



How's Your Father?



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s'f'ia 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.

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How's Your Father?

What does it mean to be a father and why is God called Father?

For this issue of *Sofia* on fatherhood, I did not commission any articles but called for contributions from SOF Network members, saying they could be about anything to do with fatherhood, from personal reminiscences to literary or theological reflections. As you will read, I had a rich and varied response.

The only article I did specifically ask for was permission to reprint a talk about fatherhood given by Duncan Dormor, Dean of St John's College Cambridge. He graciously gave permission and that talk has become our leading article. It covers both some of the problems facing modern fathers and a look at the fatherhood of God in both the Old and the New Testaments. But what I found irresistible in his talk was a quotation from Martin Luther's *On the Estate of Marriage* (1522) grumbling about all he has to do for his infant (but nevertheless feeling that infant to be a most wonderful gift):

Alas, must I rock the baby, wash its nappies, make its bed, smell its stench, stay up nights with it, take care of it when it cries, heal its rashes and sores...

It is a delightful picture but perhaps women may be forgiven a dash of scepticism: *did he really?* (I recall that when my first child was born – in 1963 not 1522! – his father, my husband, would not even push the pram.)

Among contributions from SOF members we have an article by our Vice-Chair Mary Lloyd on Silas Marner and Eppie his foundling daughter, two personal memoirs, one by an adopted and the other by a natural son, together with pieces about positive and negative aspects of the idea of God the Father: as creator and provider, but also as prop of patriarchy and sacrificer of his Son.

Partly in order to overcome such problems as 'why does God not intervene to prevent natural disasters?' Adrian B. Smith says in his article that the image of God the Father needs to be superseded by a 'panentheist' God, a divine all-pervading Energy. He thinks this 'Ultimate Reality' or 'Godhead beyond God' is real, whereas images like that of God as Father are human creations. *Sofia* Editor thinks *both* 'God the Father' and 'Godhead beyond God' are human creations. But we did *not* create the energy that moves the universe and gives us our life. Just as human fathers can be good or bad, Cosmic Energy can manifest itself both as 'eternal delight' and as 'an eternal fierce destruction': but why should we call it God? 'God the Energy' is just as problematic as 'God the Father' and *both* are poetic images.

However, I do think the metaphor created by the human poetic genius of a Father God is still powerful in two ways. Firstly as 'Sky Father'. This is a way of acknowledging that I did *not* create the Cosmos. It existed long before me and after a long process of evolution, I came into being as one of the transient living beings that this Cosmos has produced.

Secondly, our Father can stand for 'the fathers that begat us': our *cultural* ancestors. As Lloyd Geering puts it in his essay 'Saving the Planet' (*Time and Tide*, SOF 2001):

In learning to value the totality of human culture and spirituality, we also come to realise how dependent we are on our own cultural inheritance. In the past, our spiritual forebears felt themselves to be dependent on the will and activity of God, the supreme supernatural being. For us that feeling of dependence on God has been replaced by a feeling of dependence on the countless generations before us who helped to create the culture we inherited. What our forebears once attributed to the creativity of the divine heavenly creator, we must now attribute to our cultural ancestors and *with a similar degree of gratitude*.

We *receive* our life from our parents and ultimately from the energy of the Cosmos; we *inherit* our culture from our ancestors. We can be grateful to the Cosmos and our cultural forbears for what we have received, with what could be called *filiial* gratitude. In our lifetime we may hope to pass on the life we have received to children or contribute to the culture we have inherited.

But the 'God the Father' metaphor is apt only up to a point. Or rather, fatherhood itself has light and dark sides. Jesus portrays God as a caring Father, who cares for every hair on our heads:

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all counted. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows. (Mt 10:29)

What man of you if his son asks him for bread will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him? (Mt 7: 9)

Jesus is clearly wrong about what often happens. There are many people in the world without bread, who pray and beg for it and still starve. Others suffer terrible pain, which is not relieved, however hard they pray. Sometimes it seems appropriate to picture God as a caring Father, but sometimes he seems more like an absent or cruel father. Human fathers can be all these things: loving, caring, providing, absent, indifferent, abusive; fathers are much more likely to abandon, harm or kill their children than mothers. The Cosmos originates life and contains everything that is needed to sustain human life in general, but the Cosmos doesn't care.

And then we have the Agony in the Garden. Jesus prays: 'Father, if you are willing, take away this cup from me; nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done' (Lk 22:42). Jesus believes his Father *wants* him to go through horrible pain and death, and accepts his Father's will. 'And his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground' (v. 44). What kind of a father wants that, does that to his child? Certainly not a very good father in our eyes. When a father kills his children we think of that act as monstrous.

I have also often wondered about the Father in the Pauline drama of the Cosmic Christ. For example he writes to the Corinthians (I:15:24):

Then the end will come, when Christ hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power...For he 'has put everything under his feet.' Now when it says that 'everything' has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all.

That is not what sons usually do. They usually grow up and *supersede* their fathers. A son who always remains subject to his father is not an adult. I have eventually come to the conclusion that the answer lies in another Pauline concept: that of Christ's body, a whole humanity as 'the fullness of Christ'. Then the finale of his great sweeping cosmic drama would be Christ the Son as humanity's 'namesake hero' *taking over* from his Father. An adult humanity cannot remain *subject* to its father; we have to take our own decisions and not rely on God to help us out. God in that sense is dead. As Thomas Hardy wrote in his poem 'God's Funeral' almost exactly a hundred years ago:

O man-projected Figure, of late
Imaged as we, thy knell who shall survive?
Whence came it we were tempted to create
One whom we can no longer keep alive? ...

And, tricked by our own early dream
And need of solace, we grew self-deceived,
Our making soon our maker did we deem,
And what we had imagined we believed.

Nevertheless, not just at its birth but day by day until its end, life continues to be something we *receive*. If we keep 'God the Father' as a metaphor for the Cosmos which generates and sustains us, and for our cultural heritage from previous generations, it is a metaphor that applies in quite a complex way, bringing out positive and negative aspects of fatherhood, as are found in human fathers.

Returning to human fathers, at the beginning of this editorial I mentioned one who in the 1960s would not even push the pram. In contrast to that, I am deeply impressed by what I see of many young fathers today, who often share in the hard work of childcare that Luther grumbles about so ruefully. Recently, in freak April brilliant sunshine we had a family picnic on Hampstead Heath. I conclude with the image of my son-in-law helping his two sons, aged four and two, to start climbing a big tree. Then when another family member came over to be with the little ones on the low branch, he climbed on up nearly to the top. He looked much like a boy himself and all three climbers seemed to enjoy themselves hugely.

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Rediscovering Fatherhood – in the Gaze of the Infant

Duncan Dormor takes a fresh look at the meaning of fatherhood.

Much of the ‘problem’ with fatherhood today, is I suspect tied up with broader uncertainties that men have about their identity and their social role as a result of the rapid social changes that have occurred over the last few decades. These changes have been profound and far-reaching bringing increased autonomy and choice to many, both men as well as women, but equally bringing uncertainty. Women have moved firmly into the public world of work, territory that was traditionally male, and within the home, husbands and wives with complementary roles and functions have evolved into partners with more fluid patterns of reciprocity. For our grandfathers and great-grandfathers the status of a responsible married man (and father) was underpinned by his trade and ability to provide for his family, and within the family fatherhood was accompanied by a certain authority and leadership. What a father was and what a father did was understood; his identity was tied to a role and to certain characteristic functions – he provided, protected and probably disciplined. For many of his grandsons things do not seem to be as simple, for stripped of such clear functions and authority, fathers can seem in our society to be auxiliaries, less important and less competent than the superior model on offer based on motherhood.

Social change is never straightforward and naturally older patterns and ideas persist and continue to influence and shape our current thinking in a myriad of subtle ways. Mothers are widely held to possess a ‘maternal instinct’ (despite passionate disavowals from many) and post-divorce settlements usually conclude that the child’s interests are better served by residence with mothers. As a result, fatherhood is frequently defined and therefore thought about in a minimal fashion – in terms of biology. Indeed, this reductive understanding is swiftly becoming the dominant understanding of fatherhood in our society. Paternity is ‘tested’ genetically and the results seem to establish the status of fatherhood; that is, a father is a father because he is the source, because he can establish a biological claim. Such an understanding of fatherhood is fed by a sense that our identity as humans is ‘really’ genetic and ties this to the contemporary emphasis on and exercise of individual rights (including increasingly, ‘the right



Martin Luther and his wife Katharina von Bora

to have a child’) within relationships. Clearly biological relationship is important yet this stress on genetics in how we think of who we are, and legal rights in how we relate to others leads to an impoverished understanding of fatherhood as a sort of property right, ultimately based upon generative power. In trying to rediscover and refresh the meaning of fatherhood, we might start by considering the nature of God as Father, the gift of the child and the vocation of the parent.

Yet if one turns to look at the idea of God as Father in the Bible, things are not perhaps as one might anticipate. The idea of God as a sort of founding father is of course, a common one in a number of religions, but it is not where the Bible starts in its attempt to speak of God. Rather, we find in *Exodus* that God is named as ‘I am that I am’. That is, God is revealed in a fashion almost explicitly designed to prevent his followers producing a mental image of ‘him’, he cannot easily be reduced to ‘one of us’, rather he is – Other. He is not a Father God who begets or generates his people. Even when the metaphor of God as Father is finally introduced it is in the prophetic writings of *Isaiah*, *Jeremiah* and *Hosea*, where the clear focus is eschatological; that is, on a future time when the relationship between God and his people will be more fully realised as being that of a parent and child. Perhaps more significantly, it is quite clear that the Israel or Ephraim that God ‘taught to walk’ and ‘took up in his arms’ (*Hosea* 11:3) is an adopted child.

In fact the references in the Old Testament to God as Father are few (roughly twenty). Rather, it is in the New Testament that God emerges as Father and here we find that the fatherhood of God can only be understood through the revelation of the Son. It is because of Jesus that God can be understood as Father, it is because the Son can be seen that the Father can be known. It is because of the cross and resurrection, that far from being a distant, 'absent' father, God can be invoked in the most intimate of terms as 'Abba', daddy.

The character of fatherhood emerges as a response to the infant and the growing child.

