

*Where is Christ's Body?*

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*sfia*

is the magazine of the SOF 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.

# Where Is Christ's Body?

Charles Darwin was born on 12th February 1809 and, for our Spring 2009 issue, Dominic Kirkham has written a bicentennial reflection on *How Darwin Changed My Life*. Around the time of Darwin's birth, the poet Coleridge wrote in an essay for his friend the anti-slavery campaigner Thomas Clarkson: 'A male and female tiger is neither more nor less whether you suppose them only existing in their appropriate wilderness, or whether you suppose a thousand pairs. But man is truly altered by the co-existence of other men; his faculties cannot be developed in himself alone, and only himself. Therefore the human race, not by a bold metaphor, but in sublime reality, approach to and might become, one body whose head is Christ (the Logos).'

The question for this issue of *Sofia* is 'Where is Christ's body?' At the end of Matthew's Gospel Jesus promises: 'I am with you always, to the end of the world' (28:20). Paul begins to develop a theology of a 'cosmic Christ', for which 'the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now' (Rom 8:2). This cosmic Christ 'ascended on high, leading captivity captive' (Eph 5:2): 'He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.' And: 'In him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the Church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might have first place in everything; for in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell' (Col.1: 17). Paul tells the Corinthians: 'You are the body of Christ and each one of you is a part of it' (1Cor.12:27). As members of it, we must work to 'build up the body of Christ... to maturity, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ' (Eph 5:13). Paul speaks of 'filling up what is wanting... for the sake of Christ's body the Church' (Col. 1:24), and says of the eucharist: 'The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all share the one bread' (1 Cor. 10:16-17). This Christ is a healed, fulfilled humanity.

Ideas about evolution permeated the nineteenth century, evolution of all species and of the human. Darwin's great work *The Origin of Species* was published in 1859. Karl Marx wrote about the struggling evolution of a future fairer society, and John Henry Newman about the *Development of Christian Doctrine*.

At the beginning of the twentieth century (in Hastings between 1908 and 1912), the Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin, adopting Darwin's core insight, began producing a theology of evolution. In our first article the distinguished Teilhard scholar David Grummet gives an introduction to Teilhard's thought. Teilhard saw Christ 'as presenting himself to the world as its Omega point: its plan, fulfilment and final end': a realised humanity as the outcome of evolution, or as Coleridge put it

(following Paul and the Gospel of John), 'one body whose head is Christ (the Logos).'

As a Catholic priest Teilhard saw this whole process as directed by God, a pre-existent Christ *as* God. Nevertheless, the Vatican was alarmed – Darwin's theory of evolution does not *need* a supernatural director – and banned Teilhard's work for thirty years. Even without a supernatural director, Teilhard's vision remains inspiring for its tremendous sense of evolving matter as a body *finding speech*.

Teilhard spoke of the increasing complexity of human consciousness moving towards its Omega point as the 'noosphere'. It seems to be assumed that this Omega point will be Kingdom Come – the reign of justice and peace on Earth. A notorious headache for translators is that in French (and similarly in other Latin languages) '*la conscience*' means *both* 'consciousness' i.e. awareness as well as not being unconscious (asleep, drunk or knocked out) *and* 'conscience' i.e. 'moral sense'. Can we assume that increasing *consciousness* sharpens our *conscience/moral sense* and makes us kinder? Not necessarily. (Actually of course, this is not just a translator's headache, since the question applies equally to Coleridge and his 'Logos'. Incidentally, for years he planned a great philosophical work to be called *Logosophia*, but never actually got round to it.)

Our next article consists of five short extracts from Don Cupitt's recent book *The Meaning of the West*. Cupitt argues: 'Christianity by its own inner logic precipitates itself beyond itself. Christianity is the religion that for several centuries now has been passing over into radical religious humanism.' Through his incarnation: 'God takes the initiative, moving towards humanity, giving himself to humanity, becoming human and dying *into* humanity.' That makes Christianity 'the uniquely self-secularising religious tradition', which 'slowly brings about the formation of the new type of human being'. He notes that in the New Testament God has begun to withdraw and 'Jesus Christ is in the foreground'. God has become human in a Grand Narrative 'about the making of humanity; that is, about the emergence at last of fully emancipated and empowered human beings'.

That is where the body of Christ is to be found. Christ becomes an epic hero and namesake of a people, in this case, all humanity in its struggle for liberation and fulfilment. Cupitt makes a convincing case for that theological evolution. It is a brilliant vision. But we cannot say the climax of the story has been achieved or that we know it will be (if there is no supernatural guarantee). Let us hope this is not 'the end of history', as Fukuyama claimed in 1992, because if so humanity has not got very far.

Whereas Christian *ideals* brought down to Earth as humanitarian ethics are current in the West, it certainly is not true that the West always *embodies* them or puts them into practice. And these are not the only ideals that have been current in the West over the last century. To name but two others, we have seen Nazism and the 'Greed is Good – No Such Thing as Society' of Thatcherism. Yes, we can see signs of the 'Kingdom' here and there but it is still both 'now and not yet'. We certainly cannot say the West is Kingdom Come (for examples of ways in which it falls short, see *Mayday Notes* on page 27). In the Christian tradition salvation comes through the *incarnate* word – *Logos ensarkikos*. Ideals are not enough; they must be realised and *embodied*. To bring about the reign of justice and peace on Earth we must 'fill up what is wanting' (in ourselves as persons and in the species)... 'for the sake of Christ's body' – a whole humanity.

In our third article Francis McDonagh writes about the very public quarrel between two brothers, both theologians, Leonardo and Clodovis Boff of Brazil. Their fierce dispute is about where Christ is to be found today. Leonardo Boff supports Jon Sobrino, who insists that Christ is to be found *on Earth*, among the poor. Clodovis attacked his brother because he feared that position undermined the authority of the Church as the 'setting' in which to encounter Christ and salvation.

Clodovis' nervous alarm is understandable because, although Sobrino is a loyal Catholic, the thrust of his quest for Christ is *on Earth*, like other liberation theologians he has a humanist agenda. For him too it is Jesus who is most prominent in the New Testament. His Christianity also has a 'self-secularising' or 'worldly' – incarnational – tendency and the Vatican has once again come down hard, fearing its authority flouted, or what could be called its franchise ('keys to the Kingdom') at risk. Like his fellow Jesuit Teilhard, Sobrino was censured by the Holy Office, in 2006, and it banned Leonardo Boff from making public statements in 1984. One might almost gather that the accolade for a bright idea, discovery or profound insight is to be condemned by the Holy Office. The human mind *moves*. Yes, great (and also condemned) Galileo, *eppur si muove*: it *does* move.

If the body of Christ is to be sought on Earth, if it is an epic of 'the making of humanity; that is, about the emergence at last of fully emancipated and empowered human beings', then in a globalised, interdependent world, we can't say it has reached its 'maturity', that the Kingdom has come, until it is really present globally. A comfortable life for some at the expense of the majority is not good enough. We can rejoice in the signs of the Kingdom here and there, but there is still work to be done until the human species as one body reaches 'the fullness of Christ'.

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# From the French Coast to the Cliffs of England

World as Sacrament in the Early Life and Theology of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

David Grumett writes about Teilhard de Chardin's theology of evolution.

In France in the opening years of the twentieth century, religious life entered dark times. The government of the Third Republic, not content with the existing separation of church and state and post-Revolutionary secular constitution, banned all Christian education in the country. This prohibition hit the Jesuits and other religious communities particularly hard, because to gain new members they depended on a lengthy programme of formation delivered by their own clergy.

Teilhard and other leading Jesuits of his generation therefore crossed the English Channel to complete their education. Several centres were opened on the south coast of England, the largest being in Hastings, where Teilhard studied from 1908 to 1912. This period was important not only in providing a comparatively tranquil setting for spiritual contemplation, but for the vistas it opened onto what would become his other great passion: paleontology. In scientific terms this was the genetics of its age, with the recovery of the fossil record of biological history enabling human origins and connectedness with the rest of the created order to be understood as never before.

Teilhard had developed a fascination with matter much earlier during his childhood in the Auvergne amidst its spectacular extinct volcanoes. Looking back, however, he regarded this near obsession with hard, solid matter as misguided. While excavating the Sussex cliffs, he began to see the wider importance of matter not as the ultimate constituent of human life but as pointing to a deeper spiritual reality: the evolution of life and the emergence of human life as processes directed by God.

Teilhard also encountered matter spiritually in the Church's sacraments. During his time in Hastings, the eucharist became increasingly central to his spirituality: he was ordained priest, wrote a dissertation on the eucharist and received the sacrament every day. At the altar, he consumed Christ's body and blood. Yet he would soon see the bread and wine of the eucharist as continuous with the rest of created matter. In the Mass, the portion of bread and chalice of wine offered and consecrated represented for him the whole of matter continually formed and transformed by human activity.



Teilhard de Chardin in England in 1911.

Moreover, he regarded this everyday transformative activity as priestly because, just like eucharistic consecration, it involved human co-operation in God's creative action. In his spiritual classic *The Divine Milieu*, Teilhard wrote that in action, 'I adhere to the creative power of God; I coincide with it; I become not only its instrument but its living extension. And as there is nothing more personal in beings than their will, I merge myself, in a sense, through my heart, with the very heart of God.' He saw these words as applicable not only to himself but to all human beings.

The eucharist also presented a solution to his problem of how to value matter spiritually, rather than as just brute, hard, formless stuff. Drawing on the work of some earlier scholars, he came to see Christ's presence in the substance of the eucharist as exemplifying his presence in all created substances, sustaining them and constituting them into something far greater than raw matter. He thus regarded substance as spiritually formed matter.

What does all this mean for a theology of the body? Teilhard has sometimes been read as a pantheist, believing that God is everywhere in the natural world but does not subsist outside that world. This is untrue, however, and it would be equally simplistic to infer that Teilhard regarded the world as God's body. He certainly recovered an ancient sense of the whole world as a place infused with God's action and of all matter as enfolded in a single cosmic order. But he understood that the ordering of matter was possible only as the result of a cause existing outside the observable natural world, and that God could only be present in that world if ultimately subsisting beyond it.

This view of the nature of God's involvement in the world brings us naturally to the focus of Teilhard's Christian faith: the person of Christ. Devotion to Christ's life and especially his Passion was central to Teilhard's Jesuit and Ignatian spirituality, enabling him to see God at work in the world even when humanity was grievously diminished through pain and suffering. He had no easy explanations for the apparently meaningless and purposeless suffering intrinsic to human bodily existence, but in *The Divine Milieu* wrote movingly about how this is transfigured by God and provides a means by which God may enter, in Christ's bodily suffering, into the heart of humankind. God 'must, in some way or other, make room for himself, hollowing us out and emptying us, if he is finally to penetrate into us', and at death is 'painfully parting the fibres of my being to penetrate to the very marrow of my substance and bear me away' within himself.

Some striking elements of Teilhard's understanding of Christ require further comment. Later nineteenth-century theology had tended to emphasise Christ's human nature at the expense of his divine nature. This had been taken to an extreme in various modernist writings that portrayed Christ as a mere human being no different from anyone else. Teilhard compensated for this by developing the insights of some of his teachers and fellow students at Hastings into the cosmic dimension of Christ's work. Christ was not simply the carpenter of Galilee, but in the terms of Paul's letter to the Colossians the 'image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation', creator and sustainer of all things and the source of their consistency.

## In evolution, Teilhard saw Christ as presenting himself to the world as its Omega point.

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Teilhard saw Christ as exercising this guiding influence over the cosmos most powerfully via the mechanism of evolution. Schooled in the metaphysics of Thomas Aquinas, he was sympathetic to the idea that

different types of cause co-operate in the world to form a texture or harmony of causes. Although Teilhard broadly accepted Darwin's theory of natural selection, this more ancient metaphysics suggested to him that evolution was not entirely a product of random mutations and struggles for survival, but a convergent progression of the world towards an ever greater unity in Christ. He tested this hypothesis by digging up fossils, and concluded that it provided a reasonable explanation for the evolutionary changes these revealed, as well as the similarities identifiable between different branches of evolution. Teilhard even experimented with the idea of Christ as exhibiting a third 'cosmic' nature distinct from his human and divine natures, but quickly realised that Christ's cosmic activity could only be due to the perfect fusion, without confusion, of his divine and human natures rather than to the action of some additional nature. Christ's human nature provided his anchor point within the world, while his divine nature allowed him to act in the world without being confined by it.

