing questionable theology, or by singing samples from a growing repertoire of ‘happy-clappy’ tunes. Moreover, they are prepared to put up with being told repeatedly how sinful, unworthy and inadequate they are, and, by the same token, how dependent they are on the grace and mercy of a beneficent God-out-there for their well-being and that of those they love. They readily accept a regular invitation to make supplication and ask for intercession to this Remote Being, and to give Him thanks and praise. They buy into the assurance they are given that God loves and forgives them their shortcomings. To them, this is a package worth buying into.

We know from numerous surveys conducted over the last fifty years that regular church and chapel attendance now only involves about 4% of the population, and that more indigenous Britons spend Sunday shopping or attending football matches than filling pews. However, the surveys often pick up a guilty response from those who express a residual ‘belief in God’ – a lazy and vague notion of ‘something out there’, which one is tempted to interpret as pure superstition, and which, if pressed, the more thoughtful respondent believes accounts for there being Something rather than Nothing. Many non-church goers who might be labelled nominal Christians own to having ‘lost their faith’, and infer that it would be nice if they could find it again. One suspects that some of these people feel vaguely uneasy about pursuing worldly goals and living an excessively materialistic and libertarian lifestyle, and that the more conscientious among them recognise that somehow they have lost contact with any sort of moral compass.

Although we Humanists are happy to declare our contentment with a lifestyle based on living, responsibly and to the full, ‘the one life that we have’, when we attempt to promote this more widely in society we have limited success. We know that it is perfectly possible to live a moral life without some sort of supernatural underpinning or ultimate goal, but others are not convinced. Clearly it is much easier to follow commandments or scriptural injunctions unquestioningly, than to plot an ethical path for oneself, thinking things out and being sensitive enough to revise and

customise one’s response in the light of specific situations. This applies equally whether people live in the go-getting affluent West with its many distractions, or in conditions of hand-to-mouth existence in the developing world.

One reason that religions persist, I suggest, is because sufficient numbers of people simply aren’t persuaded or haven’t the energy to contemplate living outside them. In every generation there are enough people who have been brought up happily within families who practise religion, and for whom this religion has been fully integrated into their lifestyle by the time they reach adulthood. It is usually the moral constraints of the traditional religions, especially in the area of sexual behaviour, that determine the break away. It is rare for young people only to rail against the intellectual anomalies and shortcomings of their religious background. It is the mature adult who is more likely to lose patience with some aspect of church dogma or fashionable religious practice, and to take more active measures to leave the religious fold.

I now turn to look rather more closely at what the Christian package has to offer to its customers. What does the serious adherent get for his money – or put another way, what does he or she value in the Christian tradition so highly that he would really miss it if he left it behind? I’m firstly going to postulate a number of basic aspects of Christianity (some of which are common not only to various Christian denominations, but also to other mainstream religions as well), which with a bit of imaginative effort could possibly find acceptable replacement within Humanism:

1. A sense of belonging and identity, sharing a common history.
2. A sense of awe and wonder (a deep appreciation of the evolving natural world could replace a primitive reverence for the supernatural).
3. A wealth of stories with an inspiring and relevant moral component; inherited wisdom.
4. A moral compass (one can learn to be convinced that no supernatural underpinning or Authority is necessary).
5. Aesthetic stimulation from religious buildings, artefacts, music, liturgical language or drama, religious art and literature (one can continue to enjoy all these things outside the fold).
6. A long established framework for key rites of passage (Humanist celebrants and BHA members can work together to create truly meaningful ceremonies without the dubious theological underpinning).



Humanist Logo designed by SoF member, the late Margaret Chisman

7. An outlet for charitable and philanthropic engagement (there are plenty of outlets for charitable and philanthropic engagement as a Humanist).
8. Guidance from experienced leaders and a wealth of literature (Humanists are not short of either).
9. Jesus as teacher of wisdom who challenged pomp, cant and religiosity (so far as we know, we Humanists can accept Jesus as an authentic wise Rabbi, albeit limited by his own cultural worldview).
10. Comfort and support from fellow members in times of illness and bereavement.
11. A promise of Life after death (an extended traditional interpretation of 'Eternal Life').
12. The Communion of Saints. For Catholic and Orthodox believers 'those who have gone before' can be called upon to intercede for them.
13. The Last Judgment. Justice will ultimately be done. The good/God-fearing will be rewarded and the wicked will be punished. A comfort to decent people to whom bad things have happened.

Next, I will attempt to compile a list of other aspects and dogmas connected with the Christian faith, for which it may be more of a challenge to find Humanist substitutions, and which, if push comes to shove, are likely to cause the religious devotee to think more carefully about renouncing:

1. A (received) overarching single meaning to Life (to praise the Creator). It purports to answer the Big Questions we all have about existence and to provide a range of coping mechanisms for life
2. A (guided) sense of purpose and ultimate goal for the individual's life.
3. Jesus as a named individual to follow.
4. Belief in Jesus as a divine Second Person of the Trinity who has won final victory over death and sin and can intercede actively on their behalf.
5. A sense of having received the gift of unconditional love and acceptance (Grace – a 'free gift' to the believer for whom redemption has been bought by Jesus dying for humanity's sins).
6. Forgiveness and absolution. The facility of confession. Many people feel that they can't 'move on' until they are satisfied that they have been forgiven by a Higher Power.
7. The Mass/Eucharist/Communion Service. For many this is a very real blessing. They have learned to value highly the repetition of the liturgy of this service (the words, symbolic actions and drama are powerful even if there is no belief in the 'Real Presence') and they genuinely feel emotionally ('spiritually') nourished by it.
8. Spiritual discipline generally: Sabbath and Holy Day Observance. Daily Bible reading Programmes, etc. – These appeal to the ascetic and puritan streak in many people.
9. Spiritual comfort from scriptures and clergypersons in times of distress and bereavement.
10. Someone to address thanks to for the good things we have received in life.
11. Hope that 'all shall be well; all manner of things shall be well' (Julian of Norwich).
12. An appreciation of one's talents by the Church community – be the gifts very simple and those who display them ever so humble!