The character of fatherhood, I would suggest, is not to be discovered through the paternity test, nor is it located in a set of functions (e.g. the breadwinner or indeed the one who does the washing), nor even in a particular understanding of the role of the male parent (e.g. the parent who exercises discipline), rather it emerges, indeed it is constituted, as a response to the infant and the growing child. The infant lays a claim to a parent. This is caught in Marilynne Robinson's sustained and moving account of fatherhood, *Gilead*, in which the central character, the aging Reverend John Ames writes of the son whom he will not see reach adulthood:

I realise there is nothing more astonishing than a human face... It has something to do with incarnation. You feel your obligation to a child when you have seen it and held it. Any human face is a claim on you, because you can't help but understand the singularity of it, the courage and loneliness of it. But this is truest of the face of the infant. I consider that to be one kind of vision, as mystical as any.

The child is the gift that creates the response that makes the parent. There are then no particular rules about how that parent, male or female, responds to that gift. The response of the father is simply one shaped by masculinity. Of course, this is not to deny that there are some common patterns and familiar dynamics that go to make up the steps of the dance of family life as it unfolds: Times when it is a father rather than a mother that is sought or desired and times when a certain distance is required or maternal presence preferred: Times when the identification and hero-worship of the small boy for his father

is consolidated through a shared love of football; Times when the acknowledgement and appreciation of difference makes 'Daddy's little girl' seek out her father during the storms of adolescence.

Fundamentally then, in responding to the needs and desires of the infant and growing child, fatherhood, like motherhood, is a vocation and in understanding and deepening our evolving response to the gift of the child, no task is off limits to the parent. Of course it is a gift that generates a great deal of work. As Martin Luther, the former monk who had already adjusted to having 'pigtales on the pillow' before raising six children, makes clear in his writing, *On the Estate of Marriage* (1522) – which is, incidentally, refreshingly egalitarian in its vision of parenthood – fathering, or house-fathering as he calls it, is pretty demanding:

Alas, must I rock the baby, wash its nappies, make its bed, smell its stench, stay up nights with it, take care of it when it cries, heal its rashes and sores, and on top of that care for my wife, provide for her...

Yet, Luther argues, it is also a high calling to which the individual Christian man might well respond:

O God, because I am certain that thou hast created me as a man and hast from my body begotten this child, I also know for a certainty that it meets with thy perfect pleasure. I confess to thee that I am not worthy to rock the little babe or wash its nappies, or to be entrusted with the care of the child and its mother. How is it that I, without any merit, have come to this distinction of being certain that I am serving thy creature and thy most precious will? Oh, how gladly will I do so, though the duties should be even more insignificant and despised. Neither frost nor heat, neither drudgery nor labour, will distress or dissuade me, for I am certain that it is thus pleasing in thy sight.

Whilst men may not always express it effectively, or indeed constructively, sadly, ironically, the experience of losing close contact with their children following relationship breakdown, often uncovers a depth of emotional connection that surprises them, and indeed others. This suggests to me that the possibilities for rediscovering and deepening something of the awe, the privilege and the sense of gift-edness that lies at the heart of fatherhood are underestimated at our peril.

Duncan Dormor is Dean of St John's College, Cambridge. This article was first published in the Spring 2006 issue of *Flame Newslines*.

Silas Marner's Pure Gold

Mary Lloyd revisits George Eliot's *Silas Marner* and his adopted daughter Eppie.

When Godfrey Cass, the Squire of Raveloe, calls late one evening on the poor weaver, Silas Marner, he has convinced himself that he is there to do his duty and to act in the best interests of Silas and his adopted daughter, Eppie. Some seventeen years before, tempted into a dissolute and passionate liaison, Godfrey had fathered a child, hastily and secretly married the mother, rapidly regretted his actions and effectively abandoned both mother and daughter. Living in fear of discovery for a couple of years, his problems were apparently solved when the mother collapsed dead in the snow near Silas's cottage and the child – attracted by the light – toddled by accident through Silas's door and fell asleep on his hearth.

A fable for our time, as well as for her own, George Eliot's *Silas Marner* encourages the reader to reflect on the nature of fatherhood, as Silas, apparently the most unlikely of candidates for the role, rediscovers his own joy and purpose in life through his love for Eppie. Contrasted with this is the part that her 'natural' father plays in her life. When Eppie first appears, as if by some magic, in Silas's one-room weaver's cottage, remote from the village, he has for years lived in isolation, taking no part in village life, calling only on his customers and regarded by all as slightly crazy, slightly dangerous. He suffers from catalepsy, which he tries to hide by remaining isolated. He is a 'foreigner' from an industrial town some 100 miles further north – another world. Self-exiled from this former life, he has lost all faith and hope in other people and in the Calvinist religion which was once the centre of his being. The obsessive rhythm of weaving, counting the golden guineas gained by his trade, fondling and arranging them in the evening firelight, has become his only contact with the normal rhythm of life. When even his guineas are stolen, he carries on like an automaton, ageing into the appearance and habits of an elderly recluse whilst still in his thirties.

A candidate for fostering a tiny girl who would undoubtedly be dismissed without a second thought by our contemporary agencies! And yet, from the very first moment, the child who has appeared suddenly in front of the fire on New Year's Eve (while he was in one of his fits) reawakens 'old quiverings of tenderness'. At first sight perceiving her golden curls as his beloved guineas brought mysteriously back to him, his realisation on touching them suggests, equally magically, that his little sister – long dead – has 'come back to him in a dream'. As the child wakes, he 'stooped to lift it on to his knees' ... 'it clung round his neck' ... 'Silas pressed it to him'. From the very first, he meets the child's needs with sense and imagination – a combination of falling under her spell and a practical understanding of her needs.

He reheats and sweetens his cold porridge – with sugar he denies himself – feeds her, follows anxiously as she toddles about, and finally understands that her wet boots are hurting, so takes them off and shares with her chuckling at 'the mystery of her own toes'.

By the time he has carried the child outside, realising that her footsteps in the snow lead to the body of a woman, and braved with unthinking courage the journey with her to the Squire's house in search of the doctor, Silas is a changed man. The bond has been established. Challenged by the expectations of the company that someone else – or the parish – will take care of the child, he is adamant: 'No – no – I can't part with it, I can't let it go. It's come to me – I've a right to keep it... Till anybody shows they've a right to take her away from me. The mother's dead, and I reckon it's got no father ... she'll be my little 'un. She'll be nobody else's.'

Silas Marner would undoubtedly be dismissed without a second thought by our contemporary adoption agencies!

At the same time, the Squire's son, Godfrey, is torn apart by his immediate recognition that it is his child, his fear (for which he despises himself) that the mother may *not* be dead, and his private admission that 'he ought to accept the consequences of his deed, own the miserable wife, and fulfil the claims of the helpless child'. He allows himself to be comforted, at the same time as being pierced with pain, by the fact that 'the blue eyes turned away from him slowly, and fixed themselves on the weaver's queer face'.

With the support of the wise but unlettered Dolly Winthrop, Silas becomes connected with the village community. He agrees (against his old religious code) to have his daughter christened after his sister, Hephzibah (signifying 'my delight in her' and shortened to Eppie) and develops into a patiently loving father who cannot bear to punish the mischievous, intrepid little girl for whom he creates 'a nest of downy patience' for the child who was continually 'reawakening his senses with her fresh life ... and warming him into joy because she had joy'. The villagers revise their opinion of him and come to respect him for 'what he had done for an orphan child'.



Eliot's tender delineation of the conversations which denote the mature, 'tender and peculiar' love between Silas and Eppie as a young woman of seventeen, marked by reflections on her approaching marriage, her plans that Silas will always live with them and his recognition of how her arrival restored him to life. This intimate conversation is interrupted by the arrival on their doorstep of Godfrey Cass and his wife, Nancy. Godfrey, who has finally found the strength to admit to his childless – and adored – wife, Nancy, that Eppie is his child, is there to attempt to make amends for his long years of cowardice, by adopting her.

He begins by offering to repay Marner's lost guineas – which, he now knows, were stolen by his brother Dunsey – and continues with an expression of his desire to provide for Eppie, to adopt her as his daughter. Faced with Silas's lack of interest in the gold which was once the centre of his life, and Eppie's declaration that she 'couldn't give up the folks I've been used to,' Godfrey is goaded into the admission that he had not wanted to make so soon: that Eppie is his daughter. Strengthened by Eppie's hostility to the idea and goaded by Cass's prompting –: 'But I have a claim on you, Eppie – the strongest of all claims. It is my duty' – Silas mounts an eloquent defence of the rights of the adoptive father:

'Then, sir, why didn't you say so sixteen year ago, and claim her before I'd come to love her?... When a man turns a blessing from his door, it falls to them as take it in.'

Cass is forced to accept that he has failed; all he can do for Eppie now is to provide material comforts to make her chosen life easier. Set against Godfrey's and Nancy's shared belief that 'blood' should always have the prior claim, we are aware of the years of selfless love on Silas's part, which has resulted in Eppie's total devotion to the only man she can think of as Father. In the end, all Godfrey can give is money. He finally comes to accept this later that evening, at home, when he recognises that: 'There's debts we can't pay like money debts, by paying extra for the years that have slipped by. While I've been putting off and putting off, the trees have been growing – it's too late now.' Godfrey finds himself in almost the same position as absent fathers are today – legally bound to provide material

support for their offspring but often not permitted to spend much time with them, even when they wish to do so. It is recognised that the biological father cannot just come back and expect his child – and the world – to welcome his change of heart with open arms whenever he chooses. The devoted foster father has proved his claim to the child through years of physical support and an almost inseparable companionship.

George Eliot wrote of *Silas Marner* that her aim was, 'to set in a strong light the remedial influences of pure, natural human relations'. To serve that humanist purpose, the religious beliefs of Raveloe are downgraded. Influenced by her translations of Strauss and Feuerbach, and study of Comte and Goethe, Eliot has come to realise that her positivist belief in 'the pure emanation of feeling' is incompatible with any system of religious doctrine. She recognises that changing religious beliefs, myth and legends are stages in the progress of the intellect and, like other freethinkers, saw the need to develop new mythologies for our own times. She would, undoubtedly, have been one of the brightest stars of SOF if we had only invented ourselves a century earlier.

Mary Lloyd is Vice Chair of SOF and taught English Literature to university entrance level for 25 years. She currently works as a research lecturer at the School of Education of the University of Greenwich.



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God and Patriarchy

Anna Sutcliffe muses on God the Father as a product of patriarchy.



George Herbert at Bemerton

Why should God be any kind of father or any specific thing in nature? We know why, of course, it's because all ideas of God – all ideas of anything – come from patriarchal societies, more or less. For all I know, such social forms may have – have had – evolutionary advantage. We can toy with the idea that the price may have been too high. It's a free country. All the 'extant' religions may be, to a greater or lesser degree, modifiable to take account – for instance – of a different valuation of the relationship between men and women – or maybe not?