## Christianity needs to do more to recover its own unique cosmological narrative in ways that inspire people's imagination.

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In evolution, Teilhard saw Christ as presenting himself to the world as its Omega point: its plan, fulfilment and final end. In an important description contained in a later 'Outline of a Dialectic of Spirit', he explained how Christ as Omega binds together three distinct centres of evolutionary attraction: the natural end of the world, its supernatural but still immanent spiritual end, and its transcendent, triune and divine centre. This Trinitarian understanding of how humans experience reality complements his strongly Christocentric vision.

Teilhard thus presented the human body as both an active body and a passive body, but in any case as a body dependent on the body of Christ present in the eucharist and by extension in the whole created order. What did this mean for his faith? Many of Teilhard's supporters and detractors have sought to align him with a New Age spirituality that refutes traditional Christian claims or at best dilutes them. In fact, he mostly accepted those claims, seeking to demonstrate their significance for the twentieth century and thereby intensify their true meaning. He accepted that religious faith was a human creation: Christian belief had been formulated and passed on by the Church through many centuries of word and action. Nevertheless, he firmly believed that faith was more than a human creation, pointing to an inalienably transcendent reality without which

Christ would not ever have been sent into the world to inaugurate the Church's historic witness in word and sacrament. Teilhard also believed in a supremely creative, human-centred Christian faith, but remained convinced that divine action was implicated in all human creativity worthy of the name.

His view of the nature and function of Christian narrative is daring by current postmodern standards. Rather than seeing narrative's primary function as being to describe individual human lives and then to reach outwards to connect with narratives of other human lives, he depicts a panoramic sweep stretching from the origin of the world to its final consummation. Narrative is primarily cosmic for Teilhard, with individual lives and experiences subsumed into a much larger story. This is especially clear in his wedding addresses, where the love that the couple feel for each other is given permanency and consistency by the love of Christ beyond them, ahead of them and above them, drawing them outwards from mutual self-absorption into an even greater reality. This is part of a spirituality in which the ultimate truth is Christ.

Although Teilhard spent many years in China, he never accepted that all religions offered equivalent manifestations of a single overarching spiritual reality. He saw in Christianity particular features uniquely apposite to modern embodied reality, especially its incarnational fusion of spiritual and material principles and the linear narrative it unfolds of a series of events leading up to the birth, life and death of Christ and continuing beyond them. In his evolutionary theology, Teilhard understood humanity and the whole of nature as combining incarnationally these two principles in a linear historical progression guided by Christ.

This daring reappropriation of themes from secular, non-Christian speculation reminds us of how, in the New Testament, Paul used some of his letters to wrest cosmic imagery from the dominant pagan religion to put it to the service of Christianity. In the present day, the power of popular Gnosticism such as *The Da Vinci Code* shows that Christianity needs to do more to recover its own unique cosmological narrative in ways that inspire people's imagination and respond to their metaphysical questions. It also needs confidently to refute popular misinterpretations of modern science with its own alternative metaphysics, negotiating the plains on which armies of atheist scientists and philosophers currently clash with creationists. Teilhard has a lot to offer both these projects.

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## As Kingfishers Catch Fire

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;  
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells  
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's  
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;  
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:  
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;  
Selves – goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells;  
Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*

I say more: the just man justices;  
Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;  
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is –  
Christ – for Christ plays in ten thousand places,  
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his  
To the Father through the features of men's faces.

Gerard Manley Hopkins

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This poem was written in about 1880, twenty-eight years before Hopkins' fellow Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin came to Hastings, but it is rather unlikely that Teilhard knew the poem. The first collection of Hopkins' poems was published in 1918, edited by Robert Bridges.

## How's Your Father?

**Sofia 92 will be on the theme of Fatherhood.**

Father as progenitor  
Father as head of the family  
Father as kind provider  
Father as friendly mentor  
The absent Father  
The unknown Father  
The abusive, cruel or violent Father

***Which of these images of fatherhood relate to God?***

*Readers are invited to submit their thoughts on fatherhood, memories of their own father, thoughts on being a father (or grandfather) and/or social and theological reflections about fatherhood.*

*What are the difficulties facing fathers today?  
Should fathers teach their sons to be manly?  
Fathers and daughters*

**Please submit contributions to the Editor or contact her to discuss ideas for articles.**  
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# God Secularises Himself

Five Extracts from Don's Cupitt's new book *The Meaning of the West*

1

The modern West, I am arguing, is the legacy of Christianity, and in particular of two central doctrines: the *creation* and preservation of the world by God, and the final, definitive *incarnation* of God in the man Jesus Christ. In these two doctrines we see the transfer from God to human beings of God's own power to impose language upon the chaos of experience, and so create an ordered, law-governed world; and also the transfer from God to us humans of the power to give the world (and each other) value just by the way we love the world, pour ourselves out into it, and die. Thus the central Christian doctrines have functioned to liberate and empower human beings, and so to produce the secular modern Western world. In the nineteenth century this process was called 'the building of the Kingdom of God upon Earth', and it completes the historical task of religion. (p.7)

**Christianity is the religion that for several centuries now has been passing over into radical religious humanism.**

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2

Even in the Bible itself this progressive withdrawal of God is already obvious. God is vividly and personally present, as an agent in the narrative, only in Genesis and Exodus. Thereafter he pulls back and hides himself behind his revelation in the Torah, in the prophetic oracles, and in occasional religious experiences. In the New Testament Jesus Christ is in the foreground, and God is heard only as a heavenly Voice speaking from offstage, as at the baptism and the transfiguration of Christ. Sometimes God rattles the scenery, as at Christ's death; but it is very noticeable that in the New Testament as a whole, which is supposedly God's final self-disclosure, God has almost totally disappeared and only Jesus Christ is seen. And Jesus is but a mortal man who dies. So the final revelation of God is simply the Death of God which sets us free, and the Christian atheist reading of Christianity, as developed in the Lutheran tradition by Hegel and others, is correct. The old God of power has become the new God of Love. Universal, non-objective, *human* love. (p.9)

3

As the return of the supernatural world into this world becomes complete, we understand how it is that Christianity doesn't need any supernatural agency to bring about 'the end of the world' and thereby lead the Faith to its destiny; for on the contrary Christianity by its own inner logic precipitates itself beyond itself. Christianity is the religion that for several centuries now has been passing over into radical religious humanism. It is the religion that more than any other takes us beyond the age of religion into the secular and humanistic age that follows. Christianity's central declaration is that God himself is a secular humanist, that is, one who chooses to be simply a man in the human world (Latin: *saeculum*). That's enough for him, and indeed it is in a sense henceforth all there is for him. And this self-secularisation and self-emptying of God was bound to become the template for our own eventual secularisation of our culture and faith.

In the light of all this, how do we now understand St Paul's classic statement about what Christ means to his readers? It runs:

Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,  
but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death –  
even death on a cross.

Therefore God has highly exalted him...

(Philippians 2:4ff.)

As always with his doctrinal arias, the context in which Paul writes these words is ethical (see Philippians 2:3-4 and 2: 14ff). Like religious people the world over, the group at Philippi are being arrogant, disputatious and touchy, and it is necessary for the apostle to tell them to 'come off it', as the phrase goes. But he must go carefully; he must be tactful. So he sings his aria about how Jesus the Christ had come down off his high horse in the biggest way imaginable, and is now gloriously rewarded for it. The moral teaching here is straight out of the central tradition of Jesus' own message – that is, it is part of Q (Matthew 23:12; Luke 14:11; 17:14b): 'all who humble themselves will be exalted.'



So St Paul tries to talk the quarrelsome Philippians into being a little kinder to each other by singing to them a doctrinal aria about Jesus as a cosmic figure who has temporarily renounced his place in heaven, has been born a man, has lived among us and suffered an unjust death on the cross, and now has been exalted to universal lordship.

Why does Paul think that this christological romance will persuade his readers? At present our ideas about the evolution of Christian doctrine in the first two decades after Jesus' death are still somewhat hazy. The best guess we can propose for now says that Jesus himself was an almost purely secular teacher of wisdom, whose teaching made a very deep impression upon his immediate circle. At first they could see his death only as a case of innocent suffering, nobly borne. But somehow the message and the new way of life must go on – which meant that, exactly as happened in the case of the Buddha, Jesus himself must somehow be seen as going on, and therefore as being a permanent, cosmic figure. Local theology begins to supply his new symbolic dress. He is a righteous man, he is a great prophet and martyr taken up into heaven like Elijah, he is the adopted son of God, he is the Messiah-designate who will return, he is the pre-existent heavenly Son of Man figure, he is God's expressed Word. And so it goes on, the theology developing in exactly the way one would expect at that particular place and time. But at bottom all that it is *about* is the new ethic of mutual love and forbearance. A huge system of christological doctrine, a whole world-view and system of religious mediation develops over the next three or four centuries, and then lasts a thousand years. Gradually the wheel turns full circle, and in early modernity the process of demythologising begins. When it is complete we return into the simplest ethical problems of human life together, here and now. And *that* is the return of the original Jesus – that is, of his message. (pp.21-23)

#### 4

My thesis, then, is that the Judaeo-Christian tradition has always been many-stranded, argumentative and somewhat at odds with itself. The great theological themes of God's special purpose in creating humans, his self-revelation to them, his providential guidance of their collective history towards a final consummation, and, above all, his incarnation in Jesus Christ – all these themes together, critically examined and argued over, have made Christianity a uniquely self-secularising faith. God takes the initiative, moving towards humanity, giving himself to humanity, becoming human and dying *into* humanity. In the end, as St Paul puts it, 'all things are yours'. The entire supernatural order communicates itself to us, and passes away into the human world. God is a secular humanist, content to become just a mortal in the human world and to die. All the old 'absolutes' disappear, except for God's shade, which is simply Love. (p.32)

#### 5

If we are indeed currently moving over to a new kind of religious Grand Narrative such as I have described, then it is easy to see how the history of Christianity, its task and its ultimate fate, the accumulating 'Indelible' and 'the West' all fit into the story. The whole Grand Narrative is about the making of humanity; that is, about the emergence at last of fully emancipated and empowered human beings who can bear to look life in the face and say a great 'Yes!' to it. Christianity is the uniquely self-secularising religious tradition which, with its narratives about the One Creator-God, his incarnation in the man Jesus Christ, his redemptive death, and his gradual self-communication into humanity at large, slowly brings about the formation of the new type of human being. It does this by making a series of indelible impressions upon us. For example:

- a. it imprints upon us a new Western kind of selfhood, highly conscious, self-dissatisfied and ready to change;
- b. it imprints upon us a new ethic of love: not merely the mutual love of the strong and beautiful for each other, but the ethic of mutual love and forbearance, and compassion for the weak;
- c. it teaches us to believe that we can build an orderly manageable world, in which science and technology are possible;
- d. it teaches us to believe in progress: that is, that we can gradually make of ourselves better people in a better world;
- e. it teaches us to believe that the full social emancipation of women and of every sort of slave and servant is going to happen;
- f. it eventually convinces us that we can live creatively: that is, we can like artists re-imagine and remake ourselves and our world, and that creative joy in life can fully overcome our old fear of nihilism and death.