As I draw to the end of this overview, I find myself concluding that:

1. Whether we like it or not, religions are likely to persist into the foreseeable future;
2. They all have the capacity within them to change and adapt, and most have done so many times already in response to the economic, cultural and political changes round about them;
3. They have the potential to be a force for good, to inspire and motivate;
4. 'Religious' wars are rarely what they purport to be; religion has been a thin veneer for Greed, for ambitious men to win glory, and an excuse for aggression which has distracted people from economic difficulties on the home front;
5. Religions are bad when they disseminate poetic truths as literal, historical and unassailable and immutable scientific truths;
6. Religions are bad when they fail to support human rights and suppress dissidents;
7. Religions are bad when their adherents are able to claim power and privilege over others;
8. The rational, stoical life-stance that we have so far managed to project to the world seems, for many people and for a number of different reasons, unacceptable and unattractive;
9. We should encourage the religions of the world to use their wealth of stories to re-enchant our increasingly hard bitten materialist cultures; and finally
10. We should not throw the baby out with the bathwater...

I'd just like to add a brief postscript concerning the Sea of Faith Network (UK), of which I am a past Chair and of which I have been a member since its first conference in 1988. It is a place of sanctuary for people who are interested in exploring religion as a thoroughly human creation. I would be happy to answer any questions about it, and would like to take this opportunity to recommend that you visit its website (www.sofn.org.uk) where you will find a lot of stimulating material. Please accept a back issue of one of our recent magazines and a leaflet about us as a souvenir of my talk.

Penny Mawdsley is a retired teacher and a former Chair of SoF Trustees. Nurtured in the SoF fold from the first conference onwards she has now also joined the BHA.

Refurbishment

Out of town to view some painterly seascapes:
the building's closed. We trudge back hot
for art: the galleries are bare. White space
has blanked out carpets, silver, jewels.
Nothing for it but next door: the disappointing
living dead, the dusty glass, the ponderous lofting
of a dinosaur.

Then in the gloom of ending day
a sudden bolt of blue. We peer, heads close
and see the whole of this lost afternoon
restored to glory in a tiny triptych.
Lapis, gold-festooned. Italianate,
sun-dowered, but displayed beside the battered
wood of an abused Madonna – English, circa 1300.

So it's ours. Each quiet country church
so plain and unassuming, spare and light
showed once like this. Such gilded glories
illuminated village lives, till a king's whim
eclipsed the sun. Bruised saints, white-plastered
walls are our inheritance: a cleansing force.

With brilliant capability of being
hidden in a pocket, held in the protecting curve
of a handspan, this small splendour has survived
the smash and grab of centuries. We have not.
Our sensibilities have been limewashed away
until a taste for purity, clean lines, clear spaces
pared down vision, has replaced
as though god given
the ecstasy of colour and the dream of faith.

Joy Howard

Joy Howard lives in West Yorkshire. Her poems have been published in several anthologies, and in a recent pamphlet, *Second Bite* (2007). She is the co-founder and current editor of Grey Hen Press www.greyhenpress.com

Saving the Planet

Denis Gildea makes some suggestions for long-term economic policy.

Objectives

There are three main objectives of national and international economic policy for the next half century: slowing down global warming; sustainability; and social justice.

Global Warming

There needs to be a drastic reduction in the world output of greenhouse gases, especially in the first ten years. There is a point at which the process will run away under its own steam, and the human contribution to its reduction will become useless. Though scientists are not yet agreed on when this point is, we must not stake the future of the world on the hope of a favourable answer. Current ideas of changing our light bulbs, setting up a new profitable commodity market in carbon coupons issued by governments, congestion charges for driving our cars, and choosing shorter flights for our holidays are grossly inadequate. We cannot continue to use economic growth as the criterion for a successful economic policy and must reduce our standard of living. To fight an election on a programme of negative economic growth is 'politically unrealistic'. The politicians are scared.

Sustainability

also requires a reduction in consumption. The main point of current political concern (the only one in America!) is the diminishing of oil reserves.

Social Justice

apart from its own merits is essential at national level because of the need for 'fair shares' if our standard of living is to be reduced; but more important because the Third World needs to be brought into the climate change policy. We cannot expect truly developing countries to stop developing. We must give them technical assistance to reduce the rate of increase of their emissions. The rich world will have to contribute much more to the reduction of emissions to compensate. If we feel this is all too difficult, then we are effectively killing our grandchildren.

Current Morality

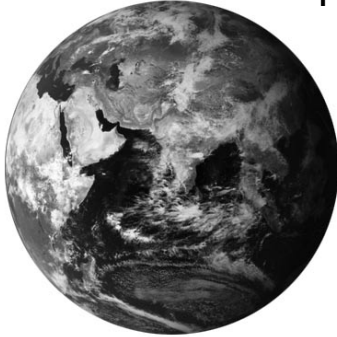
in the sense of the principles which actually guide our prejudices and actions, is:

- To maximise profitability;
- To maximise our income;
- To maximise our consumption;
- To compete for status;
- To maximise economic growth.

It is not very original to point out that this does not make us all happy. A typical example is compulsory workaholism. Many successful white-collar workers are overpaid and overworked, and do not have enough time

to for their families or to enjoy their wealth. The idea that good management involves proper staffing seems to have disappeared since around 1980. Many would prefer a 40 hour week to 50 hours for 4/5 of their current pay. The cost in broken homes and difficult children and depression is not the concern of management.

Happiness



Richard Layard's book *Happiness – Lessons from a New Science*, published in 2005 and now available in paperback, shows us that happiness can now be measured and research can show what increases or decreases happiness. We need to get everybody reading and talking about how we can all be happier. We should get polling

organisations to keep making surveys of what increases happiness or misery. Politicians do not lead public opinion now. They try to offer what people want, mainly by looking at the media, who write what they think will increase their circulation. Eventually one political party will have the courage to campaign on a slogan like 'Towards a happier world.' Perhaps it is not wholly unrealistic to hope that this might happen within ten years.