For me, all attempts to describe divinity in terms of things are part of *poetic* thinking. (I am using the word to include all the works of 'makers', in literature, music, visual arts). Characteristic of such enterprises is the contextual, existential nature of the images – they work within the forms in which they operate – or not). This is very different from the elevation of image clusters into fixed systems. However, we must accept that any 'poetic thinkers' are part of some culture or other – one must start somewhere. The very greatest poetry in English – say, the poems of George Herbert – depend on Christianity. I would say that they partake-of but transcend the religious system in which they originated, as do – again, I would say – the Annunciation frescoes of Fra Angelico, which altogether transcend, to my mind, the prurient doctrines concerning the mother of Jesus, whilst being formally dependent upon the story in scripture.

Not all effusions of Christian feeling are dependent on the imagery of patriarchy. Consider the George

Matheson (died 1906) hymn: 'O Love that will not let me go.' This is a favourite of mine, though I suppose *qua* poetry it is hardly on the George Herbert level.

O Love that will not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee;
I give thee back the life I owe
that in thine ocean depths its flow
may richer, fuller be.

O Light that follows all my way,
I yield my flickering torch to thee;
my heart restores its borrowed ray
that in thy sunshine blaze its day
may brighter, fairer be.

O Joy that seekest me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to thee;
I trace the rainbow through the rain
and feel the promise is not vain
that morn shall tearless be.

O Cross that liftest up my head,
I dare not ask to fly from thee;
I lay in dust life's glory dead
and from the ground there blossoms red
life that shall endless be.

Granted the capital letters, you'll note that there isn't a patriarchal image from beginning to end. Indeed, but for the cross in stanza four, there's no reference to Christianity. The image of the red blossoms does put me in mind of George Herbert's image:

Who would have thought my shrivelled heart
could have recovered greenness? It was gone
quite underground...

The assured piety of both men is unlikely to be discovered today in work by poets of greater or lesser degree. You can't muck about with history. This does not mean that the considerable poets now writing do not deal with our troubles and aspirations as seriously as did the earlier poets – in terms true to our authentic contemporary doubts, fears, consolations, and all.

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

My Father's Name was Jock

Ken Smith remembers his father, who died three years ago aged 97.

My father's name was Jock. Already the process of understanding has been slowed by the association that nick-name has with all things Scottish. It picks up speed again when I tell you what I learned just a year or so before he died. On the first day he turned up aged 14 for work at the local builder's yard, his future work-mates, laughing good humouredly at his diminutive size, lifted him up on to the work bench and not liking Wally – the name his family used, said 'hello little jock(ey)'. Dad died on my wedding anniversary three years ago a few weeks short of his 97th birthday still refusing to answer to any of his baptismal names – Walter Charles George.

He spent most of his working life, after serving an apprenticeship as a plumber, in the employ of the Royal biscuit manufacturers Huntley and Palmer. He serviced the cake-making machines that among other things produced countless Royal Wedding and Baptismal Cakes as well as the biscuit machines that produced the ginger nuts on which I cut my first teeth. And he had flat feet.

My wife's father who spent most of his working life in the same factory as Jock – and the reason you are reading these words is in no small measure due to that fact – didn't have flat feet and as a result nearly died several times when the British Fleet protecting our country came under fire from the German Navy. He died young of cancer of the oesophagus almost certainly caused by ingesting engine oil from the torpedoed ships he was serving on. He became a good swimmer! On one occasion he trod water for hours supporting a shipmate until he died. But all this meant that my wife was an only child. Thank-you for nothing, Adolf! But because of Jock's flat feet, my brother and I had the benefit of two parents living at home throughout the War.

He was born in one of the slummier parts of the town. His mum was the local – if unofficial – midwife and layer-out-of-the dead with an almost witch-like reputation in the neighbourhood. He was baptised a Catholic, was probably of Irish descent. I remember him as a singer and treader of the boards from my earliest childhood. I grew up with 'Danny Boy' and 'I'll take you home again, Kathleen' – songs he could still sing in the last year of his long life. Jock went to the only Catholic School in town – built, not very subtly but powerfully and maybe a touch defiantly, adjacent to the ruins of one of the Monasteries

abolished by Henry VIII. Many of his schoolmates were Italian. Maybe they taught him to sing and dance! He left at fourteen because his mum either couldn't or wouldn't pay to let him go on to further education.

In the Catholic Holy Year 1925, Pope Pius XI wished to direct the attention of the faithful to the need to expand the missionary work of the Church.

He called a Pilgrimage and the devout came in their droves, from all over Europe, to Rome. Jock was chosen to represent the local Catholic Scout Group on the pilgrimage to the Holy City. It made a huge impression on him and he could still speak in vivid detail about it in the months before his death. The high point was an audience with His Holiness, though he couldn't remember if he shook the holy hand. The next and last time he left England was 67 years later around 1992 when I took him for a day trip to Boulogne.

For most of his life he called Germans – Jerries. Dark skinned immigrants were always Blackies. The family bookshelf held no more than a couple of dozen volumes. With hindsight, I see my parents as not very emotionally mature. They were law-abiding in the

extreme. They adored each other. There was no mention of sex in our childhood. There were also tensions across the divide that transparently separated my dad's and my mum's family. I suspect that some of those tensions were religious, whether conscious or not. I lived with anti-Catholic prejudice for years, even taking it with me into theological college. At eleven I passed the exam to the Boys' Grammar School half a mile or less from my home. As a reward Dad bought me my first real bike. We had one holiday every year until I left school. The rest of the time I swotted and became an introvert – and a boy scout – like him.

With hindsight I think I became the priest (but in the Church of England) that maybe my Dad should have become. Except that if he had (become a Catholic priest) I wouldn't – if you see what I mean – wouldn't have become anything. Wouldn't even have been. My dad belonged to a religion with a god with no body, parts or passions, and his official representatives on earth – like Him – couldn't/shouldn't have sex. It's the biggest contraceptive that has slipped into Catholic credal orthodoxy – in disguise and so unchallenged.



Jock as a young man

But on the other hand, these words are being written by someone who was so ill two years ago that I more than once uttered Job's complaint: 'Would that I had died in my mother's womb'. In those pain-filled days I felt, and occasionally still do feel, ambivalent about my parents' honeymoon, where I started to be. But things are as they are. Latterly – many years latterly to my enormous regret – I escaped from my narrow protestant fundamentalism, which had been the result of my father agreeing in advance – out of love for his wife to be – that the official family religion would be Church of England. Then I began to warm to the more sacramental, poetic, aesthetic, musical aspects of religion, a warmth that I came to suspect, originated,

but sadly remained latent and undeveloped in my Dad. Happily I was loved, parented – not fathered and mothered. It was the togetherness that I remember and feel shaped by. But because the Church with its bible created a male god (without parts or passions), who underwrote and perpetuated the primitive demand for blood sacrifice, I still think we should be cautious and ambivalent about fathering – with its implicit claim to primariness and superiority.

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

Abraham, Isaac and the Prodigal Son

John Theodore Cragg thinks about some positive and negative aspects of fatherhood in the Bible.

One of the most powerful images of fatherhood in the bible is the story of Abraham being sent by God to sacrifice his son Isaac. When Abraham actually raises his knife over the bound body of his son, God speaks to him telling him not to kill his son but rather Abraham sacrifices a ram caught in a thicket. God is so pleased by Abraham's behaviour that he swears to him that he will 'bless you abundantly and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky....'

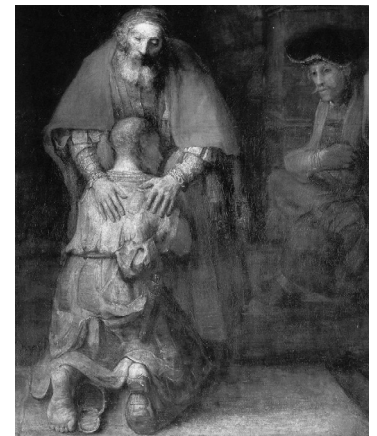
We would think Abraham guilty of a cruelty to his son; but if nothing else, the story highlights the terrible strength and power a father can exert over his child. It is reminiscent of Freud's theory that fathers may wish to castrate their sons. Effectively Abraham puts Isaac through this terrible ordeal to secure the future of his offspring as a great nation.

This image of Abraham and Isaac is severe and harsh and the story of the Prodigal Son told by Jesus certainly shows a more loving aspect. The father accepts his errant son back into the loving family fold despite his having wasted his wealth and broken his morality with wild women and luxury. I like to change the story and make the son come back as a rich man having made great wealth as a ruthless trader ignoring the father's cherished rules of correct behaviour. Would the father be just as pleased and the elder righteous brother as aggrieved? Fatherhood is clearly closely involved with making sure rules are obeyed, particularly if he has mostly obeyed them himself; but worldly success is hard to resist especially if we can ignore the ways it has been achieved.

We have established this contrast between the father who is prepared to go as far as sacrificing the life of his son to obey God and the loving father who receives his son back as a beggar who has wasted his inheritance in riotous living. The story of Abraham's willingness

to sacrifice his son is sometimes held to prefigure God's sacrifice of his only son Jesus. To me this whole idea of sacrificing a son seems abhorrent and totally at odds with our ideas of parenthood.

It is almost beyond imagination what it must feel like to be sent by your father on a mission to die. But I feel we should respect the idea, hold it as an appropriate object of contemplation.



Rembrandt: *Return of the Prodigal Son*

It's perhaps interesting to contrast Buddhism where Siddhartha who became the Buddha disobeyed his father's wishes for him to become a king by escaping from the palace and adopting the life of a wandering ascetic. In this light it appears that both Judaism and Christianity particularly emphasize the authority of the father. In defence of Christianity we should remember that in the Gospel according to St Luke Jesus is reported to say that anyone who does not hate his own father and mother cannot be his disciple. However I personally think this was a big minus for Christianity as what could be more important for survival than love and cooperation within the family?

John Theodore Cragg retired recently from his job as an escort on an Age Concern ambulance. He now does voluntary work preparing food parcels at St Mary Magdalene's Centre for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Holloway Road.

God The Father – or Not?

Adrian B. Smith argues that divine energy does not come from a Being above, outside the Universe, but from an influence, a power, within it.

Throughout human history there has been an evolution in all cultures of humanity's perception of the Ultimate Reality. The image of God as a transcendent superlative human being, with which we in the West are most familiar, is that of the Judeo-Christian tradition. But since images change with the advances of human knowledge, no one image can be set in concrete for all time. Not even that used by Jesus: God as Father.