As Christianity fulfils its historical task by imprinting all this material upon us, it secularises itself into Western culture – which already increasingly belongs not just to Europe and 'the English-speaking world', but to all human beings everywhere. As this process continues, the old ecclesiastical type of Christianity becomes redundant and disappears, but culturally objectified Christianity goes on and will go on unstoppably until its task is done. Already it is much more fully and generously catholic than 'Catholicism' could ever have hoped to become. (pp.47-8)

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*The Meaning of the West* by Don Cupitt is reviewed on p.23 by Rob Wheeler. Don's next book *Jesus and Philosophy* is forthcoming from SCM Press in June 2009.

# Christ, the Poor and Humanity

Francis McDonagh writes about the quarrel between two brothers, theologians Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, about where Christ is to be found.

To find Christ we must join the poor and take up their cause. This is not the assertion of radical theologians, but the official teaching of the Latin American Catholic bishops. The classical expression of this comes from the 1979 general conference of Latin American bishops in Puebla:

- \* 'We affirm the need for conversion on the part of the whole Church to a preferential option for the poor, an option aimed at their integral liberation' (Puebla 1134)
- \* 'The evangelical commitment of the Church, like that of Christ, should be a commitment to those most in need' (Puebla 1141)
- \* 'The poor challenge the Church constantly, summoning it to conversion' (Puebla, 1147)

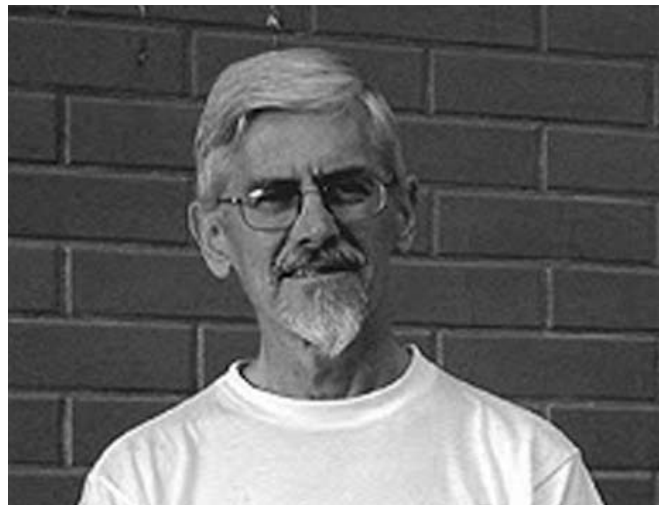
And, at the latest in the series of these general conferences, at Aparecida, Brazil, in May 2007, Pope Benedict XVI, to the surprise of many, declared: 'The preferential option for the poor is implicit in Christological faith in the God who became poor for our sake, to enrich us by his poverty (2 Cor 8.9).'

The Pope's statement came as a surprise because, in his previous role as the Vatican's doctrinal watchdog, the then Cardinal Ratzinger had issued a highly critical assessment of liberation theology. Even in Latin America, the 'preferential option for the poor' has been controversial, and at the Puebla conference liberation theologians were banned from the conference venue, and bishops who wanted to consult them had to meet them unofficially off-site. Episcopal appointments under Pope John Paul II favoured conservatives, and experiments such as programmes to have seminarians live in parish communities during their training were closed down.

Liberation theology nevertheless continued, attempting to maintain its dual character as faith reflection on the experience of poverty and an academic discipline. In some versions, it attempted to reshape the whole of theology. In particular, some theologians attempted to write christologies in a liberationist mode. The best known of these are perhaps, Jon Sobrino, the Basque-born Jesuit who has worked in El Salvador since 1957, and the Brazilian Leonardo Boff.<sup>1</sup> Christology is also at the centre of a controversy that broke out unexpectedly in Brazil after the Aparecida conference. Clodovis Boff, a Servite priest highly regarded for his work on methodology in liberation theology, attacked liberation theologians in general for putting the poor in the place of God and turning the Church into an NGO. Spice was added to this debate when Clodovis' brother Leonardo publicly attacked him. Leonardo, a better known liberation theologian, was banned by the Vatican from making public statements after his 1984 book *Church, Charism and Power* applied the



Leonardo Boff



Clodovis Boff

principles of liberation theology to the decision-making structure of the Roman Catholic Church. In 1992 Leonardo left the Franciscan order and the priesthood and, as he says, now shares his life with a human rights campaigner, Marcia Maria Monteiro de Miranda, and her six children; he still contributes to debates on liberation theology.

What particularly angered Leonardo was that Clodovis had singled out Jon Sobrino for criticism. Six of Sobrino's Jesuit community were murdered by the Salvadorean military in 1989: had not Sobrino been abroad, he would have shared their fate. Not only had Clodovis criticised a theologian who was risking his life, but he had even endorsed a Vatican criticism of Sobrino, made in 2006, when the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith had accused him of substituting 'the Church of the poor' for 'the apostolic faith transmitted through the Church'.

Clodovis Boff's position, a retreat from his previous insistence on the political implications of faith, seems to have much to do with a need to distinguish himself from his brother's faith journey, but his dissection of the argument usefully identifies some of the issues involved, and prompted a collective reply from a group of Brazilian liberation theologians. Clodovis eventually answered his critics in October 2008.<sup>2</sup> Sobrino, meanwhile, has continued to develop a radical version of his thesis that solidarity with the poor is essential for knowledge of Christ and therefore for salvation. He has recently summed up his view in the phrase *extra pauperes nulla salus*, 'no salvation apart from the poor',<sup>3</sup> of course a play on the famous dictum *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, once used to imply that those not in communion with Rome had reason to fear for their eternal destiny.

In this article I am not going to discuss the argument that 'the Church has become an NGO'. Whatever validity it may have, Clodovis' Brazilian respondents rightly point out that misuse of theology for political campaigning doesn't mean that the theology is wrong, nor has it historically been the monopoly of the Left.

More central issues that emerge in this discussion include the following:

- \* It is accepted, including by Pope Benedict, that faith in Christ leads to concern for the poor, but does concern for the poor lead to Christ?
- \* Ultimately, what does it mean to say that in Christ God became human?
- \* Has modern Catholic theology, notably that underpinning the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), become 'a hermeneutic of human existence' and therefore not a reflection on Christian revelation?

On the first point, Clodovis starts off with some fun: 'Why the devil do Christians discover Christ in the poor and not Marxists and other philanthropists? The poor don't have "Christ" written on their foreheads, as the liberation theologians imagine.' He suggests that to believe that commitment to the poor leads to Christ requires a theory of 'anonymous Christians' such as that associated with Karl Rahner, which few people today find satisfactory. He then makes the point that finding Christ in the poor depends on faith, apparently because of the degrading quality of the life of the poor: 'Any pastoral worker knows from experience that work with the poor is so challenging that it breaks down or loses its quality if it is not supported by a spirituality well nourished from the sources of the Word and prayer, since it is only this that makes the poor transparent to reveal Christ, who is already present in them, if anonymously.'

There is general agreement that the reason the poor are important for Christians is not because they are good. Sobrino even says that the main problem for the option for the poor is the presence of evil among the poor, and that it is important not to idealise them. On the other hand, he argues that there are important values among the poor, such as solidarity and creativity, that are often ignored. Sobrino's most important argument, however, is that the poor reveal what is wrong with the world as it is:

'our civilisation is very sick'. Drawing on the arguments of his martyred friend Ignacio Ellacuría, Sobrino contrasts *capital-civilisation* or *wealth-civilisation*, which 'has offered no adequate solution to the basic needs lacked by most people on this planet, nor has it accorded them human fellowship', with a *work-civilisation* or *poverty-civilisation* whose 'guiding principle is the universal satisfaction of basic needs and it sees the growth of shared solidarity as fundamental to the making of humanity' (pp 17-18).

## Christ and the Poor

Clodovis takes the liberation theologians to task for being sloppy in describing Christ's relationship with the poor: 'Christ's close relationship with the poor is not directly because of his poverty, but first because of his humanity. Faith in the incarnation does not, strictly, say that Christ became poor, but that he became human: *et homo factus est*. For one who was 'in the form of God' the greatest *kenosis* is to become 'human flesh', even if, hypothetically, as Caesar. Between God and Caesar there is a greater difference (a qualitative one) than between Caesar and a poor person (a difference merely of degree).' Clodovis is no doubt right in interpreting Philippians in this way, but the glaring defect in this representation of Christ is how it ignores what may be the one piece of historical knowledge we have about Jesus, that he 'suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried', and the social and political implications of this fact.

## Ultimately, what does it mean to say that in Christ God became human?

The great creative achievement of liberation theology has been to rescue Jesus' 'real presence' from that of the 'prisoner in the tabernacle' and give him back his historical context in a form relevant to our own day, thus rescuing him also from the tomes of historical criticism. Sobrino even speculates about whether Christ could have learned from the poor of his day.

Especially in his reply to his critics in October 2008, Clodovis insists that theology must be based on faith, specifically on confessing that 'Jesus is Lord', which he implies that liberation theologians do, if at all, only formally. The repeated insistence on this point gives this part of his argument an oddly un-Catholic air, more in the style of a Pentecostal preacher. It also laid him open to a sharp rebuke from another Brazil-based theologian, José Comblin. Having described this assumption about the faith of liberation theologians as 'arrogant', Comblin says: 'Clodovis wants to stress that the basis of theology is professing, "Christ is Lord." I think all theologians know this and no-one will dispute it. But the problem is a different one. The problem is who is saying, "Christ is Lord," where and when.

'General Videla in Argentina used to say, "Christ is Lord." In Chile Pinochet used to say, "Christ is Lord." Was that faith or blasphemy? The Latin American elite that persecuted the poor for 500 years always used to proclaim, "Christ is Lord." Was that an act of faith? Is it an act of faith today? This is our problem... The powerful proclaim, "Christ is Lord," but their lives say, "I am the Lord!" Paul's cry, "Christ is Lord," is a protest against all "Lords", a condemnation of oppression, a challenge to all those think they are Lords. It is a rejection of all oppressive powers. There is only one Lord!

'The role of theology is not to look for the right words to express faith but to determine what it is really to live faith.'<sup>4</sup>

## The reason the poor are important for Christians is not because they are good.

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Comblin takes the argument back to the distinction between orthodoxy and 'orthopraxy', the point made trenchantly in 1 John 4:20: 'Those who say "I love God," and hate their brothers and sisters, are liars.' Of course, Clodovis defends the option for the poor, but his concern is that unless it is guided by genuine faith it will defraud the poor, and become a vessel to be filled by specious ideologies. He accuses liberation theology of neglecting the non-material needs of the poor: 'The liberation people today (and always) most long for is liberation from absurdity.' This matches his approval of the conclusions of the Latin American bishops at Aparecida, where the option for the poor was vindicated, but in perhaps a more institutionalised and tamed version, more charity than solidarity. In contrast, Sobrino insists that the non-poor have things to receive from the poor, and in particular that 'from the standpoint of the poor we come to know Christ better'.<sup>5</sup>

### Christianity and Humanism

One element of Clodovis' thesis is that liberation theology is heavily influenced by the 'modernism' condemned in the Catholic Church by Pope Pius X in 1907, which, however, he says, came back and infiltrated the Church, triumphing at the Second Vatican Council. It was, he says, a 'Copernican revolution'. 'Theology was modernised, becoming anthropological: human beings as the sun and God their satellite. *Omnia ad maiorem hominis gloriam, etiam Deus*: All to the greater glory of man, God included.'

Perhaps not surprisingly, Sobrino has a radically different position. He recalls the phrase of the Dutch Dominican theologian Edward Schillebeeckx, also in the context of Vatican II: *extra mundum nulla salus*, 'no salvation outside the world'. Schillebeeckx explained: 'The world and human history, in which God wants to bring about salvation, are the foundations of faith's whole reality:

we are saved or lost, first and foremost, in the world.' Sobrino comments: 'That new formula avoids the rigorist interpretation's danger of exclusivism: not just the Church, but also the world is the setting for salvation. It also avoids the danger of reductionism: salvation is not only religious, but it also has a historical and social dimension.'<sup>6</sup>

But embracing the world, the secular, history as the field of God's saving action, was not the attitude of a few radical theologians in the 1960s; it was the central impulse of the Second Vatican Council. From Pope John XXIII's eloquent gesture of throwing open the windows closed to the world by the Counter-Reformation there is a direct line to the opening declaration of the Council document on the Church in the modern world, 'The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts.' There was opposition to this at the Council, not least from the Curia, but John's successor, Paul VI, reaffirmed the change of attitude in his closing address to the Council: 'It might be said that all this and everything else we might say about the human values of the council have diverted the attention of the Church in council to the trend of modern culture, centred on humanity. We would say not diverted but rather directed.'