So what we need is a sea change in the moral climate, or the current ethos, without relying on religious assumptions or moral preaching. Sceptics might consider two examples of such a change in recent times. The first is the fact that the affluent middle classes accepted a huge reduction in their standard of living in the 1940's. They lost their maids, their fashionable clothing and their interesting and tasty food. We all had the same rations, and were healthier for it. The poor were better nourished than before the war, and the rich were not worrying too much about obesity. This was accepted because of the unanimous opinion that we must win the war. The revolution towards social justice started in 1940 rather than 1945.

The second started around 1980, reversing the first. Milton Friedman's monetarism; the Reagan-Thatcher faith in free market forces as the panacea. This change of ethos converted even the Labour Party to the everlasting pursuit of growing wealth, and objections to gross inequality faded. This is where we are.

So where do we start? The progressive single-issue pressure groups are already working together. The next move is to the press and media; perhaps first the Guardian and the Independent, and if the Daily Mail gives a lot of publicity to ridiculing all this nonsense, the controversy over the next few years might become interesting. So I hope the introduction of the Science of Happiness might make the link between the ideal of saving the world and the defeatism about achieving it.

Denis Gildea wrote this paper in response to the 2007 SoF Annual Conference and thinks it is even more relevant now.

Thirst

Der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland

– Paul Celan *Todesfuge*

They hold the land in the dust of our houses.
As dusk falls they bring out ancestral maps
and command that we follow their lines on the land.
They command that we wait at their checkpoints,
they heft our worth in the steel at their belts,
they trap thirst in the iron of their gates.

A man farms the land you once owned, Khadija,
he waters your mulberry tree from clear pools.
He herds us in rubble, makes dust of the wells.
Remember the clear pools, Ibrahim.
Thirst is a settler in Palestine, he takes and he takes,
he stands at his checkpoints with iron,
he commands that we wait in the hot sun.

A man studies old maps in the strength of his house
he sets lines on the land, he builds walls around water
he covers our crops with ashes. Your mulberry tree, Khadija.
He pipes the rain to his houses, thirst is a settler in Palestine,
he daydreams of Zion, he strips us at checkpoints,
he commands that we wait, he commands, he commands
that we walk for our water. Your clear pools, Ibrahim.

We dig graves in the dust of our houses
thirst is a settler in Palestine he shatters our wells
he shuts gates at checkpoints he takes and he takes
he lives in a strong house with his tanks as dusk falls
he makes us wait as he daydreams in iron
he herds us in rubble
thirst is a settler in Palestine

your mulberry tree Khadija
your clear pools Ibrahim.

Barbara Cumbers

Barbara Cumbers lives in London where she works as a librarian and geologist. She has had poems in various magazines, including *Rialto*, *Smith's Knoll*, *Acumen* and *Poetry London*.

Paul Celan's Holocaust poem *Todesfuge* can be read in a superb translation by Michael Hamburger: *Death Fugue* in *Poems of Paul Celan*, 3rd edition, Anvil Press, London 2007. Barbara Cumbers' poem *Thirst* has a similar rhythm.



Please send your letters to:

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Darwin's Deity

I write with reference to Dominic Kirkham's review of *Science vs. Religion* by Steve Fuller (Sofia 88). Those who wish to propose Darwinism as an alternative to religion may find themselves using selective evidence. *The Origin of Species* is a rigorously scientific book; yet it also uses religious language, and in doing so assumes the acceptance of some religious beliefs. Let me take some examples from perhaps the core piece of Darwin's argument, the meticulously reasoned passage dealing with the development of the eye. (*Origin* Ch. VI: 'Difficulties of the Theory'. Sub-section: 'Organs of Extreme Perfection and Complication'). Darwin is comparing the historic refinement of the telescope by astronomers with the natural evolution of the eye. 'But may not this inference be presumptuous? Have we any right to assume that the Creator works by intellectual powers like those of man?'

Just as man made the telescope, in other words, a being ('the Creator') whose existence he assumes, rather than reasons, is responsible for the work of evolution which gave rise to the eye. But we have not the right to assume from this analogy (he says) that this Creator is restricted to using our powers of reasoning. On the contrary, we have to recognise that the Creator has millions of years at His disposal, since that is how the process of evolution works. '...may we not believe that a living optical instrument might thus be formed as superior to ones of glass, as the works of the Creator are to those of man?'

Note that it is assumed, not argued, that the works of the Creator are, in general, superior to those of man. What is actually being argued here is that the result of millions of years of refinement are better than can ever be achieved by human intellect and skill, in other words by science. One thing at least is clear, and that is that the results of evolution are included by Darwin in 'the works of the Creator'.

In Darwin's terms it is the Creator who deals in evolution. If he had believed that there was no Creator, why would he have used that term? This is the evidence of the text, and to say that Darwin is using poetic language, implying that he did not mean what he was saying, would, if one were being non-selective, cast doubt on much that is said in *The Origin of Species*. There is on the face of it every reason to suppose that Darwin was being as literal and sincere when he talks about the Creator as he was in the book as a whole. It is widely

recognised in fact (though perhaps not by the more extreme modern Darwinists) that he did not abandon Christianity. It is conventional to suppose that such apparent lapses of integrity are gestures to his wife Emma's sensibilities, or a deference to his own religious background. But this smacks of speciousness. Why, on the face of it, should it be supposed that Darwin was saying anything other than what he believed? Is he normally thought to be in the habit of doing so, within this overwhelmingly scientific and explicit work? And if not, why pick these bits as being exceptional? The awkward conclusion is that without some such strenuous exegesis it cannot be argued that Darwin proposes an antithesis between religion and evolution.

Michael Senior
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Baby and bathwater?