A cow thinking 'cowly'

Xenophanes, the Greek philosopher wrote: 'Human beings think of gods as having been born, wearing clothes, speaking and having bodies like their own. Ethiopians say the gods are black with snub noses. Thracians say they have blue eyes and red hair. If cows and horses had hands they would draw pictures of the gods looking like cows and horses.'

Cows can only think 'cowly' and horses 'horsely'. So humans can only think of God as having all the human attributes of love, justice, forgiveness, mercy, etc, to the 'nth' degree. As humans we can do no other. However, while God may not be beyond our experience or imagination, God, as the Ultimate Reality, is completely beyond our intellectual comprehension. In the Middle Ages, the German mystic Meister Eckhart made the distinction between God and the Godhead. As a semi-non-realist I find this an essential distinction. The Godhead is way beyond our human comprehension, but as Christians we need some way of relating to the Divine and so we create an image of God with superlative human attributes.

In our own time the same distinction has been made by the theologian Paul Tillich writing of 'the God above God' as 'the object of all mystical longing'. We find the same distinction made by Hindu teachers over two millennia ago who speak of 'God Unmanifest': Nirguna

God, the eternal self-existing divine reality, and 'God manifest': Saguna God. This latter is God in relation to his creation expressed with human attributes but to a superlative degree: personality, omniscience, goodness, love, omnipotence.

The idea of God as Trinity (with God the Father 'on top') I understand as a sociological pattern, as just one more attempt to comprehend God. The infelicitous aspect of the Father image, is that it portrays a God who looks after us: an interventionist God. The notion favoured by those who like to imagine God as 'sitting up there in a celestial phone booth' to answer human prayers, does also evoke such questions as why God does not intervene to prevent natural disasters such as the tsunami, a drought, a flood; why are some people chosen to be rescued while others are allowed to perish; why is this young person taken in her prime, and why does another have to endure a prolonged agonising death? Why indeed does a Father God allow his children to suffer? Does God have favourites?

Gregory Baum wrote in *Man Becoming*: 'God is not an object of which man may have an observer knowledge. Why? Because God is present in the very man who knows God and in the very process of knowing God.' Today we need a third way between the inaccessible, transcendent Godhead and the immanent human-like Father God: the next stage in God's 'evolution'. We need to let go of images and start from our human experience. We need a new name for God. 'Man's last and highest parting occurs when, for God's sake, he takes leave of God', wrote Meister Eckhart. With our expanded human knowledge of the Universe and its vastness, recognising that time and space are elements of creation, that in the sub-atomic field effects can come about without a cause, that everything in the Universe is in perpetual motion, nothing is still and everything is in constant change, we are led to ask where does the energy, the power driving this evolution come from? Not, as we have said, from a Being above, outside the Universe, but from an influence, a power, within. Divine energies are not an intermediary between God and humanity, not a 'thing' that exists apart from God. They are, on the contrary God himself, God in action, God in his self-revelation, God indwelling his creation through his direct and unmediated presence. Meister Eckhart in the 14th century commented in an imaginative way: 'What does God do all day long? God lies in a maternity bed giving birth'. In other words, God Manifest is energy.

Adrian B. Smith is a Catholic priest and member of SOF, author of 16 books among which are *The God Shift: our Changing Perception of the Ultimate Mystery* and most recently *God, Energy and the Field*.

Of the Father's Love — Adopted

John Pearson writes about his adopted father and about being a father himself to his two daughters.

One summer Sunday afternoon each year in the late 1950's would find me, a small boy of 4, 5 or 6, stood on Rugby station, watching for the smoke of the engine coming to take my Daddy away. And every year it would be through tears that I watched the smoke billowing out again as indeed he went, heading for that far away place called 'London' to do marking for the week. To me it felt like forever without him. If it was fine, Mum and I would walk the two miles or so back home to Clifton, the small village where we lived, to a quiet bungalow my father had designed and got built for him, my whole small world, that seemed so empty. He never went away, except for that one same trip every year. Every year, on his return, I was itching to see what present he might have brought me, which he would take slowly from his battered briefcase.

For decades afterwards I kept these pictures in my mind, and however old I grew, I still felt that when the time came for him to die it would be just like the train all over again. Throughout my childhood, even into my teens I would pray (still) – saying the Lord's Prayer followed by: 'Please look after Mum' but then: 'Please please please look after Dad'. I am not sure that when Dinah asked me to write about my father she wanted every 'kiss and tell all' naive tear-jerking detail. However, in the first short piece above, in a way, you have it all. She asked me to write about him, and about my own subsequent role as a father, particularly, in my case, because I was as it suggests above an adopted son. Even late into my parents' lives, and they both survived into their 80's, whenever people asked me if I was an only child, I would delight in saying: 'Yes, so far !'

Anyway, to get on; I was adopted when 18 months old, late by today's standards, by a childless couple in Rugby. My father, George, was 42 at the time, old – too old nowadays to have even been considered. A master at the local grammar school, treasurer at the village church, sidesman, a minor pillar of the establishment. Back then, Squire, Vicar and Teacher were seen as on



John Pearson aged 5 with his father

a par. Leaving school at 14, he had worked his way up through evening classes to qualify as a teacher. He served in the Air Force in the War, travelling Europe as an airframe fitter, marrying my mother when 28, in 1940, before he left the UK. Just after the War he matriculated and was working for an external degree from London University, which he really wanted but had to cease this because my Mother was involved in a serious road accident.

When my own children, Jenny and Sarah, were born I was still in my early thirties. I had left public school (sent there at my father's wish) with A-Levels, had my first degree and some professional qualifications under my belt. I had married at 23 and had not been in a war. Our lives had, thankfully, been accident-free. I was in many ways a different man from him, perhaps just what he wanted.

My father, 'Dad' hereon in, is said to have wanted a girl. He could have had a girl, for he sought a ready-made child, of which many of both sexes were available for adoption back then. However, he seems also to have wanted to imitate nature as much as possible – just take what fate threw up. Fate threw up a little boy in a Children's Society Home, previously neglected by Foster Parents and 'rescued' by observant social workers at the age of about a year. (Those were the days?)

Dad did not treat me like a girl. Neither did he treat me quite like a boy. He was the world's worst sportsman, totally uncoordinated when it came to ball games. So incapable was he, he told me, that when ordered to throw a grenade during basic wartime training he protested. 'Just get on with it Pearson!' roared the Sergeant. Dad feebly tossed the grenade about ten feet, just over the parapet. Never did six men drop to the ground so fast! So, from the start, there was very little football or cricket on the lawn for me, and I being an only child there was no one else to teach me. His interest in sport generally, the things that others did, was lukewarm. In Doncaster, his home town, we did occasionally go to see Doncaster Rovers, though with no real appreciation of the finer points. Similarly, we made a couple of visits to Headingley to see Yorkshire play – more because Dad was a staunch Yorkshireman than anything and because his lifelong best friend, an honorary 'uncle' of mine, was a paid-up member (his own sons keen cricketers, county trials material). He did once try to teach me chess for about a year. Every Saturday though, after we had worked together in the garden, he and I would watch the wrestling together – a strange liking on his part, for such a gentle man.

Was my relationship with Dad any different because he adopted me?

It is pointless now to reflect on whether I wanted sons or daughters. I suppose that, our first child having been a girl, a boy would have been a 'tidy' second. But did I, could I, know how to bring up a son? Being adopted I cannot blame Dad's genes for my inability at cricket or (what I was initially made to play at school) rugby – 'rigger' –, but I was seriously short of a role model. I took instead to swimming (a softy sport – lots

of nice warm water instead of cold wet mud as on the rigger field) and because of that I suppose steered Jenny into learning quite soon, and working at it hard. So, by the age of ten or eleven she was swimming for Newcastle, and I, proud father ferrying her to 5.30 a.m. training sessions.

Dad, it has to be said, gave me swimming, paying for lessons when I was eight. He delivered me to the council pool, came back for me at the end and bought me Bovril from the machine. He took me to public sessions until I could go on my own – he plodding along (if you can plod through water) by means of a slow 'doggy paddle' or equally sedate breaststroke. Still, he was not there to enjoy it or to get fit. He was there for *me*. Dad also gave me London. After seemingly endless years of summer time abandonment he took me, for my tenth birthday, to 'do' the Capital. This included a live performance of *Pickwick Papers* starring Harry Secombe, then it was home again via a late train. He showed me all he could: Buckingham Palace, Horse Guards, Big Ben. In Leicester Square, after the show, we had roast chestnuts. And so, I was hooked. Mum came along, but it felt like *his* London.

I have taken both my daughters, usually as a pair. We have been to *Cats* and all that. I have tried to enthuse them with the hidden byways I have myself discovered over the past 40 plus years, but usually they have had eyes chiefly for the shops. Last year, to my delight, Jenny was walking with me along a small street behind Admiralty Arch when, having paused to read a blue plaque on the wall, she suddenly remarked that she loved all the history. Bingo! Another generation on whom it will not all be lost perhaps?

Home life throughout my schooldays was calm, safe, middle class – dull I suppose by today's standards. God was in his heaven and all was well with the world. Dad went off on his bicycle to school each day to teach. I remember crying with frustration at being rejected by junior school due to my late-in-the-year birthday. Dad went off to school each day so I wanted to. Mum was a pretty standard fifties housewife, didn't go anywhere, having left work to marry and developing no career. My parents entertained very little (a fact which Dad later blamed on my mother, who lacked all confidence in this field) and they had very few friends in the village. I had few cousins, most of whom, due to my parents' age, were in their twenties before I was really conscious of them. I had few friends in the village either, due in part to my parents setting themselves a bit above the folk on the council estate (boys from which roamed the



John with his daughters Sarah and Jenny

village on their bikes) but due mainly to my attending a small private school in the town rather than the local primary. I was driven there by my Dad until I was seven or so, after which I myself cycled daily. I had one school friend who also lived in the village and we were fairly inseparable through my time there. He and I would cycle to Cubs together. I had maybe three other friends in those days, who went to my school but lived in the town. We saw little of one another 'out of hours'.

I think I have been able to do better than that. I cannot claim to be a great socialite and have no famous 'contacts', but both my wife and I have been active in politics (in a minor local way) and church as well as through our differing work and professional associations. So, the house has been a place of comings and goings of all sorts. I think that both my daughters have gained confidence and distinct personalities through mixing easily with doctors, lawyers, architects ... everyone. As we have had friends of all ages and social classes they are able to relate to more folk than I would ever have known existed. I have always tried to get them involved, join the Brownies and so on, and find friends they would bring home for tea, 'sleepovers' and the like. They have had many birthday parties whereas I myself can remember only two. I left school in York, where we eventually lived, having made one 'best friend'. Jenny left Newcastle having made about thirty !