Latin American liberation theologians see their theology, also 'centred on humanity', as an application of the Second Vatican Council to their continent. In very different times, marked by the restoration of the Tridentine mass and the rehabilitation of a bishop excommunicated for rejecting Vatican II, who also denies the Holocaust,<sup>7</sup> the humanity of the Church and its theology is once more a site of struggle.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books and London: SCM Press, 1978), *Jesus in Latin America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), *Jesus the Liberator* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993, and London: Burns & Oates, 1994); Leonardo Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, and London: SPCK, 1974).

<sup>2</sup> See Francis McDonagh, 'The Struggle Continues – in the Family', *The Tablet*, 3 January 2009.

<sup>3</sup> See Jon Sobrino, *The Eye of the Needle*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> José Comblin, 'As estranhas acusações de Clodovis Boff' [www.adital.com.br](http://www.adital.com.br), December 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, p. 35.

<sup>6</sup> Sobrino, *Eye of the Needle*, p. 75.

<sup>7</sup> 'Pope readmits Holocaust-denying priest to the church', *Independent*, 25 January 2009.

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# How Darwin Changed My Life

**Dominic Kirkham offers a bi-centennial reflection on the importance of Darwin's work.**

Charles Darwin was born two hundred years ago, in 1809, into a very different world from ours. The world became aware of him fifty years later with the publication (in 1859) of his seminal work, *The Origin of Species*. Since then, perhaps more than of any other single person, one can say that his legacy has changed the world.

I came to Darwin late in life, just a century after the publication of *The Origin*, and rather circuitously. But then Darwin himself came to an awareness of his own ideas in a similar rather tortuous, if not tortured, way. For those of us who grew up under what Rabbi Jonathan Sacks calls 'the sacred canopy' of religious belief he was a marginal, vaguely threatening figure. The believer had come to accept that no doubt things changed – even evolved – with time but, even so, everything hung together beautifully in a grandly providential way. It was only a matter of time before all things would come to a very clearly defined fulfilment. Darwin had nothing to add to this vision.

Despite this one figure rather provocatively thought otherwise: Teilhard de Chardin, whose thought burst on the 1950s with something of the same frisson as Darwin's in the 1850's. (By amazing coincidence *The Phenomenon of Man* was published – in English – exactly one hundred years after *The Origin*). Here was full blown theological evolutionism. Teilhard's cosmogenic rhapsodising introduced a sense of excitement beneath the hitherto staid restraints of the sacred canopy. But responses were mixed: was he a Trojan Horse, smuggling subversive ideas under the canopy? His was an emergent universe, marvellously structured around a basic unifying law (of things becoming more complex and so more conscious), which would ultimately lead to a final spiritual goal – the omega point. To scientists – like Sir Peter Medawar – this was twaddle, to traditionalist theologians it was heretical, but to many lay people, like myself, it was electrifying; this was the radical sixties and just what was needed to take one beyond the petty denominational squabbles that had previously so often ruffled the sacred canopy.

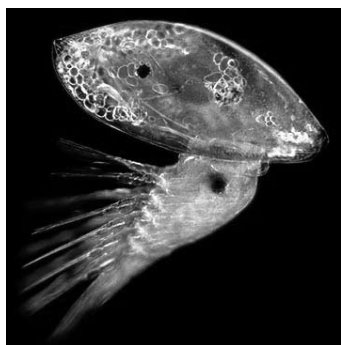
The problem of how to reconcile such an evolutionary view of the world with traditional 'sacred' thinking soon became apparent when certain Dutch theologians made the attempt in a new 'adult' catechism. Almost from page one the work ran into the ecclesiastical buffers over the doctrine of Original Sin.



*Emma and Charles Darwin had 10 children, not all of whom survived*

This had a very different perspective of the past from that of a progressive drama. It also required a very specific first individual falling from a state of previous perfection: rather the reverse of the evolutionary vision. As the entire justification for a sacred canopy rested on the assumption that people needed saving – and so neatly justifying the existence of its clerical gate-keepers – it was not long before the catechism was banned.

To me, then a seventies seminarian, the stumbling block in the drama of cosmic progress also focused on humanity, or rather more specifically man, Adam. This was a time when the anthropologist Richard Leakey was making some amazing discoveries in the 'Eden' of East Africa. The bones he uncovered told an altogether different story of human origins from that of traditional theological prescience. It was indeed one of seamless emergence over millions of years from a very humble ancestry; a view of history very much at odds with Salvation History. But what most perplexed me was the theological status of other humans such as the Neanderthals: what happened to their invite to the sacred canopy?



Darwin studied barnacles

An air of mystery surrounds what really happened when our African ancestors met their European cousins; an encounter charged with tragedy and pathos. There is evidence that on the level of technology and artifice the Neanderthals learnt from their more sophisticated African cousins but on the level of ritualised behaviour and social organisation they were unable to grasp what their fellow humans were up to because of the inadequacy of their cognitive abilities. They had been genetically condemned to be congenital atheists and in the vital stakes for survival they were not up to the sophisticated social organisation of the newcomers. So, after a quarter of a million years they were eclipsed and simply disappeared from the face of the earth. How very unfair!

That neither fairness nor morality had anything to do with survival was an issue that came to preoccupy Darwin. Only one thing seemed to count in nature: fitness. The ability of a species to adapt to a niche, developing slight advantages over its rivals, was the key to survival. In fact, the evolutionary story, with its vast and arbitrary mass extinctions, not to mention the predatory savagery of normality, showed no evidence of any moral sense or purpose. This realisation became a disturbing feature of Darwin's thought, one made all the more unbearable by family tragedy. But there was a deeper, darker quandary: if all living things were connected by processes of natural causation they could not also be the result of periodic creation. The realisation that there is a radical choice to be made between an evolutionary view of life and one based on a belief in individual creation is disturbing and traumatic for anyone having grown up within a theistic tradition.

The choice was starkly and ominously presented to Darwin by his mentor, Charles Lyell, in the pages of the second volume of his *Principles of Geology*. Darwin received a copy of this work whilst on board the *Beagle* in the early stages of his voyage. To the naturalist who had set out as a pious and convinced creationist the implications of such a choice would be momentous, reaching far beyond biology to the whole way in which humanity was to be perceived. To the captain of the *Beagle*, Robert Fitzroy – a convinced creationist – even the possibility of there being such a choice was simply unconscionable and it became a source of estrangement between the two men. For myself, there was a time I could hardly bear to think about it, finding evidence for the evolutionary origins of humanity almost unbearable to read. Since then I have come to realise many do likewise, simply dismissing the 'inconvenient' truth.

Over the years Darwin agonised in secret over this issue, as must anyone who confronts the possibility of the collapse of that sacred canopy, with its centrally supporting narrative of humanity as a created entity. It explains much about both his recurrent ill-health – of which he declared his work on *The Origin* to be, 'the main cause of the ills to which my flesh is heir' – as well as his prolonged reticence to publish his work. To a friend he declared that it was like 'confessing a murder'. That death, of course, as Nietzsche was later to more dramatically proclaim, was that of the ultimate object of belief, God.

Despite this Darwin remained focused on the careful observation of nature. His imagination was first triggered by the immense variety and richness of life in the South American jungle. After his first visit on 28 February 1832 he recorded in his Journal the deep impression this made upon him: 'To a person fond of Natural History such a day as this brings with it a pleasure more acute than he may ever again experience... Amongst the multitude it is hard to say what set of objects is most striking.' From this grew his sense of the coherence of life – what we now call biodiversity. The core of his work culminated in the key insight of how all life forms grow and diversify through adapting to their environment.

There was much that would always lie beyond Darwin's understanding. He could explain selection but not variation, the genetic basis which remained hidden from him. He focused on the species as the unit of survival but it has become clear that what survives is the organism-in-its-environment: as Fritjof Capra sagely warned, 'An organism that thinks only in terms of its own survival will invariably destroy its environment.' Darwin shied away from the cosmological implications of his theory on the origins of life but we now see the basic dynamics of evolution begin with a holistic view of systems in homeostasis – a state of dynamic equilibrium. Regardless of so much being hidden from him, to me what has always been most inspiring about Darwin is the relentless way he searched for truth, always willing to confront new evidence, even if it seemed to challenge his established convictions; always meticulous in considering every aspect of an idea.

## key insight of how all life forms grow and diversify through adapting to their environment

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There was nothing strident in any of this. It represented not so much a shaking of the foundations of the sacred canopy as its gradual dismantling. The philosopher Daniel Dennett has aptly described Darwin's thought to be like a corrosive – a 'universal

acid' – that gradually dissolved the traditional beliefs of Providential design. To me it led to an increasingly radical realisation that the whole idea of a sacred canopy was in fact no more than a human fabrication to justify our own exceptionalism. It had been integral to the whole of my religious upbringing that humans were to be defined in terms apart from nature rather than as a part of it, against the natural world in favour of some supernatural destiny. Mircea Eliade pointed to the essential characteristic of mythical and religious thinking as being to look beyond the tangible world to a greater reality whilst Cardinal Heenan once tersely responded, when asked how he saw the purpose of his life, by saying, 'To save my soul'.

It was such 'trans-earthly' illusions that Darwin gently, but firmly, punctured. His essential greatness lies in the fact that for the first time in history a coherent explanation was made possible of how complex organisms, like ourselves, could arise from simple processes without invoking an overarching theistic causation. For this he was demonised as a 'devil's chaplain'. He was subsequently accused of being prophet of a godless universe, destroyer of moral values, legitimator of neo-barbarism and the progenitor of inhuman eugenic programmes. All of which is grossly unjustified. To hold him responsible for the misrepresentations of others is like holding Jesus Christ responsible for the Spanish Inquisition or European witch-hunts.

With the benefit of hindsight we can see that many initial responses misrepresented Darwin's thought. Almost immediately his theory became entangled with the Victorian political agenda of progress. Other popularisations were misleading: for example, Huxley's description of evolution as the survival of the fittest, or Nietzsche's solitary superman pitted against a soulless universe. There is no better contemporary illustration of how wrong all this was than the recent Olympic achievement of the British cycling team. Their amazing success (survival) was not just about the fitness of supermen (and women) at their peak, but equally of their fitting into a team which was collectively constantly re-assessing every slightest detail – from the structure of the bikes and sportswear to the diet and mental state of the cyclists – so that advantages of tiny parts of a second would collectively add up to a significant difference. This approach is what the team manager, David Brailsford, called 'the aggregation of marginal gains', a perfect expression of Darwinian thinking applied to life. The outcome was wholly benign and enhancing, eloquent testimony to the survival (triumph) of those who fit in!

On a cosmological level there has been a similar, more positive appreciation that has moved beyond the bleak mechanistic view of a universe indifferent to human fate we find, for example, in the novels of Thomas Hardy, to one conducive to life. What Darwin gave us the means to discern was that we do not just live our lives, we are part of an organic process. Developments in cosmology have revealed that we do

not just live in a static cosmos, we are part of a great drama of cosmogenesis; we live, as the ecologist (also Catholic theologian and priest) Thomas Berry has written, in 'a universe ever coming into being through an irreversible sequence of transformations moving... from a lesser to a greater order of complexity and from lesser to greater consciousness.' In this neo-Teilhardian sweep of mind we can begin to grasp that the human is rooted in a cosmic drama to which we are integral, not an addition or extra but as its most extraordinary expression: matter becoming reflective on itself as mind.