Dear Editor,

I would like to say a big 'thank you' to Nicholas Smith for his letter in *Sofia* No. 89. I am now nearly 92, very deaf, I cannot walk far and am no longer allowed to drive, I do not now attend conferences but did so for many years and greatly enjoy reading all the literature that membership entitles me to.

I am reasonably intelligent but cannot find the words to get through to my children, grand-children and great grand-children of the difference between being human and being an animal. They do not need to hunt and gather their food. They do not have to worry about shelter or keeping warm and communication is easy. All they think about is how to get enough money to buy fashionable clothes, to pass on their genes and buy ready-made meals.

Without being too pious, what have we to offer that they will listen to? Previous generations made many sacrifices to become human and I don't want future generations to be less than human even if it means giving up instinctive abilities and reactions. There is still much that we do not know or understand but G.O.D. is no longer the accepted answer and dear old Darwin does not go far enough. The water has become very cloudy but how do we save the baby?

Yours sincerely
 Mrs Margaret Jeremiah
 Ithaca, Boat Dyke Road, Upton, Norfolk NR13 6BL

Current Affair

Comment by Owl

'I'm going to tell *Sofia* readers a Christmas story,' says Owl to an Other. 'Leave a warm glow, like Dickens or O. Henry.'

'O Who?'

'You know - *The Gifts of the Magi*.'

'And your story, is it true?'

'Yes, this lady I know, she wouldn't make things up. She lives in one of these towns, you see, with cobbles and a Historic Centre and expensive little Disneyworld signs. Except that the tourists swarm over the cobbles reading their foreign maps and peering at tourist tat, so the locals get irritated and don't go into town much. A few attend church - the churches are historic as well. On the odd Sunday when she thought she should make an appearance, the lady kept noticing this *Big Issue* seller standing at a corner.'

'Doesn't she like going then, to church?'

'She likes the people, and the music. And she knows they raise lots of money for good causes, like Darfur. But back to the *Big Issue* seller. She can't pass him on the other side every time, because the historic street is pretty deserted early on Sunday mornings, so eventually she asks his name. He's called John, he's 30 and he sleeps rough or occasionally gets to doss on a mate's floor. He looks very thin, is usually cold and often wet through, but he always has a pleasant word. One week she brings him a warm coat from a charity shop, another time a hot dog and tea from the market. She asks about housing prospects. They aren't good. He's on the 'list' but he isn't an alcoholic or a junkie. He doesn't have children. He isn't sick or disabled - yet. Worst of all, he can't tick the main box, because he doesn't count as local, though he's been selling the *Big Issue* there for two years.'

'Can't the church people help him?'

'Now that you mention it, there are several Town Council members in the congregation. At Harvest Festival they process in their robes and chains. Even the councillor in charge of Housing is on the Electoral Roll. But there are rules, and John doesn't qualify.'

'How does he survive?'

'Heaven knows. There's a day centre where he's supposed to have a social worker, but what's the use of that if he can't get a roof over his head? Without a proper address he can't get state benefits. If he were a layabout who qualified, he'd get all of that. But John's no layabout - he's out with his *Big Issues* in all weathers. The 80p he earns from each magazine will only just buy him a cup of tea on the market.'

'So, what's the Christmas story?'

'One Sunday the lady has a longer chat with him, not prying but enough to confirm her hunch that literacy is one of his problems. Next day she goes to the supermarket. She buys, sale price, the following, brand new: one fleece, one showerproof jacket, one sweater, two coloured T-shirts, pack of three white T-shirts, two pairs of boxers. All of that costs her the same as one normal bag of family food. What sweatshop did this lot come from? she worries momentarily - but John's need is immediate. When she hands the stuff over, he's full of thanks. She says firmly she's not a social worker but her taxes pay these people's wages. She wants them to sort John out now, before another winter kicks in. He promises to keep trying.'

'She doesn't have a spare room?'

'Not even a stable bare, or a garden shed. And then there's her family. Not to mention the principle of the thing.'

People shouldn't be sleeping on streets.

Anyway it so happens that last Sunday she passes again and asks, "Were the clothes all right?"

"Oh Babes," says John (he calls her Babes - at her somewhat mature age she's not going to object!), "they were wonderful. They must have cost you a fortune."

She assures him they didn't (relatively speaking). He's still smiling.

"And Babes, I've got a room lined up. It's lovely and I've just got to earn 20 quid from the magazines today to get in there."

She finds a banknote, fresh from the hole in the wall.

"I can't take that," he says.

She tells him he can and he must, and she'll buy a *Big Issue* as well.

"Babes," he says, "I could just hug you."

"Well," she replies, "you'd better do it, hadn't you?"

No other church-goers were actually in the cobbled street at the time, so the rather unusual hug didn't have to be explained.

'And is that the end?' asks the Other.

But Owl can't answer that, for who truly knows?

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



Dominic Kirkham reviews

Above Us Only Sky

by Don Cupitt

Polebridge Press, Santa Rosa USA, 2008) Pbk. 134 pages.
£13.25. ISBN: 9781598150117

In a recent Diversity Survey at work I hesitated over which box to tick when it came to Religion. In the end, like 44% of my colleagues, I ticked the 'None' box. I was not particularly happy with this and, as with my colleagues, it does not imply a brazen atheism or hard faced materialism. Far from it. Rather it reflects the emergence of what Don Cupitt (henceforth DC) calls, in his latest book, a new kind of religious consciousness that has been quietly 'easing itself in around the world' over recent decades as, 'the religion of ordinary life': a secular, this-worldly, and radically-democratic affirmation of ordinary life.

The appearance of this new way of religious thinking is a theme that DC has been exploring over the last decade in a number of books. In this latest work he seeks to present 'a systematic theology' of ordinary life. Not that he is trying to persuade anyone of anything. On the contrary, his style is exploratory – 'trying to show you what you already think, or are coming to think' – which is fine with me, because, like so many citizens of the modern world, I am not fully sure anymore exactly what I am coming to think – though I am rather more sure about what I don't believe!