What else can I say in the remaining words left to me? I could talk of my father's sensible attitude to drinks and smoking . He was into neither in a serious way. There was a drinks cupboard at home occupied by bottles which seldom saw the light of day except at Christmas. He never smoked during my lifetime. I was never actively banned from either. He taught me

the law and let me judge what was right. He knew I am sure that I tried smoking, with others, when 13 or 14. He saw that I did not like it and did not take it up. There were times when I was in my later twenties and on a visit 'home' that he and I would walk around to the local hotel for some rather forced bonhomie over a pint or two. Not even his time in the Air Force had taught him to enjoy it there. In similar vein I have not been heavy-handed with my daughters, and perhaps as a consequence neither smoke, neither is into drugs and neither is anywhere like verging on alcoholism, as are so many of 'the young' nowadays.

What was all this about? Understanding my own father ? Trying to imitate what I saw as his good qualities as I brought up my own children ? You may have wondered, if you have stuck it this far, what it all has to do with being adopted. Was my relationship with Dad any different because he adopted me? Have I acted any differently as a father myself from what might otherwise have been ? For his own reasons he gave me immense, unselfish love and companionship (which is not the same as money) – and all the opportunities and successes he never had and which, by the time he had me, he could just about afford. Unlike me, he *never* lost his temper over anything.

I have tried to do the same for my own children and with the occasional improvement even, but perhaps less unselfishly, and hope that they are coming to value my love and company as much as my money. He was old by today's standards and somewhat set in rather sedate ways. This taught me, I hope, that there was rather more to life than simply going out and having fun. It was never a secret that I was adopted and I suppose that I always felt, a bit at least, that I owed my parents something in return, and so perhaps behaved more gratefully than I might have.

In October 1996, that 'train' left for the last time and this time it really did take my Daddy away. When my father did die, in fact, I did not cry – not as forlornly as a child at least, for he had suffered increasingly from Alzheimer's and so to all intents and purposes he was already lost to me. If I have succeeded with my own daughters' upbringing, and if I get to be a wise but doting grandfather ever, as he eventually did, then much of him still lives on. So, something I never really took the chance to say: 'Thanks Dad !'

John Pearson teaches Construction Studies at the University of Northumbria. He is Chair of SOF Board of Trustees.

The Broken Chain

Behind a newspaper, only visible from knees to feet,
responding with a grunt to the cry of 'Look Daddy!'
as the child places another brick on the tower;
telling him what not to do, how to behave;
demanding that he cease his crying, calm his fury, be a man –
bewildered by such weakness;
ordering to bed on the dot of seven with a firm 'Goodnight';
assuming, without thought, the role his father had played,
because father's father had played it.
This chain has to be broken – must be!

Down on the carpet, insinuated between the furniture,
repeating with delight the cry of 'Well done!'
as the child places yet another piece in the jigsaw;
offering options, guiding behaviour;
soothing hurt, wiping away tears, giving comfort –
understanding of childhood distress;
luring upstairs with the promise of a bedtime story;
adopting, after reflection, a role far different
from that of his father.
The chain is at last broken – praise be!

Helen Bellamy

Helen Bellamy is a SOF trustee.



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letters@sofn.org.uk

Just another Myth?

Dear Editor

Amongst the longer and customarily 'deep' articles in *Sofia* 91 was the brief piece by Michael Senior on the Thokoloshe. I have yet to recover from my joy at what I took to be a fine send-up of organised religion represented by *Life of Brian* back in the 70s. Similarly, Michael's article came as timely light relief at the end of a heavy though rewarding read.

I had meant, in any case, to respond to Christine Avery's attack on Penny Mawdsley's article (*Sofia* 90). Personally, I found the latter honest, fair and measured and from my point of view totally true. For me, Michael has said it all again, and in about 2000 less words. I would keep all Penny's lists however. And what a splendid little fellow the Thokoloshe looks. Luckily perhaps, both those with 'unhealthy sexual fantasies' and the more sensitive (Christine perhaps?) were spared sight of his 'most notable feature' Clever photography or just another Myth ?

John Pearson
 'Purely Rational Thinker'

A Waste of Space?

Dear Editor

I endorse the exhortation of the advertisement on p. 18 of *Sofia* 91: 'Join SOF Network to . . . discard the supernatural.' If the Network has discarded the supernatural, why does it waste precious space for David Grumett's article about Pierre Teilhard de Chardin? De Chardin goes along with Paul in deifying Jesus of Nazareth, whom Grumett invariably calls *Christ*; and Grumett writes, 'Teilhard saw Christ as exercising. . . influence over the cosmos most powerfully via the mechanism of evolution.' This may be helpful to believers who may be tempted to reject evolution, but it is no help to anyone who has discarded the supernatural. Grumett's article would be appropriate for the US journal *Sojourners* or a British equivalent, but it is no help to non-theists. Could theistic articles in *Sofia* be turning off subscribers?

Hershey Julien
 413 James Road, Palo Alto, California, USA

Call Me Bwana

Dear Editor

One of your questions in the latest *Portholes* [in the call for submissions to *Sofia* about fatherhood] is: 'Why are some clergymen called "Father"? I think I can answer that. For a long time, the distinction was made in the Catholic Church between the secular clergy (the parish priests, like me) and the regular clergy – those who followed a rule of life (like Jesuits and Friars). The seculars were called RD (Reverendus Dominus or Reverend Mister in English, Don Michele etc in Europe) and the regulars 'Reverendus Pater' or RP. This distinction still exists in Italy and France although it is fading a bit.

In the 1890s Cardinal Vaughan, the then Archbishop of Westminster, wanted to distinguish his men from the Church of England clergy whose holy orders had recently been declared null and void by Leo XIII, so he instructed them to style themselves RP (Pater) not Rev. Dominus. In this diocese, Bishop Allen therefore stopped writing to his clergy 'Reverend Sir' and started to write 'Reverend Father' instead. Some resisted; in recusant parts of Yorkshire the bluff, no-nonsense Catholic priest would still be expected to be called 'Mr Pickwick' well into the 20th century, but the change happened. And anyway, many of the priests in those days were actually regulars (Redemptorists, Jesuits, Passionists etc.). However, some high Anglicans liked the name and started calling themselves 'Father' too – and irritatingly writing it out in full instead of 'Fr' (like you don't say Missis Livingstone but Mrs). So they ruined Cardinal Vaughan's purpose after all. But that's the reason.

Michael Morton
 St Winefride's Church
 Sandbach
 Cheshire CW11 1HU

SOF Sift

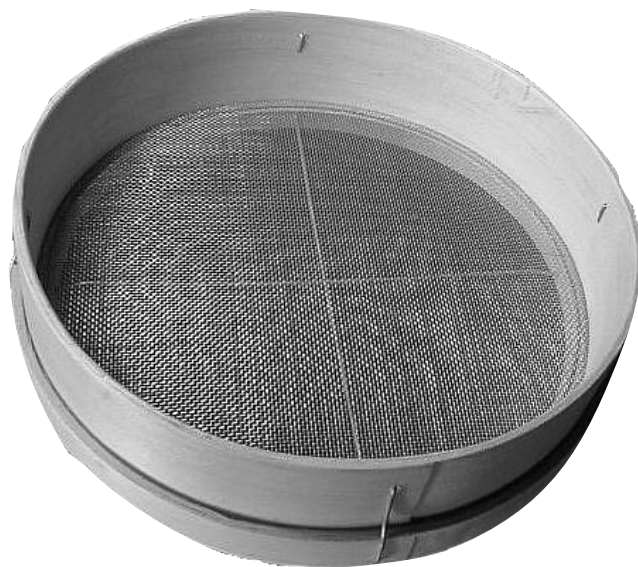
A column in which Network members think out loud about SOF and their own quest.

From Jerry Peyton (Edinburgh)

As far as I can gather the Sea of Faith (SOF) emerged in the 1980s out of liberal Anglicanism, and a high proportion of members has always been mainstream churchgoers. I do not have quite the same narrative – rather a sort of chain of memberships/ crises/ counselling/ surprises. Finding myself doing an Open University arts degree led me here. On this slow journey (1991-04) to a BA honours, I came to focus solely on the fine range of courses on offer in Religious Studies (the eventual title of my degree) and Cupitt's name beckoned. *Sea of Faith* (the book) gradually stuck as one of my many unofficial texts. I attended the local SOF group, plus 3 Annual Conferences. I have now read much SOF material – books and *Sofia* – and SOF ideas begin to move out into the world in letters I write to magazines or papers.

SOF and I have carried over beyond formal study into self-led learning via connections and frontiers and consolidations of reading and writing and thinking. Let's think of texts – not just a printed sheet or passage of writing but any pivotal item of culture or consciousness, personal or collective. Literature like *A Child's Garden of Verses* by RLS or *The Wind in the Willows* were childhood texts. The first great text of my growing up was Bob Dylan's titanic pop record *Like A Rolling Stone*. When I became church-religious in my 20s liturgical fragments resonated. In the 1980s (now in the Quakers) I became a poet and one particular human encounter was a text – 'all real life is meeting' – as Buber famously says. *The Searchers*, the great John Ford western, spoke volumes. I also discovered US poet William Stafford, and a little-known book by John Berger. At decade intervals counselling passages acted as texts. In these recent years of OU/SOF, the little Anthony Freeman book *God in Us* is added, plus *Rumour of Angels* by Peter Berger, US sociologist. *I and Thou* is the latest.

There is more. But the point is not the complete list but the way such very various texts as these spell out the code which both holds and unlocks our life-values in a holy-gram of experience. Most Christian writers still take 'religious experience' to mean the specific message from or about another world. I feel gratefully free of this in SOF as unnecessary. Berger (P), it is true, speaks unignorably of 'signals of transcendence'; but Freeman



says equally unignorably 'there is no way ... it would be possible to tell the difference' (to decide whether a revelation was supernatural or not). 'It also is a way to pray,' says Elizabeth Jennings of poetry itself – 'by which I mean it's ceremonious thought/ spoken through you. You must not let it stray.'

So the poetry Dinah has brought to *Sofia* is welcome. We hear of 'emergent properties' and I wish to work (and play) with each idea SOF explores as we grow in this non-institutional faith path. I did not start out on it from church membership but from the 'year zero' of the simple question: 'What is religion?' No universal definition is available so we have to do our own work on it, as in *After God* by Don Cupitt. If I 'become religious' or have the 'authentic life', which Buber says is 'encounter' or experience a 'signal of transcendence' or enter a 'way to pray' in my latest poem ... how am I and how are we in SOF to understand this? A text never ceases speaking. It is permanent lifelong evidence.