## Darwin was demonised as a 'devil's chaplain'.

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Though this sounds rather like Hegelian mysticism it is Darwin who provided the key empirical analysis which enabled the new understanding of our world as an evolving entity; of nature as the epiphany of its own mystery. Stuart Kauffman of the Sante Fe Institute is typical of those scientists who have taken this understanding forward, believing that, 'evolution is richer than Darwin supposed.' His theme is of how emergent processes have led us to the numinous beauty of the world of which we are part; we are here, at home in the universe, because of a creative self-organisation that is the hallmark of natural processes. Neither entirely random nor predetermined, 'Self-organisation mingles with natural selection, in scarcely understandable ways, to yield the magnificence of our teeming biosphere.' It is no accident that one of his works should be entitled *At Home in the Universe*.

This is now part of a new 'sacred' story that has emerged from Darwin's legacy: the Epic of Evolution. It is not just 'a theory' – it is a radically new vision, that weaves all inert elements and living things, matter and mind, into a seamless web of life. To understand the carbon molecules from which life has grown is also to understand the stellar conflagrations that created them. Again, to quote from Thomas Berry's ecological manifesto, *The Great Work*, 'The human is neither an addendum nor an intrusion into the universe. We are quintessentially integral with the universe. In ourselves the universe is revealed to itself as we are revealed in the universe.'

This is an awesome vision. It transcends in grandeur and scope and detail all other previous 'sacred' cosmogonies. What is so radical in this new story is that it locates humanity within nature, not above or over it. In doing this it takes us beyond the traditional understanding of Western civilisations, from their Classical origins even back to a time before the Neolithic revolution when humans began to manipulate (domesticate) nature for human ends. It takes us back to those prehistoric, shamanistic times, when humanity viewed nature as a spiritual entity, entered into communion with other beings and where every being was respected for its own unique value. Such societies

were once condescendingly dismissed as 'primitive'. I have gradually come to see how much we can learn from these distant times and have come to respect their pre-theological spirituality.

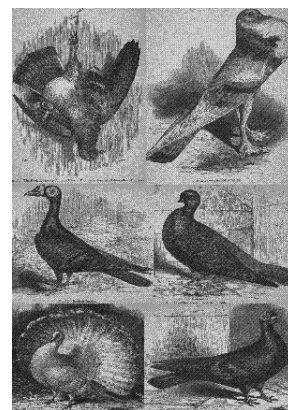
The key word is respect. It encapsulates the essential disposition to nature which modern exploitative humanity has lost. In choosing to view nature simply as a commodity or resource we are now not only in imminent danger of destroying what has taken millions of years to unfold, but in doing so are in danger of destroying ourselves. The unprecedented challenge that now faces humanity is not just how to save its natural habitat, but how to save itself from itself. To do so is impossible without a profound change of disposition. To respect nature is to recognise its rights, and in doing so to recognise that our rights are limited: we have no rights over other living things, other than those of the all powerful predator; we have no rights as one species to threaten the bio-diversity of the planet, to absolutely destroy the habitats of other species. To recognise this is to recognise the right of nature to be itself, to be wild. This is the ultimate challenge to an all-conquering anthropocentric consumerism.

Wilderness may conjure up images of vast untouched open spaces. But this is not the only dimension. Wilderness can exist in those little hidden worlds on our doorstep: a handful of soil is a little universe of life. It was in his sensitivity to this that the real genius of Darwin lay, a genius that drew its strength from the tireless observation of the most humble things – earthworms, barnacles, pigeons. His great work, *The Origin of Species*, concludes with him contemplating an 'entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and the worms crawling through the damp earth.' It was from such observation that he was able to intuit the laws acting around us. And though his epochal world voyage and visit to the wilderness of Galapagos is often treated as seminal to his theories, no less so were the daily walks along the garden paths of Down House. It was here, in a little natural arena, that he formulated all his ideas.

In a world of increasing urbanisation it is this local connection to nature that I now treasure most. Though born in an industrial town I was privileged to grow up near green open spaces of parks, allotments, golf courses, reservoirs and small farms, which provided an entrance into an entrancing world of 'otherness', of nature. After departing from beneath the sacred canopy I have returned to these treasured natural places. They are my solace. But, like many people, I now view their destruction with a sense of profound grief, which resonates with what is happening to the larger world of nature.

This is about more than just personal loss. It is about the recognition that our humanity is rooted in nature, and that without these roots our lives wither. For we carry within us still the marks of our ancestry, an ancestry which for countless millennia dwelt among the open

grasslands, rivers and woods. The emotional and aesthetic satisfaction that comes from connectedness to the natural world is at the heart of human well-being. Even a picture of a natural scene on a hospital ward aids recovery! As the great naturalist E.O. Wilson warned in his apocalyptic *The Future of Life*, we delude ourselves to pretend we can survive without our natural habitat.



Some of the pigeon types studied by Darwin

This is why, for me, the locality has now become the primary focus of my concern. Ecology has replaced theology as the source of my spirituality and object of my contemplation. The need to repair our relations with the natural world is the most urgent challenge facing humanity. Our present alienation creates a difference which becomes indifference, of no intimacy which becomes no fulfilment, of addictive substitutional consumption which simply fuels an endless cycle of destruction. As the geographer Barry Lopez wrote of the American way of life, 'The more superficial a society's knowledge of the real dimensions of the land it occupies becomes, the more vulnerable the land is to exploitation, to manipulation for short-term gain.' The malaise of our entire urbanised way of modern life lies in this alienation from nature.

It is a malaise which traditional beliefs have largely ignored. In fact they are a large part of the problem. Monotheistic religious traditions, in particular, relativise the importance of nature by their supernaturalist orientation which generally denigrates – even demonises – nature, in favour of some illusory trans-worldly fantasy. In turn this becomes a distraction from the true reality of the world as a spiritual place, our 'sacred' destiny and of all creatures as 'sacred' beings worthy of respect. To me, now, both the religious and humanist elements of Western culture have distorted our view of reality through their anthropocentric preoccupations – the focus that places the human drama and human need at the centre of concern.

To this view Darwin provides a salutary alternative. His writings challenge us to a profound reversal of our perspective of ourselves and the world we inhabit. They prompt a new mode of consciousness, different from any that has occurred since Neolithic times. Darwin spent a lifetime struggling to understand the natural world. We must do the same. If we fail to do so we will have no future: the origin of our species will become lost in the trauma of our extinction.

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



# Confronting the Thokoloshe

Michael Senior looks at two religious practices in South Africa.

From time to time on the Cape's windy shoreline you see a group of African people standing in the waves, filling with sea-water large plastic containers. It looks like one of those African mysteries one sometimes comes across, and indeed to some extent it is. Yet this one has a sort of explanation. It is a step in the complicated process of dealing with the thokoloshe. These people are going back shortly to Johannesburg with their employers, and they are taking the sea-water for their own use and that of their friends and relatives. They are going to wipe it on the walls of their houses. That way, when the thokoloshe tries to get in he will think he has reached the edge of the sea, and give up.

Who is this unwelcome yet apparently rather naïve being? Once seen, I would guess, never forgotten. He is a dwarf-faced man only about a metre high, has a single buttock, but makes up for these deficiencies with his most notable attribute. His phallus is so long that he carries it slung over his left shoulder. That the thokoloshe is a product of rather unhealthy sexual fantasy is apparent also from his behaviour. He seduces innocent girls and indeed those who should know better, and (says Heidi Holland in *African Magic*):<sup>1</sup> 'Women who have had a sexual encounter with him are said to remain in a state of erotic excitement for days afterwards.' It is not wise, however. Seduction by a thokoloshe can result in a disabled child. One precaution is to raise your bed on bricks, rather as white settlers used to stand the legs in tins of water to deter ants. Thokoloshes are presumably too short to climb up. The other ploy favoured by people living so far inland is to bring back from the coast (or ask your employers to, if they have gone without you) those bottles of sea water.

The thokoloshe is morally ambivalent. He is bad if you are bad, but to innocent children he is a playfellow. Apart from his sexual role he is to blame for many of the accidents, and worse, of life. He knocks things over and it is his fault if they go missing. He wakes you in the night. He makes you do things you should never have done. The process of dealing with the thokoloshe is not the only ancient belief which affects normal life in

modern Africa. Doubtless there are many other habits which are baffling to Europeans but could be explained that way. For instance, bush fires are a serious problem in the scrublands surrounding towns, and some are started by the need to burn down the hut in which the segregation part of initiation into manhood has taken place. How, the white people wonder, can anyone believe such things, to the extent of running their lives by them, in this modern world?



Thokoloshe

Before meals the white people hold hands and bow their heads while the head of the group addresses an unseen being, who is apparently able to be everywhere at the same time, all the time, and able to hear our words, and understand them in both English and Afrikaans, and in response to our pleas, able to influence our minds, since the leader asks him on behalf of the group to instil gratitude in all their hearts. Once a week some of the white people enter a special building which enables them even better to communicate with this being, through a process of ritual gestures and incantation. Twice a year they hold great ceremonies in these buildings, supported by lesser rituals in their homes, marking events which occurred in the saga of this being, in a mythological time when the being took a form in which he could be represented on earth. They believe (for instance) that this form of the being was born without a human father and

lived again after he was killed, and commemorations of these two beliefs are central to their ceremonial year and indeed govern some of their seasonal secular behaviour as well. They believe that the being in question sees and knows all their deeds and thoughts, and that their personal behaviour is judged, approved or condemned by him; and they hold it right to behave accordingly.

It is somewhat frightening to find that such primitive superstitions not only still rule people's individual lives, but are apparently accepted as the moral principle of whole nations. What is more, the European people in Africa have themselves signally failed to adopt such spirits as the thokoloshes, and indeed hold it to be an absurdity to do so. Clearly it is taking the white settlers rather a long time to settle in.

## The thokoloshe is to blame for many of the accidents, and worse, of life.

Such an objective conclusion is unsettling, perhaps distasteful. But it is a matter of fair exchange. If the Europeans in Africa have not become African, and would regard much of what is involved in that as retrograde, it is not fair for them to complain that the Africans are slow in conforming to European standards, sometimes meaning that they have not adopted the Dutch-Calvinistic work-ethic. Religious belief must always be a closed system. If your belief is right, as you must hold it to be, then any alternative is wrong. Yet there is a logical trap inherent in even this certainty. The other parties on their part could say the same thing too. And if one person's religion is another person's superstition, to profess a religion at all is to put yourself on an even footing with people you may regard as primitive.

<sup>1</sup> Heidi Holland, *African Magic*. Penguin Books, 2001. Pages. 132-135.

Dr Michael Senior is a full-time writer specialising in history and mythology. He is a long-standing member of SOF.

sf

Be

## philoSOFical

Join SOF Network to  
Sift religions as human creations  
Discard the supernatural  
Absorb the wisdom  
Assess the ethics  
Taste the poetry  
Do as you would be done by  
Earth and Humanity  
are everybody's and your own

Magazine, newsletter, local groups, conferences  
For membership details see inside front cover

## Work

'...the function of living organisms is merely the distribution of matter...'  
BERTRAND RUSSELL

Philosophers are a rare and valuable commodity  
Although innumerable shops for the selling of merchandise  
Are bursting with innumerable products on their shelves  
It is unreasonable to expect a busy assistant  
To find you just that shade of philosopher you require.  
And in the right size and substance to satisfy your taste

This is why it is so much easier to buy cheese.  
All you have to do is to point at the wretched stuff  
And announce clearly: Half a pound please.  
Then eat the stuff and take part, your own part  
In the bodily distribution of matter.

Ah, had you asked: half a philosopher's stone please  
You will find well-stocked shelves, right next to the cheese.

John Rety

John Rety was born and lived in Budapest until he came to Britain as a teenager shortly after the Second World War. This poem is from his latest poetry collection *The Best of All Possible Words*. (Hearing Eye, London 2008). John Rety runs the Torriano Meeting House poetry venue in Kentish Town, London, and a *Festschrift* for him, *Torriano Nights*, (Acumen Publications, Brixham 2009) was recently launched at the Barbican Library.