In taking stock of where we are in this process – whereby an 'ethic of human-fellow-feeling' replaces the old ethic of Divine Law – DC begins by postulating 26 'slogans' (with brief explanations) which encapsulate the new dispensation. Here key elements from previous works are recognisable: the contingency of Life, Solar Living and non-realism. There is much to reflect upon here that is well put and pithy, as in, 'Life is now God to us'; I particularly liked, 'The work of justice is to clear a space for love', but would query – having experience of the largely hidden anxieties and frustrations of aging people – that, 'There is no point at all in making any preparations for death.'

Having concisely delivered this teaching the following 27 chapters – each of essay length and autonomous – are 'Backing and Backup', covering everything philosophical, religious and cultural that has been happening over the last few thousand years! As always, DC is concise and stimulating, even on old topics. I liked his 'ironic' presentation of Plato as the man who gave us both, 'the metaphysics that nourished and fattened up Christianity and the dialectical or questioning style of thinking that was eventually to break Christianity down.'

The ultimate purpose of all this is to persuade readers to 'throw out the junk' that clutters our minds from the past in order to start thinking clearly – a modern sort of Purgative Way. The genesis and role of critical thinking is a crucial element in how DC understands the uniqueness of the Western, and now post-Christian, bequest to the global culture of modernity. For DC there were two seminal 'arenas' which account for this: the law courts of classical antiquity – 'one of the great nurseries of reason' – and the confessional, 'the religious believer's scrupulous self-examination before God.' However, I am with A.N.Whitehead on this in ascribing a third and more pivotal role to the Medieval



reviews

practice of scholastic disputation, and in particular the teaching of William of Occam. It was Nominalism which first rent the hitherto seamless web of belief and reality, which led to a desperate search for certainty down two very different routes: one by way of the religious fundamentalism of Protestantism's *sola scriptura* and the other by way of empirical investigation of the *scienza nuova*.

The aftershocks of this seismic epistemic split are still reverberating around the world. On a personal level DC tells us (p.91) that, 'the day this book is published, I shall finally and sadly terminate my own lifelong connection with organised religion.'

It was whilst reading DC that I came across a report of the recent Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference in which the chairman lamented how, 'The retreat of God from education has left a spiritual vacuum and the breakdown of any shared value system.' One may wonder at the coherence of such a sentiment, still more at his belief that independent schools were uniquely placed, 'to fight such a malaise.' An address like this makes one realise both just how paralytic much religious thinking is and also how hard it is to let go of the spectral past. It is precisely in the ability to look beyond old fixations to the possibility of new, non-religious value systems in a positive way that DC excels. As he writes, 'Christianity is now our Old Testament', valuable though outdated and superseded by something far better, a religious humanism in which God has truly become man.

Just one small cavil! I wish Polebridge Press would get out of the habit of using unexplained Chinese ideograms as copy designs. The one in this volume, so a Chinese colleague tells me, means 'Nothing'. Personally, I was disappointed with the opaque title and would have much preferred something that reflected more accurately the content of the book: such as *The New Religion of Ordinary Life*.

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

This book is available from amazon.co.uk for £13.25.

Fairly Faithful

Edwin Salter reviews

Report of the Sea of Faith Commission on Faith Schools



reviews

This document presents three recommendations each prefaced by numbered comments which lead towards it. In roughly 4000 words it offers a clear rationale for reform. The air of reasonableness with which it proceeds flies rather magically over difficulties of prejudice and power; and the supports of empirical evidence and rigorous argument are implied rather than stated. Its title – *Faith in the Classroom* – is perhaps a trifle queasy (like this one, but not as slimy as the recent *Faith in the System* wherein all is well, thanks be to the gods).

The recommendations are in brief: 1) that state funded schools should not be able to select their pupils; 2) that compulsory religious worship be abolished; 3) that Religious Education should become a National Curriculum subject.

It seems easiest to begin with the narrowest and most feasible of these, the last.

This reviewer certainly applauds the aspiration that RE may become 'owned and valued by all: those who belong to a religion and those who do not'. But why is RE currently directed by local bodies (SACREs)? This surely implies a content which is partial in all senses, a sop to local tastes (the prejudices of pluralism). My own Norfolk SACRE deserves a G & S treatment for it consists of officers, cooptions and four principal subcommittees whose 25 members almost all represent religious bodies (the C of E dominates, bizarrely Baha'i and Rome have equally one dedicated place); there are none irreligious and it has always astonished me that some humanists want to join (and so lend credibility to) this nonsense. My local secondary school enters all pupils for an RE GCSE without any consultation – conveniently no extra work is required and no knowledge beyond Christianity.

Disposal of this rickety rackets apparatus is one nettle to be grasped. The other is the question of withdrawal which presumably would not be available for a National Curriculum subject. And quite right too, I think, but it is not argued here. Compulsory Worship was enshrined in the Education Act of 1944 and reflected the conventions of the times and the powerful position of the churches in schooling and parliament. As the Report states, a majority of secondary schools are no longer compliant, but it sensibly resists the expedient of 'every faith its prayer room' and emphasises the value of inclusive assemblies broadly moral and spiritual in character. This is roughly what goes on now and, especially if such assemblies had a brief silence for reflection which enabled private prayer, the proposal would seem widely acceptable for non-faith schools. The interesting and difficult questions here are about faith schools and whether 'not compulsory but

optional' applies to school or pupils, where parents fit in, and how far the options extend. The right of sixth formers to withdraw as individuals from collective worship has recently been recognised but should younger pupils remain subject to unfettered preaching?