Grateful as I am for the necessary intellectual exertions typical of SOF I would like to see more of a straightforward personal sharing of our unique texts – not sentimentally but sacramentally, even dangerously as part of our middle way. I have mentioned a few examples of my own 'life-texts'. Each one calls for its own beautiful unpacking. May other readers do so with theirs and start the ball rolling?

Jerry Peyton is a poet and works in a charity shop. He can be contacted by email at jeremypeyton@btinternet.com

Please submit your contributions to the SOF Sift column (approx 750 words), to editor@sofn.org.uk or by post to the Editor at 10 St Martin's Close, London NW1 0HR. Please include your postal address and email if you have one.

Stephen Mitchell reviews

A Broad Place: An Autobiography

by Jürgen Moltmann

SCM Press (London 2007). Pbk. 400 pages. £29.99.

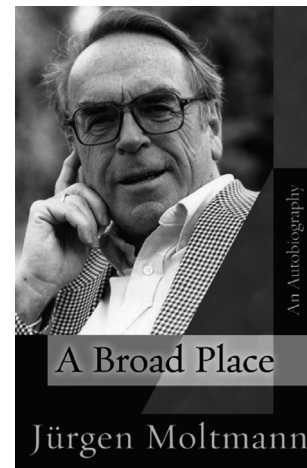
ISBN: 9780334041276.

In a devastating criticism of *The God Delusion*, Nicholas Lash accuses Richard Dawkins of being theologically illiterate and ignoring two millennia of religious thought: 'His understanding of the notion of "belief in God" is as crass and ill-informed as his understanding of what the word "God" means.'

If a group such as ours wants to be taken seriously in claiming that 'religious faith is a human creation' then it must make very sure that it is theologically literate and informed. And if members of SOF, in a bid to be more theologically literate, were allowed to read the works of only one theologian, they could do no better than read the works of Jürgen Moltmann. In an astonishing and successful career, Jürgen Moltmann has travelled the world and engaged with every major theological movement of the twentieth century. His books, including *The Crucified God*, *Theology of Hope* and *The Spirit of Life*, have become best sellers across the world.

Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann and Dietrich Bonhoeffer were the dominant figures in German theology at the beginning of his career but soon he was assimilating the political theology emerging from the Christian/Marxist dialogue, the liberation theologies of Latin America and the civil rights movement. The Jewish/Christian dialogue, discussions with Orthodox theologies, travels in South Africa, India and China, also contributed to his thinking and writing. Moltmann describes his theological journey and the lessons he has had to learn with a self-effacing humility. This is touchingly illustrated in his description of the discussions and joint lectures with his wife Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, the feminist theologian. Moltmann tells his life story with a childlike simplicity. He describes with obvious delight his travelling and lecture tours and every page drips with the names of theologians he has met and conferred with. But behind the name-dropping one is aware of a determination to engage with the issues facing human beings worldwide.

His interest in theology began in Scotland when in his teens he was a prisoner of war in Kilmarnock. By 1945 Moltmann had experienced the horrors and lunacy of war both as a soldier in Hitler's army and in the bombing raids on Hamburg. One bomb killed his friend who was standing right beside him, another reduced his home to rubble. Then news of the horrors of the concentration camps reached them.



reviews

Depression of the wartime destruction and a captivity with no end in sight was compounded by a feeling of profound shame at having to share in shouldering the disgrace of one's own people. That really choked one, and the weight of it has never left me to the present day. For me, two experiences raised me from depression to a new hope in life: the friendly encounter with those Scottish working men and their families, and a bible.

What will fascinate SOF readers and, I hope, convince them that there are allies to be found amongst contemporary theologians is the way his intense study of theology across the world cultures has led him to 'a new theology of life'.

I laid more and more weight on a *culture of life* because I sensed the deadly dangers of the increasing nihilism. After the mass murders in the Second World War, Albert Camus wrote, 'It is Europe's mystery that life is no longer loved.' The twenty-first century began with the terror of Islamic suicide murderers. In Afghanistan Mullah Omar told Western journalists, 'You love life – we love death.'

... and so in *The Source of Life* ... I wanted to explain – without a plethora of references, footnotes, and learned discussions – why reverence of the life of all the living and why spirituality of the body and the earth had become important for me.

The reader cannot but be impressed by Moltmann's appetite for work and travel. But the book has some irritating features. At times the translation has a literal and wooden feel that grates. Reading some of the sections concerned with his travels is as interesting as watching the neighbour's holiday slides. But Moltmann's ability to feel the pulse of the world in the twentieth century makes this book well worth reading.

Stephen Mitchell is the Vicar of Gazeley and four other parishes and Rural Dean of Mildenhall, Suffolk. He is a former Chair of SOF trustees.

Michael Morton reviews

Religion and Human Fulfilment

by Keith Ward

SCM Press (London 2008). Pbk. 192 pages. £14.99.
ISBN: 9780334041634.

By the late nineteenth century, as Friedrich Nietzsche disobligingly pointed out, most educated people in the West had ceased to believe in God. They had been won over to what they took to be a scientific view of the world. All the same, the traditional morality based on Christian and Judaic religion continued in full flight. Nietzsche protested that this was inauthentic and indefensible. You no longer believe in the foundations of your own value-system: if there is no God, then your morality cannot come from a transcendent source. Or – as Ivan Karamazov argued – if there is no God, everything is permitted.

For more than a century, the question posed by Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky has troubled philosophers and theologians. They have been aware that the relationship between religion and morality is close, but fraught with ambiguity. There are those who regard religion as being morally reactionary and vicious, opposing progress in the name of archaic divine laws. And then there are others who would uphold religion as an important defence of human value, moral dignity and objective moral standards.

Professor Keith Ward is one of the foremost commentators on Christian belief and doctrine in the context of modern science and the world faith traditions. He is Regius Professor of Divinity at the University of Oxford, the successor to Rowan Williams no less, and is to be taken very seriously. He is one of our foremost commentators on religious belief in the context of modern science and world faiths. And he comes up to evidence; he is easy to read, his argument is good and accessible. I must also pay tribute to SCM press whose presentation and setting is very easy on the eye. For that is no flattery in a world where theological and philosophy are often printed in texts and literary style that are wearisome to read and difficult to follow.

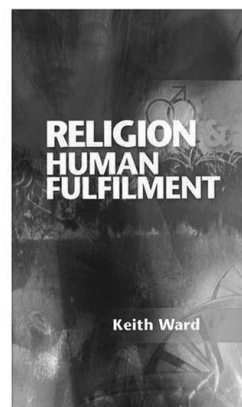
The essential argument in this work is that all the major world religions have at their heart a concern for personal fulfilment, and that they place the ideal of such fulfilment in a transcendental or spiritual realm that has primary existence, reality and value. The objective and categorical moral force of morality can be safeguarded by religious devotion to transcendental goodness.

The book follows the structure of a lecture-series and so Keith explores this thesis by a careful examination in successive chapters. He discusses specific moral problems such as violence, human genetic modification

and ethical concerns around the beginning and ending of human life. He looks at questions about secular and religious law in Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism. He argues that these traditions have positive and creative vitality that can inspire and reinforce a humanistic or 'personalistic' moral engagement.

For he calls religious humanism 'transcendental personalism', and I think that this is a bit of a three-card trick, because they are not really the same. No-one deep in religious faith and particularly in an academic setting like Oxford University wants to hear the proposal that morality is really a human conversational product. That it evolves slowly through a forensic debate, one that is best illustrated by the Jewish Rabbis and by the Jesuits during the seventeenth century. I felt that he missed this in his discussion of religious law when considering the contribution of the *Torah*; he circles around it but never bites. The same is true of 'The Case of Islam and Jihad', which I thought he gave too easy a ride when you consider the common antipathy towards Islamism (as well as towards any organised 'traditional' religions which are commonly viewed as morally ugly and violent. He acknowledges this all right, but does not respond strongly enough.)

In general, Professor Ward does write with a tone of reasonable, easy benevolence. It is a bit like Duke Senior in *As You Like It* who, free from the envious court, found 'sermons in stones, books in the running brooks; good in everything'. However, he appears to realise this in the 'Prologue', which in some ways is the most interesting part of the book. The lectures from 2006 on which the book is based just predated the stream of literary invective from Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris and the boys, which seem to have shaken Keith Ward's goodwill and he feels he has to answer it all. His defence is, broadly speaking, to distinguish between good and bad religion. However, the making of *that* distinction entails an authentic moral judgement. Which is where we came in.



reviews

Michael Morton is the Catholic parish priest of St Winefride's Church in Sandbach, Cheshire and a former SOF trustee.

Dominic Kirkham reviews

God, Energy and the Field

by Adrian B. Smith

O Books (Ropley, Hants. 2008). Pbk. 150 pages £9.99.
ISBN: 9781846941351.

One of the features of our times is the resurgence of religious belief – often of an extreme kind. The reasons for this are varied. In part it reflects a disillusionment with the moral mayhem of secular society. Also, it reflects a dissatisfaction with the bleak reductionist view of life which, from a biological perspective, sees everything as an outcome of a struggle for the survival of the fittest amongst selfish genes. Surely, we think, there must be more to life than this!

Amongst the many who think so are distinguished academics and scientists, for example, John Polkinghorne, Arthur Peacocke, Keith Ward, who are also clergymen. I have a bookshelf full of their works and my first reaction on receiving *God, Energy and the Field* was that I already had a book of the same title: Keith Ward's, *God, Chance and Necessity* comes close.

The common element of all these works is that they obviously want to keep God in the picture – or rather 'Field'. Since Einstein's famous equation of energy and mass such writers have been given a field day, which makes their task relatively easy – if you will forgive the puns! There has been a long Neo-Platonist tradition in Christian theology of thinking of God in terms of his emanations. It is not too difficult to make a conceptual connection between 'emanations' and 'energy' (as did Plotinus at the outset), and, hey presto, religion is back in business on the back of modern science.

Adrian Smith sees himself in this tradition and wants us to understand that the quantum fields of energy are but a 'veiled presence' of the Divine consciousness which creates the universe. In this view God is not to be seen as an 'interventionist' in the world but integral to its energies. From the point of view of religious orthodoxy the danger of this line of thinking has always been the charge of pantheism. Smith disavows this in favour of its more subtle form, panentheism. Within this vast and endless debate the fundamental difference between religious scientists and secular scientists seems to boil down to something rather simple: we believe that in the beginning there was either a 'someone' or a 'something'. If it's the latter then everything that follows is arbitrary; if it's the former then everything accords to some mighty blue print. Smith opts for 'the man with the plan' (God is invariably a 'He').