**Please send your letters to:**

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**Your Burning Issue**

I really enjoyed the Christmas issue of *Sofia* – full of interesting and challenging articles. But I had to disagree with Ken Smith writing about India, who remarked ‘cremation is surely the future’. Cremation adds more pollution CO2 to the atmosphere, doesn’t it? That is why, when my husband died in June last year, he was buried in a light wicker casket in a woodland site. Admittedly there was some carbon imprint in driving to the burial site but there should be more of these ‘green’ burial places in the future.

I found the article about Mexico and the cult of Our Lady of Guadalupe quite fascinating.

**Joan Sheridan Smith**  
 38 Holcombe Crescent, Ipswich

**Darwin’s Deity**

Fortunately for Michael Senior, the ‘strenuous exegesis’ he suggests that is required to resolve the ‘antithesis between religion and evolution’ that exists in the interpretation of Darwin’s works has already been carried out – by Darwin himself! To the famous concluding passage of the *Origin*, on ‘endless forms most beautiful’ – reputedly the most widely quoted passage in biology – between the first and second edition Darwin added, ‘by the Creator’, as an explanatory causal source. Later in a letter to the botanist J.D. Hooker, Darwin wrote: ‘But I have long regretted that I truckled to public opinion, and used the Pentateuchal term of creation, by which I really mean “appeared” by some wholly unknown process.’

The dilemma of Darwin was that of anyone struggling with the expression of genuinely new thinking: the constraint of inadequate language and a vocabulary already culturally preconditioned. So feminists have had to battle with a world expressed in male terms – a ‘mankind’, an ‘anthropology’, etc – and black writers to battle with the host of embedded ‘black’ prejudicial words. This is part of the answer to the question of Michael Senior as to why Darwin would have used the term Creator if he believed there was none.

The other part is that Darwin, a social conservative who hated public controversy, tried to avoid getting drawn into distracting disputes over belief. He typically turned down a request for a book dedication on the sage grounds that ‘direct arguments against Christianity

and theism produce hardly any effect on the public.’ They also obscured his scientific work. But beneath his reclusive demeanour his core disposition was both radical and completely antithetical to the widespread Victorian belief in moral progress and Christianity as revealed truth; as he wrote, ‘The universe we observe, if properly understood, has all the properties we should expect if there is no purpose, no design, no evil, and no good. Nothing but blind, pitiless indifference’ Such a view is incompatible with any form of Deism, Theism or Creationism. Gestures to his wife’s religious sensibilities apart, towards the end of his life Darwin did clearly state in his *Life and Letters*, ‘that an agnostic would be the most correct description of my state of mind.’

**Dominic Kirkham.**  
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**‘Religion, pure and undefiled’?**

Although I am a free thinking Unitarian and anti-fundamentalist, Penny Mawdsley’s talk/article (published December 2008) would not encourage me to join SOF. In the first place, Penny Mawdsley quotes Don Cupitt to imply that the earliest etymological root of a word, the term ‘religion’ in this case, is the real key to the current meaning of the word. This is not how language works. The problem with the word ‘religion’ is that it is applied to a huge range of phenomena often as different from each other as mother’s milk from poison. The article presents a description of religious people in excessively general and often condescending terms. Why invent a ‘lowest common denominator’ religious nitwit when you could look at shining exemplars of spiritual being such as Thomas Berry, Rowan Williams, Thomas Merton, Evelyn Underhill, Annie Dillard...? Such people could not be said to ‘have a high boredom threshold’ or ‘put up with being told repeatedly how sinful, unworthy and inadequate they are’. Nor would they ask, ‘What makes a religious person tick?’ because this figure of speech suggests that the speaker holds a simplistic, mechanistic worldview.

What I recognise as true religion, what wakes up the fundamental energies and yearnings of being, is an experience of depth and mystery, ‘Otherness’ and intuition, and it could never be contained within the ‘fixities and definites’ of purely rational thinking. The map is not the territory and the real world is richer and more complex than our rational descriptions can ever be. This is not to recommend unreason or woolly thinking, but a careful discrimination between what can be measured and what cannot.

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## To Sofia Editor

I am writing to communicate my experience of the magazine. I have renewed my subscription and have been reading the most recent issue. I think that while it has always been welcome it has under your editorship been better than ever. As a poet I like the poetic dimension you have brought to it. I look forward to more *Sofia* with you as editor.

**Jerry Peyton**  
Edinburgh

## The Origin of Language

It is always a pleasure to have another new Don Cupitt book to read: *Above us Only Sky*. Like mouthwash, Don's books are always refreshing, clear out anything unhealthy lurking in the cavities, stop the build up of harmful bacteria and leave the mouth tingling clean. In comparison, Richard Dawkins' writings are more like advertisements on buses – novel, maybe mildly funny at first but, after a while, tired and tedious. Interestingly, however, both Cupitt and Dawkins suffer from the same fundamental gap in their writings – their failure to tackle the most baffling question of all, namely, the origin of language. Dawkins ably explains the origin of species by cumulative selection and Cupitt ably explains the origin of human consciousness by 'the way language lights up the world of experience'. But neither has so far provided an answer to the origin of language itself. How did the ancient language of DNA originate? How did the ancient language of mankind originate? At the moment, I am still inclined to the view, acceptable I guess to neither Cupitt nor Dawkins, and expressed in the only language which I know but which originated God knows where, 'In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.' O.K., 'God' is a tricky word but the alternative is akin to paper and ink somehow getting together and doing their own thing by writing books!

### Grenville Gilbert

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# SCIENCE & RELIGION ME&NING

SOF Annual Conference: Leicester, 21-23 July  
Information: [sofconf09@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:sofconf09@yahoo.co.uk)  
or [www.sofn.org.uk](http://www.sofn.org.uk)

## The Boy

The suffering was real.  
The telling of it is simply a story.  
How the child coped with the cruel events.

Hot shrapnels whizzed past.  
Buildings burst apart.  
All around the town burnt.

Oil refineries, munitions factories  
But also tenements and buildings  
Human habitations cracked and burned around him.

The smell of death was everywhere.  
That sweet, unmistakable smell.  
The boy took no notice.

He walked from street to street.  
He searched for his friends.  
Bombers above him filled the sky.

They came so low  
Skimmed above the tops of tenements  
The underbellies showed their horrid markings.

Yet the boy walked undeterred.  
It was his life not theirs.  
The town was his town not theirs.

Hissing hot shrapnels missed him.  
Buildings collapsed behind him.  
Who let loose these mad devils?

Not that he was not annoyed.  
Not that he was not angry.  
Not that he did not curse the whole mad world.

He took no shelter just walked  
Among the ruins of the exploding town  
Stepping over the torn cut open corpses.

And at last he reached his destination.  
His uncle was by the furnace baking bread.  
'I have come to help,' the boy said.

And all night they baked bread.  
Neither of them would admit that the  
Whole town was forever dead.

*John Rety*

# Current Affair

## Comment by Owl

Amazing, isn't it, how these days Christmas gets packed away and recycled before you can say 'Epiphany'? Festive 2008 won't be quickly forgotten, however, by the couple of wretched primary school teachers who were disciplined for sowing doubt, assailing faith. In the miraculous birth of a baby without a father? No, worse, in the very existence of the deity of the season, jolly Santa himself. A lot of public twittering resulted, mainly confused musings as to what constitutes 'allowable fantasy' as opposed to 'truth'. More interesting was the 'belief / heresy / blasphemy' aspect. You won't be sacked or burned at the stake for teaching biology in our schools according to Darwin, it appears; but be very careful when tackling in the classroom the logistics of a fat god dispensing blessings on a single night down the world's remaining domestic chimneys.

Now Spring's here, and with it a further danger. In the metropolis at least, we might find ourselves willy-nilly on an 'atheist bus'. Maybe they should be renamed 'Pascal buses' with that silly word 'probably' in their message: 'There's probably no God'. Richard Dawkins, pictured proudly in front of one of these splendid red vehicles, should have turned around and noticed what a non-sequitur the rider was: 'Now stop worrying and enjoy your life'. Does anyone nowadays know *anyone* who is hindered from enjoying their life for the simple reason that there (probably) *is* a God?

There's talk of a copy-cat bus in Canada – donations are flooding in – but the show seems to be over in Genoa, where the Italian version got stopped in its tracks, well before it got to Rome (which would really have been fun). The Italian message is said to announce: 'The bad news is that God doesn't exist. The good news is that you don't need him.' Again the wording is disappointing. Shouldn't the non-existence of God also be *good* news? But it's not going to be allowed anyway, despite the rather wistful comment of Marta Vincenzi, Mayor of Genoa: 'If passengers do not want to travel on one of the atheist buses, they can always wait for the next one.'

Perhaps that is asking too much of human nature. If you've been waiting half an hour for a 43A, and it turns up with a blasphemous message, you're going to need pretty strong principles to stand firm at the bus stop. An inspiring note is that this bus advertisement was instigated by the Italian Union of Atheists and Rationalist Agnostics. Two groups which might in another country be maintaining a frosty distance have managed to form a Union!



In case both the tags of 'atheist' and 'rationalist agnostic' are currently sounding rather tired (and the same has even been suggested of 'non-realist'), it might be the time in this bright new year to consider re-branding oneself a 'Bright'. Brights, of whom some are Enthusiastic Brights, and whose pictures, including that of Dawkins himself, can be found on their attractive website, insist that the word is here a noun and not an adjective. 'Gay', they argue, has been successfully used as both adjective and noun to style a particular group of individuals in a positive way. So, by analogy...

Christopher Hitchens, predictably, is unconvinced, shedding scorn on the 'cringe-making proposal that atheists should conceitedly nominate themselves to be called brights' (*God is not Great* 2007). Founded in 2003, the Brights claim only to promote 'Illuminating and Elevating the Naturalistic Worldview', but insist that that is all they have in common, apart from a social conscience. Each is to be considered an individual, dependent on no-one else's point of view. The result sounds like a sort of philosophical Mensa, a notice-board for advertising oneself as 'that sort of person'. And it is difficult not to be reminded of the poor old Cathars and their fate – though their designation as 'Perfects' was not their choice, it is said, but a jibe by the Catholic Church labelling them 'perfect heretics'.

All of which should give SOF some pause for thought. Are we really closet, modest Brights? What, should the grand donation be forthcoming, would be the message on the SOF bus?

## Jennifer Jeynes reviews

### ***Progressive Secular Society and other Essays***

by Tom Rubens

Societas 40. Imprint Academic (Exeter 2008). Pbk. 128 pages. £8.95.  
ISBN: 9781845401320

This Council Member of the National Secular Society is, not surprisingly, very taken with the idea of a progressive secular society and so was delighted to note the title of Tom Rubens' latest book. It is in fact the first essay of 28 altogether, of varying lengths, several of which will be familiar to readers of *Ethical Record*. They have been written since 2002. A progressive secular society is one committed to the widening of scientific knowledge and humane feeling, Rubens states. 'It regards humanity as part of physical nature and opposes any appeal to supernatural agencies or explanations. In particular, human moral perspectives are human creations and the only basis for ethics.' So far so admirable.

The blurb further claims that 'secular values need re-affirming in the face of the resurgence of aggressive supernatural religious doctrines and practices'. Authors aren't necessarily consulted about what appears in the blurb and I am sure as a teacher of humanities, Rubens would know that doctrines per se can't be aggressive, only their proponents though practices might be. The blurb then promises me 'secular thoughts for the day'. That is a marvellous idea for Humanists who are still banned from *Thought for the Day*, as they refuse to succumb to theological platitudes but wish to think for themselves. Unfortunately, the blurb writer has not discussed this with the author or the index compiler and one has to work out the length of each article from the page numbers to ascertain which may be of suitable length to qualify. It is not clear whether articles of two page length are to be included in this category. Anyway, readers should not have to work so hard.