The very broadly worded first recommendation is prudently taken as concerned only with selection by faith, but even so it is all a bit rum. Arguing that 'The Church would not wish to distinguish between Christians and non-Christians in deciding who should be fed and healed, nor would we expect it to in the case of education' strikes an implausible note given the history and purpose of the faiths. Imagining the headlines – 'Catholics (or whatever) Can't Go to Catholic School' (a proposal already rejected) – also makes me feel this is currently unattainable. But

government policy favouring new faith schools adds to the difficulties and divisions and should be reversed. There are very important root and branch arguments about what states should provide and permit by way of education. Just for starters suppose Eton had to take at least half in each of

the categories non-Christian, non-posh, non-clever and non-paying. In short, provision and who selects and on what open or covert basis, and who pays and who profits (control of our schools is appallingly dirt cheap) are chaotic. Utopian principles awaited.

My own opinions (with a roughly humanist perspective) happen to be very supportive of the spirit of these recommendations and they are well worth developing. Other thinking, including an *Accord Coalition* involving the British Humanist Association, has similar intent. The Sea of Faith can be pleased with its Commissioners (Stephen Mitchell with David Boulton and Allan Hayes, the last signing only the recommendations) for formulating concise proposals. Underlying issues are out of focus in this report but perhaps the chances are better for limited progress argued on narrower grounds. Undoubtedly there are dragons in the path, but this most reasonable 'Boo' will help their vanishing

In March 2008 Ed Balls, Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, denounced 'shocking evidence of social selection in faith schools nationwide': asking parents for hundreds of pounds, weeding out poor or difficult children, and refusing to give places to children in local-authority care.

Dr. Edwin Salter works as a psychotherapist. His too many previous careers include much teaching.

SoF Commission on Faith Schools is on the website www.sofn.org.uk or by post from Stephen Mitchell, All Saints Vicarage, The Street, Gazeley, Newmarket CB8 8RB. Please send A4 sae with 78p stamps.

Emily Johns reviews

118 Days

edited by Trisha Gates Brown

CreateSpace (2008). 242 pages. £12.99 ISBN: 978-1438202433

The Christian Peacemaker Teams do not wait for the barbarians – they go right into their midst and disturb their world with humanity. *118 Days* tells the story of a small international delegation to Iraq that was being hosted by the CPT in 2005. Norman Kember from London, Harmeet Sooden from New Zealand and Jim Loney from Canada were kidnapped during their visit to Baghdad, along with Tom Fox their American guide who was a Christian Peacemaker working in Iraq. For 118 days they were kept chained together. Two weeks before their release Tom Fox was separated from the group and subsequently murdered.

The book is a collection of writings by people touched by the kidnapping of these men. The editor, Tricia Gates Brown, has paced the contents so that you are drawn to read the same story again and again. One event in the life of four men has so many ramifications. The room with the cold floor and too few blankets becomes the calm centre of a huge explosion in many lives. The story reaches San Quentin jail where during CPT imprisonment three American prisoners debate the meaning of courage. The author of this piece, Watani Stiner, was a black activist convicted of conspiracy to murder Black Panthers. One of his jail friends has 'life' for trying to cash a \$250 stolen cheque, and the other is inside for murder. Watani's tracing of the intellectual journey in the prison yard is beautiful and rigorous. It starts with the news of the kidnap on the radio and the presumption by the listeners that the hostages are religious zealots. The debate then shifts to compare the hostages to Rachel Corrie and the lunacy of risking one's life for peacemaking. During the walks around the prison yard they ponder the question: 'Is there anything in this world that you would have the courage to sacrifice your life for?'

The news also reaches other communities touched by CPT. In the village of At-Tuwani, Christian Peacemakers have accompanied the subsistence farmers to their fields and pastures, protected their children on their way to school and provided witness to attacks by Israeli settlers. When the villagers hear of the kidnapping they begin organising a demonstration. This expression of solidarity spreads chapter by chapter through Palestine and the Muslim world. This insistence by a powerful range of voices – from the clerics of Baghdad to Abu Qatada in prison in Britain – that the CPT works for good in communities under attack, is broadcast to the



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hostage takers in Baghdad.

The consciousness in the Arab world of the actions of the CPT stands in unhappy contrast to the media experience in the West. Simon Barrow of the Ekklesia news service describes his struggle to counter the soap opera story of 'naïve fools, a warning to others', and of the ferocious media assault on Norman Kember on his release. This chapter provides a small insight into the fury that CPT provoked in the Establishment.

118 Days starts with the preface *Why We are Self-publishing*, which lays a deep seam of disquiet to the whole story. *118 Days* was taken on by two consecutive publishers and dropped because the CPT refused to remove paragraphs by Jim Loney's partner, Dan Hunt, about their courtship. Dealing with the reality of homophobia is an important part of this book because it was vital in keeping Jim Loney alive. As soon as Jim was kidnapped it was decided that any indication that Jim was gay had to be erased from the public record. Since 2003 the murder of gay men has soared in Iraq. Through Dan Hunt's words the book records the shattering experience of crawling back into the closet and being shut away from any public declaration of love or grief for his partner. After Jim's release, as his sexual orientation became public, four bishops in Canada, previously supportive of the hostages, banned Jim from being invited to speak in their dioceses. This book spans a world of religiously-inspired love and hate.

The North American skew of the material in this book could be balanced by reading Norman Kember's *Hostage in Iraq*, but this does not detract from the value of *118 Days*. It is a profound book that reflects the compassion, dignity and intelligence of people around the world in facing war and terror.

Emily Johns is an artist and the Editor of *Peace News*.