The problem with this is that not only is there no evidence for nature being planned but all the evidence is decisively against it. As the distinguished French geneticist and Nobel laureate, Francois Jacob found, Nature works as a tinkerer with available materials, not

as an engineer does by design.

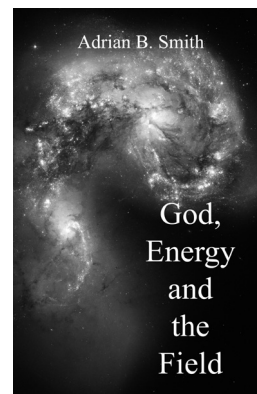
The story of evolution is one of constant improvisation and adaptation, not of a pre-thought-out design.

As the nature of the human brain and consciousness is an important part of Smith's book it is ironic that no organ more clearly expresses the tinkering of Nature. The threefold structure of the brain clearly expresses various evolutionary stages resulting in all sorts of complicated and overlapping neural pathways, such as those we find in the functioning of sight. Clearly, if anyone was planning a brain from scratch the human brain in its present form would not be the result.

Despite what Smith wants us to believe about a non-interventionist model for God's action he still posits an 'ontological gap' when God intervened 'between a species with no eternal soul to ourselves with such a soul.' Such a statement contradicts everything we have come to understand about primatology over the last half century: that there is no 'gap' between 'them' and 'us'. The more we know about other species the more like them we are. Everything we now know about DNA underpins this knowledge. To state otherwise is simply ignorance. In the face of such knowledge one must wonder why so many people choose to either reject or ignore it. One answer was concisely put by an American creationist: 'It's simpler to believe in God.' Another is that humans want to believe in their own exceptionalism; like Queen Victoria, the thought of being too closely associated with animals is 'rather shocking'.

Unfortunately, God and science, like aristocracy and democracy, make for an impossible combination. That is not to say that there is not a need for a spirituality which addresses human concerns. These cannot just be dismissed, as materialists and reductionists might do, and books like that of Adrian Smith will no doubt continue to appeal. However, the coming of age, of which theologians like Bonhoeffer wrote, is about a moral maturity in humans when they start to look at the world as it is and not as they would like to think it is. It is only then that we will be able to build a coherent and sustainable understanding of ourselves.

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



reviews

Anne Ashworth reviews

Darwin: A Life in Poems

by Ruth Padel

Chatto & Windus (London 2009). Hbk. 141 pages. £12.99. ISBN: 9780701183851.

He collected the facts, came to the inescapable conclusions, changed our world view forever. The BBC's Darwin season has probably provided most of us with an outline of his life. We have seen the Galapagos Islands, the Darwin home at Down House. But it has taken a poet to bring that life to life.

No-one could be better equipped than Ruth Padel. Not only is she an outstanding poet and Charles Darwin's great-great-granddaughter, but is a Fellow of the Zoological Society of London and a member of the Royal Geographical and the Bombay Natural History Societies. She has also travelled the world, including locations where Darwin and Alfred Russell Wallace gathered their data. She knows her stuff. An added, and major, advantage was her ancestor's own wonderfully evocative writing.

The poems are printed with marginal notes giving dates and background facts, but the living nerves are in the poetry. It incorporates the written words of Darwin and his family and associates, from the many memoirs and letters available. Indeed, some poems are entirely quotations, the words barely tweaked to fit the accommodating simplicity of free verse. So how has Padel worked her magic? She has her ancestor's eye for details and her poet's skill at presenting them. For instance: *'A land iguana! One saffron/ leathery elbow, powdery as lichen, sticking out/ like a man doing press-ups while leering at the sand.'*

But there is more: a strong power of conveying emotion. So much delight, grief, fear, doubt; so much illness in a suffering family. It makes a moving and enthralling story. We follow Darwin's youth, as a non-sporty boy obsessed with natural history collecting; his passion for guns and shooting; his abortive attempts to read medicine at Edinburgh and then divinity at Cambridge. We are aware how early he began to deplore his ugliness (remaining conscious of it in later life). Then comes the voyage. Darwin's excitement and delight in all he finds of geology, flora and fauna is contrasted with his revulsion as he encounters the cruelties of slavery. Later, we follow his loves and losses, his wrestling with religious faith.

Darwin's studies at Cambridge were intended as a prelude to being a gentleman clergyman. So he had studied theology, he had read Paley. Was there an ultimate Designer? Even before his marriage Darwin was already privately taking leave of God, so marriage with

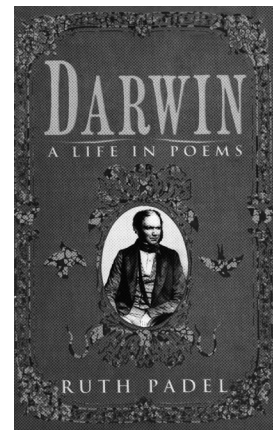
his devout cousin Emma Wedgwood presented them both with an intractable and lifelong heartache.

Their enduring love only made the tension more painful. *'He can feel his doubt. It flows/ at the rate of lava, ten hours for every inch... He wants, so much, to believe as she desires/ (The night is squashing him like magma).'* For her part, Emma dreads an afterlife without him. Charles and Emma can at least agree on what constitutes right and wrong, but their basic authorities derive from irreconcilable sources. He had come to recognise evolutionary reasons for anger and aggression, but also for co-operation, empathy and kindness.

They had ten children, three of whom died. All Emma's confinements were terrible. As Padel describes the first the reader winces. The pain is *'a battering ram, a guillotine inside'*. He listens, *'waiting, like a hermit on a pole/ forty nights in bare/ desert. The cries...'* In this book we relive Charles' recurrent illnesses (almost certainly from the infection contracted in South America). *'The microbe hunters haven't got going yet. (Louis Pasteur is thirteen).'*, the poet reminds us. Darwin joyfully studied his beloved children's development just as he would any creature's, but the confirmation of his theories in their inheritance of his disease and their vulnerability as children of first cousins only reinforced the misery of seeing them suffer.

Towards the end we are privy to Wallace's suffering too, as he contracts malaria. *'The heat is huge/ as if he had the sun in bed with him... a smelly rag of a man on a bed of straw and parasites.'* Yet both men retained their passionate delight in discovering, collecting, contemplating. *'Banana leaves/ shit-speckled as with sweet pea/ petals, or with snow, by roosting birds.'*

'When the sickness is worst/ he watches a tendril/ spiral clockwise into light.' The poems throb with joy as well as pain. 'We stand in awe before the mystery of life,' Padel quotes from the ancestor who elucidated so much of that mystery. This book is a major achievement. I commend it to you.



reviews

Anne Ashworth's publications include *the Verb To Be is Everywhere Irregular* (poetry) and *The Oblique Light: Poetry and Peak Experience* (poetry and prose). She is a member of SOF.

To Carry the Child

John Horder reflects on the first Stevie Smith Roadshow, held in the Magdala Pub, Hampstead on January 14th 2009.

Stevie Smith, the poet, enjoyed reading Agatha Christie thrillers in French and German over and over and over again. This was a time-honoured way she had evolved of calming down her inner three-year-old child in order to give this vulnerable artistic part of herself some respite from life's unbearable pain, chaos and bitter and brutal disappointments.

I am thinking about the groans the Chorus of the Women of Canterbury are continually moaning in T.S. Eliot's heartfelt verse play, *Murder in the Cathedral*: 'Man's life is a cheat and a disappointment', etc etc., written in 1936, after his first marriage to Viv had been shot to pieces by her madness, and his lack of generosity and excessive virginity, as recorded in Michael Hastings's insightful play, *Tom and Viv*. But whereas Tom found some solace for his inner three-year-old boy by becoming a practising Anglo-Catholic, Stevie never stopped fighting Christianity, for example in her poems 'Thoughts about the Christian Doctrine of Eternal Hell' and 'Was He Married?' According to her old friend the Reverend Gerard Irvine: 'In religion Stevie was ambivalent, neither a believer, an unbeliever nor agnostic, but oddly all three at once ... one could say that she did not like the God of Christian orthodoxy, but she could not disregard Him or ever quite bring herself to disbelieve in him.' Translated, this means she could never settle for a self-brutalising idea of God the Father in the biblical sense.

On 14 Jan this year, Dinah Livingstone and I had independently planned to perform Stevie's poem, 'To Carry The Child', about the heartbreak of taking her inner three-year-old girl into adult life, at the first Stevie Smith Roadshow at the Magdala pub in Hampstead. In the event, Dinah kindly asked me to perform it. Let the last stanza speak for all the conflict and cross purposes Stevie was ravaged by all her life:

But oh the poor child, the poor child, what can he do,
Trapped in a grown-up carapace,
But peer outside his prison room
With the eye of an anarchist?

For many years, Stevie lived with her aunt, the Lion of Hull, at 1 Avondale Road in Palmers Green, North London, to whom she returned each day for comfort and refuge, with a ritual 6.30 p.m glass or three of sherry, after doing menial Monday to Friday work as a secretary at George Newnes, the publishers.

Not surprisingly, this was never enough emotionally. Stevie's Lion Aunt could never ever give her the lasting security of a mother and father's unconditional hugs, cuddles and kisses she had continually longed for,

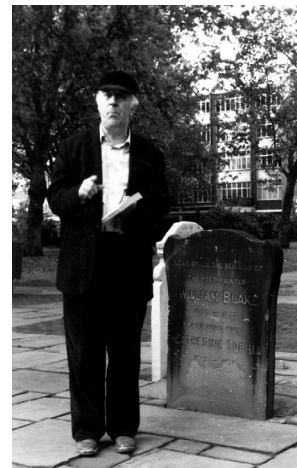
but never experienced for herself, in all her friendships and experiences all her life. She was chronically touch-deprived, as many famous men poets including Ted Hughes and Philip Larkin inevitably were, sharing a non-hugging Yorkshire background as they did with Stevie.