'Secular Stoicism' is less than one page, an interesting example of one with a pithy title. Humanists do need bravery to live a life without hope of reward in any heaven, even if we manage not to be haunted by the threat of damnation after death. This author is to be commended for not seeking easy popularity, even if the publishers do their best with the blurb. His previous two books are even less likely to catch the eye of the casual browser, *Minority Achievement in an Evolutionary Perspective* (1984) and *Spinozan Power in a Naturalistic Perspective* (1996). Rubens does not claim that secularism is his major focus in his latest book: he sees all the essays having a focus of mechanistic naturalism. Indeed he expands this idea to become a position of 'mechanistic

energism' calling upon the physicist Heisenberg in support. I don't see the need to use this phrase –

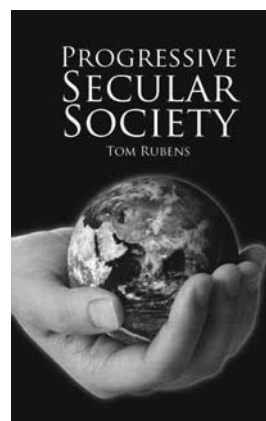
I think it is an example of a basically arts-based writer trying to sound more scientific but feeling mass (equivalent to energy) as not being attractive enough in metaphorical terms. Einstein taught us that energy equals mass times the speed of light squared ( $E = MC^2$ ). One of the essays is called 'Plato, Shakespeare and Energy' – this would sound less attractive to the arts community, I think, as 'Plato, Shakespeare and Matter'. It seems Rubens is attempting to ground his theories in a view of the material universe in which the concept of energy is placed centre stage. *Sofia* readers should assess this for themselves.

Writers familiar to those of us who have listened to Rubens' lectures either at the Ethical Society or PFA (Philosophy for All) feature in the name index such as Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim, Bertrand Russell, George Santayana, Arthur Schopenhauer and Herbert Spencer. It is thus possible to look up personal favourites. A less well known name is S.K. Ratcliffe, the grandfather of the late Nicolas Walter and author of the short history of South Place Ethical Society. He was an Appointed Lecturer there and Rubens highlights a talk he gave in 1945 called *The Eclipse of Liberalism*. Another issue for *Sofia* readers to engage with is 'Do Humanists Need the Concept of Evil?' The author feels we certainly do because it will 'fill a crucial gap in an already existing general framework of morality'. He then adduces the usual suspects – Hitler, Stalin and Pol Pot but does not delve deep enough into the aetiology of this unpleasant trio's actions. He claims that Humanist morality is independent of any supposed deity – true and therefore the reviewer feels we need to study behaviour at the edges of a human psychological continuum, not revert to a christian term impervious to useful analysis.

I recommend this book – there is much for thoughtful readers to consider.

---

Jennifer Jeynes is the Ethical Society Librarian at the Conway Hall in London.



reviews

## Rob Wheeler reviews

# *The Meaning of the West*

by Don Cupitt

SCM Press (London 2008). Pbk. 171 pages. £18.99. ISBN: 9780334042020.

It has become quite fashionable to knock 'the West' nowadays. It is therefore gratifying to be offered an alternative, and more positive, interpretation of the development of western culture in Don Cupitt's latest book, *The Meaning of the West*. At the outset Cupitt is quite clear about what he thinks the greatest invention of the West is. It is not any specific technology or methodology but rather something that underlies them all: critical thinking: 'The West is at heart an independent, questioning cast of mind for which nothing is entrenched, nothing is sacred, and (conversely) everything is on the table, negotiable, open to reappraisal, revision and reform or reframing. In short the West is a uniquely vigorous culture based on a fully open market of ideas.'

What is surprising and challenging about Cupitt's thesis is its rejection of received wisdom regarding the origin of rational thinking. He locates the seeds of the western critical thinking tradition not in classical Greek culture, that eventually percolates through into Christian culture, but within the practice of Christian spirituality itself: 'The modern West is a huge objectification of the old Christian spirituality, transferring to the entire public and intellectual life of the culture the scrupulous spirit of critical examination and purging that the monk in his cell had originally directed against himself, and himself alone. This critical spirit owed something to Socrates, but much more to St Paul and, later, St Augustine. The idea that systematic critical examination is the only way to the Truth we seek began as a principle of Christian spirituality...'

The problem that Cupitt is up against with this thesis is that as a matter of brute historical fact the Church has generally behaved defensively and dogmatically, rarely critiquing its own ideas and suppressing dissent ruthlessly. Following current lines in radical biblical scholarship Cupitt takes the view that the teaching of Jesus was originally largely secular and utopian (there are few theological presuppositions in his sayings in the Synoptic Gospels) and that in essence the message of Jesus has flowered, over time, into modern secular humanism. Cupitt relies on the idea that the teaching of Jesus contains a kind of inner logic that unfolds into something quite different through the historical process. This leads Cupitt to conclude that in many ways the modern, western state is more 'Christian' than the Church ever has been because it more successfully embodies the values and beliefs of Jesus. These values and beliefs include the unique value of the individual, mutual love and forbearance, care for the weakest and most vulnerable members of society, a high estimation of human creativity, belief in the uniformity of nature and a belief in social and moral progress.

The feature of this book that troubles and puzzles me most is Cupitt's claim that he is a nihilist

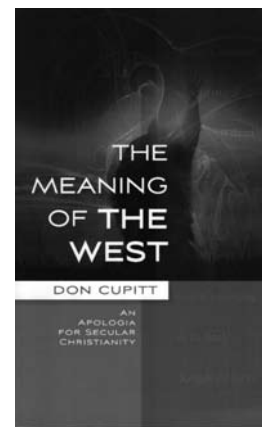
– a claim that he has made in several other of his recent books too. Not only that, but he appears to run nihilism into relativism and pragmatism and other, on the face of it, incompatible philosophical positions. The common meaning of nihilism is a belief that there is nothing of value in the world; that all value distinctions are meaningless. However, Cupitt seems to be quite happy making value judgements and truth claims throughout the book – not least implying that critical thinking itself is both good and possible.

Adopting the 'Principle of Charity' (an important critical thinking method) I have come to the conclusion that this claim to be a nihilist is just a rhetorical flourish or piece of hyperbole. What Cupitt is really wanting to do is vigorously reject Platonism – the belief that there is a preordained, rational structure out there in the world. I wish Cupitt would give up this eccentric use of terminology as I do not think it in any way promotes understanding of what he is trying to communicate. Where I find myself unable to accept Cupitt's central thesis is his failure to distinguish between rational thought as such and critical thinking, which is a specific type of rational thought. Of course the monk in his cell uses reason to judge his conduct against the rule of his community. Likewise the theologian uses reason to support his apologia for the Faith. However, neither are engaged in a fundamental examination of the presuppositions of the belief system they have received. Neither can 'think outside the box'.

Karl Popper in his 1958 article 'The Beginnings of Rationalism' points out that while religions make an effort to pass on a pure and uncorrupted version of the teaching, labelling and rejecting those who change the 'truth' as heretics, the pre-socratic Greeks invented the new tradition of critical rationalism. In this tradition Anaximander criticises his master Thales and there is no quarrel or schism as a result. So the essence of critical thinking lies in looking for, and eradicating, error in the received belief system but while staying within the convivial community of enquiry. The way of Christianity, and all religions, has been the attempt to pass on a pure version of the doctrine, using reason to justify but never critique and punishing those who deviate from the party line. So it is the Greeks we have to thank after all!

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Rob Wheeler is SOF webmaster.



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George Gelber reviews

***The Eye of the Needle:***  
***No Salvation outside the Poor***  
***A Utopian Prophetic Essay***

by Jon Sobrino

translated by Dinah Livingstone

Darton Longman and Todd (London 2008), Pbk. 96 pages. £9.95. ISBN: 9780232527391.

*The Eye of the Needle* was written before the financial crisis revealed the feet of clay of mightiest and proudest of our financial institutions. It would be uncharacteristic of Jon Sobrino to revel in the sight of the mighty being put down from their seat – and he would say that a mere change of circumstances of the mighty will not exalt the poor. That will require a change of heart, an opening up on the part of the rich and privileged to the insights that can only be gained from and with the poor. It will also require a spreading out among the poor themselves of the solidarity, generosity and spirit of forgiveness which Sobrino and others have found in the Christian base communities throughout Latin America. But, Sobrino insists, without the poor there is no salvation.

The first third of the book is a compilation of fact and quotes about the stunning inequality of our contemporary world – a world in which half of humanity lives on two dollars a day, less than the total support given by the European Union to the average European dairy cow, in which nearly a billion people survive somehow on a dollar day or less. This is also the world in which, as Sobrino points out, ‘just 4 per cent of the largest 225 fortunes in the world would be enough to give food, water, health and education to all.’ And it is not as if this inequality is diminishing, quite the reverse; the latest calculations of global inequality show that the chasm between the world’s richest and poorest people has widened so that now the richest people earn in about 48 hours what the poorest people earn in a year. The cramming together of so many similar facts and so much caustic comment makes this first part of the book seem like a rant but, readers should reflect, it is all true. Even the great breakthrough events, like the G7 summit in Gleneagles in 2005, which set aid targets for the richest countries, were only deciding on the size of the crumbs that should fall from the rich man’s table.

In the second two thirds of the book Sobrino shows how there is no salvation outside (apart from) the poor, how the poor are essential to saving ourselves and the world. His thesis is global in reach, and he cites examples ranging from Auschwitz to the Democratic Republic of Congo, but its roots lie in the terrible violence of El Salvador meted out to tens of thousands in the course of the civil war. Among the dead, murdered by government forces were four

American women missionaries, Archbishop Oscar Romero and Sobrino’s close friend and colleague, Ignacio Ellacuría, Jesuit priest and rector of the Catholic University, murdered with five colleagues and their two housekeepers. Ellacuría is present throughout the book, quoted liberally as Sobrino extends his thinking about the poor.

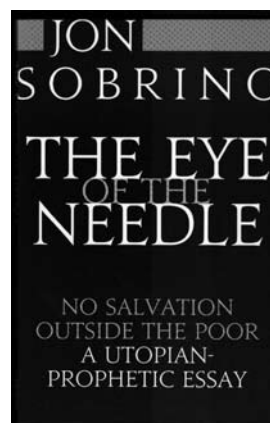
Sobrino is not starry-eyed about the poor, recognising that they can be as venal, corrupt, selfish and cruel as any of their oppressors. But the poor, the millions of families and individuals throughout the world who are poor – good, bad, honest, crooked – just by being have-nots, hold up to the haves a mirror which reveals their collective dehumanisation. At the same time the poor, their suffering and, in the midst of their suffering, the solidarity, love and generosity which can be found in Christian base communities, for example, constitute for the rich a call to conversion which in turn can lead to truth, hope and action.

In the introduction Fr Michael Campbell-Johnston SJ, who worked alongside Sobrino in El Salvador, illustrates what such a conversion could be like by quoting from the 32nd General Congregation of the Society of Jesus:

If we have the patience and the humility and the courage to walk with the poor, we will learn from what they have to teach us what we can do to help them. Without this arduous journey, our efforts for the poor will have an effect just the opposite from what we intend. We will only hinder them from getting a hearing for their real wants and from acquiring the means of taking charge of their own destiny, personal and collective.

In the same document we find a complementary, twin passage which shows what the non-poor world of analysis and technical expertise can contribute:

We have to... overcome the fear which blocks us from truly comprehending the social, economic and political problems which exist in our countries and on the international scene ... From analysis and discernment will come committed action; from the experience of action will come insight into how to proceed further.



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Sobrino would say that it is not a question of 'helping the poor', with its implications of the helping hand coming down from above, but of being moved by the poor to overcome our own dehumanisation. But he does mention Einstein and Pasteur as examples of the contributions which can be made from the world of the non-poor.