Alison McRobb reviews

Little Marvel and Other Stories

by Wendy Perriam

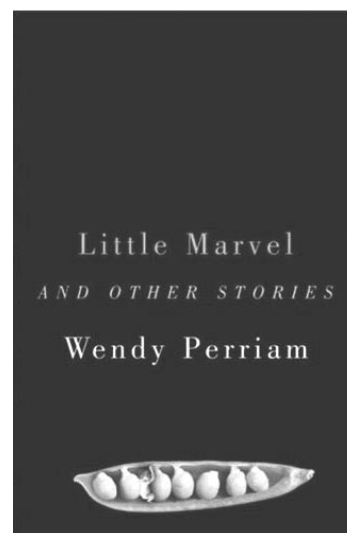
Robert Hale (London 2008) Hdbk.224 pages. £18.99.
ISBN:978-0709085973

'Unsung', 'underrated' – strangely these descriptions appear on the book-jacket of this collection, the judgement of reviewers who are actually praising the author to the skies for her witty-but-serious take on life. If these reviews – from the heavy newspapers (Fay Weldon: 'I am her greatest fan') and *The Tablet* to boot – are sincere, then Wendy Perriam is being both 'rated' and 'sung', and with good reason. 'She writes beautifully about relationships,' says the *Sunday Telegraph* correctly, 'and hilariously about sex' – though that aspect other readers might find heart-rending, hardly hilarious.

Bravely Perriam probes the slippery topics of love and fear, fixation and disgust. *Little Marvel*, we find out, is a variety of green pea. Green peas bizarrely become the heroine's phobia. We can smile, but also share the sorrows of poor Dolores, menaced by green thoughts in a green shade. The narrative shows deep understanding of the intractable nature of phobia. Understanding it, its origin, its dynamic, is perhaps not so hard. Conquering it might prove to be beyond one's powers.

All of these tales grapple with their protagonists' consciousness of a deep deficiency or an irreconcilable conflict in their life. This is thoughtful stuff, though the absurdity of which the characters themselves are disarmingly aware can certainly be funny. What is one to say to credit-controller Brian, pushing forty, who on a business trip to Sorrento has his eyes opened to real passion by the beautiful, willing Fiorella, half his age? Go back. You know you belong with your dowdy wife and uncouth teenage children. Why? Because they love you, that's why? And yet . . .

Unlike many authors, Perriam seems to be able to empathise equally with the dreams and disappointments of the young and callow, the well-meaning middle-aged and the nearly dotty elderly – and with both men and women. We can suffer the agonies of the young daughter of a broken marriage just as we can cringe with Grace at her unwanted Diamond Wedding celebrations. 'She and Charles remained at arm's length despite six long decades of so-called intimacy yet she had never, once, admitted her frustration, except silently, to the furniture.' A lot of life is frankly disappointing. You can learn the reasons, examine the causes, but you are still stuck with the



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results. Sustained positive thinking, the kind the self-helpers celebrate, is beyond most of us, realistically. But 'good enough'? Yes, we can settle for that. Even 'good enough' can involve a world-shaking change of heart or habits. Achieving it can be a personal triumph.

'Religion' and 'spiritual' turn up in the newspaper reviews as well, the writers seemingly failing to note that Perriam gives religion of any sort fairly short shrift, mainly because it fails to deliver the goods. In fact, in all of the stories, she herself only rates things, people and ideas that deliver the goods. This down-to-earth approach is so characteristic of her that the surprising, sometimes surreal, endings of the stories can leave the reader gasping, but never indifferent.

The technical quality of Perriam's work is justly praised. It would be hard to fault. As Fay Weldon says: 'Wendy's born to write.' Only very seldom, and fleetingly, does one detect 'crafting' or get that whiff of 'creative writing class' – when writers are trying too hard – which can be off-putting to the reader. As if aware of the danger, Perriam in the final story 'Peacocks' reveals a perceptive grasp, perhaps to some extent autobiographical, of the urge to write, and how easily it can be inhibited or stifled.

An impressive fifth collection of short stories, *Little Marvel* is, then, a rewarding read from a writer who knows how to mix irony, fury and humanity. Her people all find a brave way out of their predicament. We might not always approve of their choices – some may be too accepting for our taste, some too wild, some truly surreal. But they are honest choices, born of honest reflection.

Alison McRobb teaches theology and English Language and is a Principal Examiner in Hinduism for Cambridge International Examinations. She is a former Chair of SoF Trustees.

Cicely Herbert visits

Spitalfields

during London Open House Weekend

Years ago, when my local Adult Education Institute still existed, I enrolled on a short course entitled *The Meaning of Money*. It seems that no-one shared my curiosity in the subject and the course had to be cancelled owing to lack of interest. Thus, for me, the dealings of the City and its gold reserves remain a mystery. What has always been clear, however, is that a large proportion of the world's population has to live without any financial reserves, and, indeed without adequate food, or housing.

In 1976 the enlightened Greater London Council (the GLC) set up the *Spitalfields Project*, in order to make a study of deprivation in the area, and to discover the real needs of local people, with housing and health issues considered a priority. I must admit that, although I regard myself as a Londoner, I have long steered clear of the area and its surrounds, ever since, in 1954, as a somewhat naive student making an obligatory first visit to Petticoat Lane, I parted with precious money to purchase 5 pairs of silk stockings, none of which had feet on them!

However, I returned this September, when London hosted its annual *Open House Weekend*, during which time the curious citizen is able to look inside buildings of all kinds, that are normally inaccessible to the public. In glorious sunshine, I wandered through the streets of the vibrant neighbourhood, many of whose residents have come to London quite recently, fleeing poverty and oppression. Spitalfields has long been a first port of call for those seeking a new life in England and it has an ancient history. My copy of *Old And New London* informs me that the area was built on an ancient Roman site from which 'Urns containing hoards of coins, lamps and icons have been unearthed, along with Saxon coffins.'

In the seventeenth century some 50,000 Protestant Huguenots, driven from France by persecution and oppressive religious laws, fled to England, where many thousands settled in Spitalfields, which became the centre of a thriving silk weaving industry. One can still find streets of elegant terraced houses, with large attic rooms, where the weavers once worked. In the nineteenth century when more than 2 million Jewish people left eastern Europe, fleeing oppression, many found their way to the east end of London. In time, many of the churches became synagogues, and later Mosques, and since the last decade of the twentieth century the area has been a refuge for Somali people fleeing the atrocities of the civil war in their country.