Climate change, not mentioned by Sobrino, provides a 'real world' vindication of his thesis by making clear that the ever greater consumption which is the motor of globalisation is unsustainable and threatens all life on our planet. Climate change challenges us to move towards a model based on well-being which values the attributes that Sobrino finds in the poor. In a sense, therefore, *The Eye of the Needle* puts Sobrino on the barricades of the 21st century and, 40 years on from 1968, with the message 'Let us be realistic: demand the impossible' because the impossible is now the imperative.

George Gelber is the Senior Policy Adviser of CAFOD's Public Policy Unit.

FROM: **Jerusalem**

The Rhine was red with human blood,  
The Danube rolled a purple tide,  
On the Euphrates Satan stood,  
And over Asia stretched his pride.

He withered up sweet Zion's Hill  
From every Nation of the Earth;  
He withered up Jerusalem's Gates,  
And in a dark Land gave her birth.

He withered up the human Form  
By laws of sacrifice for sin,  
Till it became a Mortal Worm,  
But O! translucent all within.

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

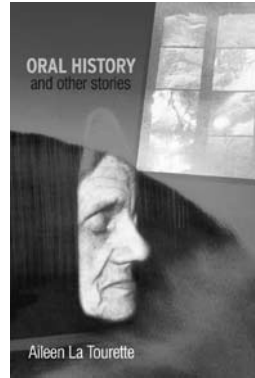
And thine the Human Face, and thine  
The Human Hands and Feet and Breath,  
Entering through the Gates of Birth  
And passing through the Gates of Death.

**William Blake**

**Alison McRobb reviews**  
**Oral History and**  
**Other Stories**

by *Aileen La Tourette*

Headland Publications (West Kirby 2007).  
112 pages. Pbk. £7.99. ISBN: 9781902096339



First the health warnings: for readers who feel sensitive about strong language or shocking situations (though by modern standards neither very strong nor very shocking) perhaps this collection of short stories will not be their cup of tea. Then there's the 'f' word. The cover notes correctly identify La Tourette's work as exploring 'some of the emotional nooks and crannies not much

explored in contemporary feminist fiction.' But again, these tales can be enjoyed without the need for any particularly feminist reading. The intriguing 'Barbershop Quartet', for example, captures in four episodes many facets of male angst – unforgettably of the adolescent transformed from hairy werewolf to acceptable (to himself) human being by a haircut, in 'The OK'.

Outstanding in this collection is 'Echo Shoes', which steers clear of all cliché to get right inside a mother-in-law daughter-in-law relationship, wringing from it every drop of humour, irritation and antipathy. Here it is the 'oldie' who is trim, elegant and in love with fashion, who would rather die than wear ugly shoes. We applaud her in her bloody-mindedness, yet maybe succeed in sparing a thought for what the younger generation has to put up with.

It is perhaps the ex-pat author's transatlantic voice which is more assured than her English one, though there's not a hint of Polyanna here. Even in the most English of settings, however, she can convey the significance of the place. Why a guest night in a chilly Cambridge college's single bedroom might spell total desolation of the soul can only be appreciated by someone who's been there. Though Fate has not been kind to La Tourette's characters, they often show an endearing ability to be kind to each other, or at least to let them down lightly. Mrs Lamont finds a lively variety of sympathetic company in her Group Therapy 'bell jar'. Gay Malcolm is the perfect gentleman as he gives besotted Grace the brush-off in 'Malaga'. As she soars homewards into the clouds, Grace sees them in Hopkins's colour burst 'gash (gold) vermillion'. The stories in *Oral History* may have more of his 'blue-bleak embers' about them, but, dammit, that's life.

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.

## Christopher Truman reviews

### Crossing the Snowline

by Pauline Stainer

Bloodaxe Books (Tarset 2008) Pbk. 96 pages £8.95 ISBN: 978185224 8123.

If you study 'the vanishing point' in *The Annunciation* by Leonardo da Vinci (to my mind, a paradigm for many of the poems in Stainer's book), you may discern an alp, a high brooding mountain in mist. Rearing between intermediate cypress trees, dark with death, the effect is of a window onto the work of a Zen master. Mountain air is marvellous for 'cleansing the doors of perception'. Perhaps the intent behind the mountain in the painting was to associate the annunciation with breathing fine pure mountain air; and correctly so.

Pauline Stainer's book opens with 'Our Lady of Indigo'. A poet 'working at the margins of the sacred', generally Stainer interweaves motifs of the Virgin Mary, the crucifixion, light, water and a quasi-mediaeval bestiary through poems wide in locale and subject, the variety unimportant. The poems are bare, spare, musical. Oddly like Buñuel's 1969 masterpiece *The Milky Way* concerning two pilgrims en route to Santiago, from almost any point one keeps on flipping into some form of religious illumination or hallucination almost as an 'annunciation' of a truth. The blue of Mary's robes is the dominant motif.

Perhaps an autobiographical note may illuminate the title poem, 'Crossing the Snowline'. For most of their lives, my paternal grandparents lived a mock-Tudor mansion in The International Settlement in Shanghai, which they defiantly christened 'Thornthwaite'. Even today, the Red Guards who appropriated the property are still scuffing the immaculate baize lawns of my grandfather's billiards table. Worn out by the heat, rather than fear of revolution, they migrated (via Hampshire) to Pau, capital of the *département* Pyrenées-Atlantiques. There has been an English colony in Pau since Wellington passed through with a victorious army in 1814. Many returned to live.

Architecture in central Pau is Swiss Calvinist. Each morning, my grandparents would walk the elevated Boulevard des Pyrenées and study a one-hundred kilometre stretch of the brooding, snow-capped Pyrenees and plan excursions. When I visited their old quarters last summer, the almost sinister Pyrenees were still snow-capped. The French call them the savage frontier, replete with brown bears, wolves and multiple birds of prey. The weather is notoriously unstable, a mist potentially fatal. I had been to Pau before, en route to St-Jean-Pied-de-Port and what became a terrifying, seminal experience up in the mountains. Eight kilometres from the Spanish frontier three main pilgrim routes converge at St Jean en route to Santiago de Compostela. Darkish mountains dominate the city. Every pilgrim is reputed to have left the Porte d'Espagne with a terrible sense of foreboding for the journey over the mountains, the struggle over the pass, the demons up there, circling.



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Parallel to their route, one day I drove from there to Esterencuby and then on to narrow windy mountain-top roads up past Errozate, high on the border with Spain. As I left the car to continue higher on foot, twelve griffon vultures circled overhead. High on a craggy ridge, I suddenly found myself looking down into a prehistoric dolmen or stone circle on a south-facing slope. At the centre was a grassy bowl, fern, moss, rivulets.

After a while, I started to sense spirits circling, ancient voices, even the idea of 'being in God' yet the spirits felt apart, pagan. Overhead, slowly the wind rose, the sky darkened, mist formed. I was being drawn in by the spirits to the place. They suggested it might be wonderful to stay, forever. So completely removed from 'our time', fearful, I got up, left.

It was then I understood the fear of the pilgrims leaving St Jean for Santiago de Compostela, and the idea that an apprehension of the utterly pagan is a precondition for 'seeing God'.

This is all to say why I was fascinated by Stainer's title poem, and her parallel poem (p 55) 'Border Crossing'. Briefly, I understand how 'the sculptors of Kilpeck / on the road / to Santiago de Compostela... / some never made it back / through the wilderness / to chisel / a sleeping Christ.' For, in remarkable lines they:

...lie fallow  
under their larch ceiling  
as if amazed  
by the irrepressible light  
at the burial of the stars.

As if a continuation, the parallel poem starts: 'Don't look back. The dead thrum / through the marram grass / in search of a voice.' Read on!

We are told *Crossing the Snowline* emerged as recovery from the death of a daughter. At times, it reads as if one is constantly turning a corner to encounter part of a Renaissance masterpiece and Stainer does provide many references to painters or paintings. Poems about paintings can be notoriously creaky and boring, but here the glimpses of paintings form part of a 'lived vision' and the book is prefaced by a quotation new to me from Simone Weil: 'There is only one fault, incapacity to feed on light'. This preoccupation is balanced by a poem such as 'Water-spiral'. It is wonderfully non-didactic and illuminating.

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Christopher Truman has built a web site for his line art. His poetry has been widely anthologised.

# Mayday Notes



## Not Kingdom Come

It would be myopic and complacent to say that justice and peace reigns on Earth and the West is Kingdom Come, which, in any event, in a globalised world has to be global, embracing the whole of humanity.

If we look first to the Western Superpower, the USA, we see, for example:

- the illegal invasion of Iraq which has led to over 1 million deaths; other invasions and wars;
- torture in Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib, authorised at the highest levels of US government (some of these tortures appeared previously in CIA training manuals);
- secret ‘rendition’ flights and prisons;
- a history of support for brutal dictators to promote US interests abroad, plus support for Israel however violently it behaves (see below);
- military personnel (including members of death squads and many dictators) trained in repressive ‘counter-insurgency’ techniques in the USA;
- trade policies such as NAFTA that benefit large US corporations at the expense trading ‘partners’ in poorer countries;
- a Great Wall along the US-Mexico border to keep out ‘illegals’ ensures free movement of goods but not of people;
- the USA does not acknowledge the jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice and flouts its rulings;
- the USA has not adopted the Kyoto Protocol on climate change;
- at home, the USA has the widest gap between rich and poor of any advanced Western nation;
- death penalty in some states;
- no free national health service;
- many homeless people, some designated by the insulting term ‘sub prime’;
- failure to bring relief to flooded New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Was this because most of the population was black, ‘sub prime’?

It would be easy to go on but let this be the beginnings of a checklist for new President Obama. Of course, this grim list does not alter the more cheering fact that there are many wonderful things and people in the USA and hope for the future.

We have no reason to be smug about Britain, ‘America’s closest ally’. Britain has supported inhumane US policies – including the illegal invasion of Iraq, using the ‘dodgy dossier’ – and aped its increasing gap between rich and poor

and homelessness (45,000 homes were repossessed in the UK in 2008). We have people sleeping rough in bitter cold, asylum seekers imprisoned in camps, suspension of *habeas corpus* in anti-terror legislation and growing threats to civil liberties; creeping privatisation schemes in the NHS; water services owned by private companies (including all the infrastructure – England is one of only 3 countries in the world to allow this) and many other essential services privately owned...

## Carry on Smiting

One of the most shocking things in the nightly horror stories on the news of the recent war on Gaza was the response of the Israeli government spokespeople – not only the lack of concern they showed for UN schools bombed, the Red Cross blockaded, children left starving for days beside their dead mothers – but their *sense of entitlement*. Carry on smiting, I thought, remembering Joshua.

‘Joshua said: “By this you shall know that among you is the living God, who without fail will drive out from before you the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites and Jebusites” (Josh.3:10). ‘When Israel had finished slaughtering all the inhabitants of Ai in the open wilderness where they pursued them, and when all of them to the very last had fallen by the edge of the sword, all Israel returned to Ai and attacked it with the edge of the sword. The total of those who fell that day, both men and women, was twelve thousand – all the people of Ai.’ (8:24-5). ‘So Joshua defeated the whole land, the hill country and the Negeb and the lowland and the slopes, and all their kings; he left no one remaining, but utterly destroyed all that breathed, as the Lord God of Israel commanded’ (10:40). Jahweh has a lot to answer for. However if Jahweh were arraigned before the International Court at The Hague, doubtless he would say he did not acknowledge its jurisdiction (like Israel itself or its backer the USA). The USA abstained on the January 9th 2009 UN resolution calling for a ceasefire in Gaza – thereby giving Israel ‘permission’ to carry on – and quite often seems to think it is Jahweh.

N.B. Of course, not all Jews support Israel’s policy and behaviour towards the Palestinians. At the march for Gaza on January 10th (estimated at 100,000 strong), in Hyde Park I saw substantial contingents of Jews, including the great banner of Jews for Palestine.



*Christ Pantocrator*