Sundial on Brick Lane
Mosque says 'we are shadow'

Brick Lane Mosque has
been a church and a
synagogue.

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Researching the changing history of the area I read *Rodinsky's Room*, which is the story of a 'quest' to discover what had happened to one man, the inhabitant of an upper room above the Synagogue in 19, Princelet Street, Spitalfields. David Rodinsky seems to have walked out of his room one day, never to be seen again. In uncovering the mystery of the man's disappearance and learning his history, the authors provide an extraordinary and moving testimony to the importance of each person's life on Earth, acknowledging the existence of all lost and displaced victims of oppression and poverty. By the end of her search for David Rodinsky, Rachel Lichtenstein has discovered a great deal about herself and her roots, and she reads the Kaddish, a prayer for the deceased, for David Rodinsky at his burial place in Waltham Abbey cemetery on the borders of Essex. Iain Sinclair writes: '*Rodinsky's Room* was the module through which an important narrative of immigrant life, hardship, and scholarship, would be recovered.'

As a child of 8, sent to a boarding school after my mother succumbed to the ravages of TB, I believed I had been cast out of home, and that should I be forgotten, as seemed likely, then I would no longer exist. It took many years for me to recover from that, fortunately, unfounded fear. Yet, throughout human history, for so many people on earth, the fear has proved a terrible reality.

Cicely Herbert is one of the trio who founded and continue to run *Poems on the Underground*. She would like to thank her neighbour, Rhoda Brawne, for an interesting discussion and for introducing her to: *Rodinsky's Room* by Rachel Lichtenstein and Iain Sinclair (*Granta*). The Synagogue at 19, Princelet Street has become an education centre for children from local schools.

The Home Coming

*A memorial in the Chapel on Holy Island tells of Lieut. V.F.Stewart, son of the local Minister,
Durham Light Infantry and Royal Flying Corps, killed in France, May 13th 1917*

I flew here once, on leave
Bringing David, Captain Smith
Across to the island,
A short sortie, over a silver sea

Floating effortlessly here
With only gulls to share the peace
Through a sunny sky, white to the South
To the North, a powder blue.
Clouds, slow moving, dappled the land below

Behind us, on the mainland, we saw a train
Speeding South taking mail or men
Saw children waiting at the crossing
Faces lifted to watch us pass, arms waving

Arriving here, made young at heart
We shouted, pointed out boats
Bright clad visitors on St Cuthbert's Isle
Picking their way back before the tide

I turned the plane and, falling
We swept across the land
Just higher than the Heugh
Where we once met, you and I
And where my thoughts will ever be...
No sign yet of things to come

Over church and market cross
The Manor House
In its garden, some austere gathering
Again, faces turned to see us pass
Even here a hand was raised

Like boys we turned, this way and that
Eager to explore this living map
Tiny, laid out perfect all below

Along the beach
Upturned boats, older than time itself
Others, resting, waiting for the tide
We saw mud here, but gentle, gull speckled

Dispelling thoughts of other muds we knew

We followed trippers in their horse drawn cart,
Out towards the castle
A bleak black mass set in sheep-strewn fields
A little garden by its side
A sign of wars – but smaller, long ago
A sheepdog made its silent way amongst a flock
Chasing to silent orders from its master

And what did David make of this
Mainlander who never really knew
My off-shore youth

I remember all the details...
Those that he would never know
The creaking of the stile, the cries of waders
Rising, peaking then seeming to fail
Like some sad engine

Cries of new born lambs on Crooked Lonnen

The smell – we have no smell up here
Of gutted fish, of drying lobster pots
The feel of sand dunes beneath your feet
Of wet grasses, cooling sunburnt legs

Flying onwards, out to sea ...
Far out a small boat under sail
Cut through little waves, too far below to hear
But we could see its splashing progress
I sailed my father's boat here, once
From the harbour, out to sea
With only seals to share the peace

I have long since left the Isle
This Isle or any isle..
Cast down by a cruel blow
From a harsh mainland

But I still come back ...
 Though you cannot see me
 Seeking comfort...
 From a homeland I can no longer touch
 And to warn you in voices you can no longer hear
 Of Life and Love and War

I am with you when the rain drives in from the sea
 When mists hide the castle
 And in this brilliant sun.



John Pearson

John Pearson teaches Construction Studies at the University of Northumbria. He is Chair of SoFTrustees.

Woodcut

1. Advice

Without a vice, the perfect
 cut slips the saw's
 grasp, the drill equivocates.

Here's a scar ingrained –
 a rough track
 for the fallen
 angle.

2. Measure

Millimetres crawl
 on jointless legs away
 from any mark.
 They have no

nest. They feed on raw
 anxiety and slivers
 of dead time.

3. Glue

is a matter of hope.
 You sweat out the drying
 and feel nervously

for play. At school
 they taught us dove-
 tailing. Nothing
 stuck.

4. Filler

is redemption tubed.
 It lies for you

between
 intent and action,
 mind and (slipping) world.

5. Spirit Level

It all rests squarely
 on this:
 a trapped

bubble:
 a little zero
 dividing the equals.

6. Offcuts

Among the accidental
 objects shaved
 and stripped
 from shelving –

a blond ringlet of dust,
 curled from the bit,
 cutting implausible
 form.

Kevin Mills

Kevin Mills is Reader in English Literature and Religion at the University of Glamorgan. His first poetry collection – Fool – will appear from Cinnamon Press in 2009

Magnificat

My soul magnifies the
Lord,
and my spirit rejoices
in God my Saviour,
for he has regarded the
lowliness of his
servant,
and from now on all
generations will call
me blessed;
for he who is mighty
has done great things
for me
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those
who fear him
from generation
to generation.
He has shown strength
with his arm;
he has scattered the
proud in the
imagination of their
hearts,
he has put down the
mighty from their seats
and raised up the
lowly;
he has filled the hungry
with good things
and sent the rich empty
away.



Guadalupe Tonantzin