Curiously, Ted Hughes in a letter to his and Sylvia's son Nicholas, before he tragically killed himself, has the last word for the moment on the badly brutalised three year-old inner child in all of us. It is the most powerful and deeply intuitive statement for somebody who was so savagely attacked for causing Sylvia's suicide for so many years by feminists of both sexes. Writing to Nicholas in 1986, Ted describes with great feeling the inner child in all of us: 'Nicholas, don't you know about people this first and most crucial fact: every single one is, and is painfully every moment aware of it, still a child.' He continues:

We most of us construct a formidable Taj Mahal-like false persona to protect this helplessly and hopelessly naked and vulnerable three-year-old child. And that little creature is sitting there, behind the armour, peering through the slits... Every single person is vulnerable to unexpected defeat in this innermost emotional self... And in fact, that child is the only real thing in them. It's their humanity, their real individuality, the one that can't understand why it was born and that knows it will have to die, in no matter how crowded a place, quite on its own.

We return to the second stanza of Stevie's 'To Carry The Child'. Perhaps at this moment in time we are not ready to take more of what she and Ted are both saying into the depths of our hearts:

The child in adult life is defenceless
And if he is grown-up, knows it,
And the grown-up looks at the childish part
And despises it.



John Horder by the tomb of William Blake

John Horder is a poet, journalist and passionate story-teller. He has written for *The Guardian*, *The Tablet* and *Acumen* and writes a regular column in the *Camden New Journal*.

To My Grandfather

William Imray remembers his sculptor grandfather.

He took me from a fearful pit,
And from the miry clay,
And on a rock he set my feet,
Establishing my way.

The 40th Psalm's second verse as in ballad metre we sang it in the Church of Scotland – are the words in which my maternal grandfather would express relief and gratitude when he felt himself rescued from tribulation by a loving God. Yet stronger even than religious conviction was a strain of romantic longing betrayed in his dedication to our national poet. Robert Burns, his life and work, were never far from his thought. My grandfather, gifted craftsman and designer was by his care and example the nearest I would ever come to having a father. My mother had been widowed when I was barely two and she and I,

her parents and her maiden sister lived together in a house by the Dee, named by my grandfather 'Lea-Rig', lovers' trysting-spot of a Burns song. Aged 60, he was operated on for prostate cancer, a procedure which, as I much later learned, involved at that time castration. This, I now realise, was what embittered him beyond belief. His loving God had treacherously failed him, and our devoted minister became then a particular focus of his loathing. Unhappily wed besides, he relied on his romantic longings alone for emotional sustenance, and spent the enfeebled years till cancer's return in perfecting his last sculpture. It would capture in granite the final parting of Burns from the woman whom, following her death, he would long after recall in words which were more dear to my grandparent than any psalm could ever be:



Aberdeen Granite Works, 1930s. Grandfather standing, third from the right

O Mary, dear departed shade,
Where is thy place of blissful rest?
Seest thou thy lover lowly laid?
Hear'st thou the groans that rend his breast?



You were barely an hour at work that morning when
we saw you return, step firm enough, but deeper
by years the rut in cheek, lips pursed invisible,
eye taking leave of us for the long caves of dread.
You'd passed blood, entered your decade of withering –

and I of my blossoming. I was twelve at the time,
and little knew, as you lay that winter in the one
room we had coal to warm, why my each manlier step,
each word in manlier key would earn its scowl of you.
(‘So weak!’ they’d tell me. ‘You must try to understand!’)

Little could see either why you, who’d welcome in
elder and preacher once, quoting them text for text,
claiming how many a time from *fearful pit, mired clay*
you’d known rescue, *once more on rock established*,
would curse them now or clutch silence, brow to the wall.

They took your part – mother, maiden aunt, grandmother.
I alone would defend our hero of better days,
the minister. No mention then of ‘understand’!
I’d won that argument. Or so I thought – so thought
tens of winters to be. By slowly gathering drop

only has understanding seeped down through a thinning
thatch, have I myself known the hypothermias
of shivered belief, know in myself the shameful
envy of some whose forces push to *floruit*,
known from what fearful pit you eyed my own thrusting.

Is it true what I read: that they took but one way
with prostate cancers then – and no more humbling scar
could they brand a man with? Had I known in those years
when I’d see you, briefly restored, shamble daily
to the shack, there to tell granite a secret grief,

and see the block startle under your chisel-blows
to likeness of parting lovers, of love denied –
had I deciphered then the dialect of your stone,
I think I’d have falsettoed back childhood again,
content to sit by you and prattle childhood things!

William Imray

William Imray (Brown) is a member of SOF. He was a lecturer in classics and an organist-choirmaster in the Episcopal Church of Scotland, now retired.

Mayday Notes

Sacrificing your Son

According to George Frazer in *The Golden Bough* (1922): 'Among the Semites of Western Asia the king, in a time of national danger, sometimes gave his own son to die as a sacrifice for his people. He quotes Philo of Byblus, in his work on the Jews, as saying: 'It was an ancient custom in a crisis of great danger that the ruler of a city or nation should give his beloved son to die for the whole people, as a ransom offered to the avenging demons; and the children thus offered were slain with mystic rites. So Cronus, whom the Phoenicians call Israel, being king of the land and having an only-begotten son called Jeoud (for in the Phoenician tongue Jeoud signifies 'only begotten'), dressed him in royal robes and sacrificed him upon an altar in a time of war, when the country was in great danger from the enemy.'

In 2 Kings 3 we have the story of the king of Moab, who sacrificed his son to stave off defeat in battle by Israel *and it worked*. 'Now Mesha King of Moab was a sheep breeder and he had to deliver annually to the king of Israel a hundred thousand lambs, and the wool of a hundred thousand rams.' When Moab rebels against this heavy tribute, King Jehoram of Israel, together with Jehosaphat of Judah and the king of Edom, march against him. At the end of the story: 'When the king of Moab saw that the battle was going against him, he took with him seven hundred swordsmen to break through, opposite the king of Edom, but they could not. Then he took his eldest son who was to reign in his stead, and offered him for a burnt offering upon the wall. And there came great wrath upon Israel; and they withdrew from him and returned to their own land.' By sacrificing his son, the king saved his people.



Children as Property

'Some fathers cannot recognise their children other than as extensions of themselves,' Deborah Orr writes in a report on child-murder-father-suicide cases (*Independent*, July 16 2002). She quotes a string of cases in which men have killed themselves and their children. One father left a note for his estranged wife: 'I am taking mine with me.' Child-murder-parental-suicide cases almost always involve the father. Sometimes, she says, it happens because when the father becomes suicidal, he cannot bear to leave his children, and his bleak world view leads him to believe the world is too hostile a place for them. Sometimes he kills his children as an act of vengeance on his wife. Other fathers kill themselves and their children when they get into financial difficulties. Then they are driven by 'an inverted wish to protect them' and their desire to be old-fashioned breadwinners. They are victims of their own exacting expectations of what a father should do for his family. Their attachment to their children reaches the point where they don't understand where their own identities end and their children's identities begin. Orr concludes: 'There is huge insecurity and confusion among fathers in the late-capitalist, post-feminist West about what it is to be a man.'

Men Muck in More

On the other hand, writing in the *Daily Telegraph* in June 2008, Richard Savill reports that modern fathers are older, more often unmarried and more domesticated than they were thirty years ago. In 1978 fathers spent an average of 46 minutes a week doing housework and cooked two meals a week. Now the average father spends four hours and 13 minutes per week on housework and cooks four nights out of seven. Today only half of fathers get married before having their first child, whereas 78% were married in the 1970s. In 1978 men's average age at marriage was: 23; age at having first baby: 24. In 2008 men's average age at marriage was: 26; age at having first baby: 27. Savill reports: 'A spokesman for Debenhams, which carried out the poll, said: "Despite having children later in life, men seem to muck in more nowadays by cooking, cleaning and helping out around the home. It is also now quite the norm to become a dad out of wedlock too. The trend has obviously been sparked by more couples choosing to live together before marriage as well the rising cost of weddings."'

Cicely Herbert explores

The Legend of the Green Man



When I was nine years old, I ran away from my boarding school, leading two of my friends astray. We spent a full twenty-four hours 'on the loose.' It was early Autumn and we'd been blackberry picking. As darkness fell, we dug ourselves in to a haystack for warmth, where we felt safe in the company of the small creatures that scampered around us. There was a moon that night and the trees on the horizon took on twisted shapes of mysterious beings, in a way that was both intriguing and scary. I remembered this childhood escapade whilst researching the folklore of trees, after a recent visit to Southwell Minster, in Nottinghamshire. This wonderful building contains many superb medieval stone carvings, and its chapterhouse has been described as 'one of the world's great works of art' and, 'more like an arboretum cut from stone than a room, ... so finely carved that you suspect the wind could make it tremble and sway.'

The term *Green Man* is thought to be of recent coinage, but the legend is centuries old. He has many names, as: 'Jack in the Green' and the 'May King' and he is said to represent the 'tenacity of life.' Images of the Green Man are to be found in early Roman art, in Persia, Greece, and Egypt, Borneo and India: indeed, almost anywhere inhabited by humans, where nature is celebrated and revered. In Scotland, the first footers of the new year traditionally carry coal and greenery into the home, and in the English springtime the wild man becomes the May King or Jack in the May. These festivities coincide with the blooming of the hawthorn (or May tree), which has, for centuries, represented 'human nature, sexuality, reproduction and fertility.' The strongly scented hawthorn tree flowers in April and May, and the tree has long been associated with wedding celebrations, where it was used to decorate the nuptial bedchamber.

Legend has it that staves cut from the branches of yews contain the spirit of the tree and confer magical powers on those who carry them and a fine description

of the rites of Oak Apple day, is to be found in Roger Deaken's *Wild Wood*, when, at dawn, he encounters a wodwo, 'a green figure, half-tree, half-stag, enveloped in antlers of leafy oak boughs,' who greets him with a cheery 'Good morning!' Tales of the wild man of the woods abound and perhaps he lives on in the legend of Robin Hood and his merry men, and very much so in Shakespeare's plays, peopled by foolish mortals exiled to the Forest of Arden, where they learn to love one another and begin afresh. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Theseus says of the lovers, 'No doubt they rose up early to observe the Rite of May.' I remember many productions of the play, but none more magical than that of the French Canadian director Robert Lepage, whose quarrelling quartet of lovers awake from their dreams, to bathe together at dawn, under a forest waterfall.

The Green Man has come to be associated with the essential life-force and as such, his presence is especially important to us today, when so many trees are being thoughtlessly hacked to pieces, as land is requisitioned for building, to be tarmacked and paved out of existence, and as mankind creates ever more deadly weapons of destruction. The green shoots of the weeds, the foxgloves and the buddleias that sprout from railway tracks and building sites, may be annoying to the town planners, but they remain a welcome sign of hope for humanity and the planet's survival.

Green Man: The Archetype of our Oneness with the Earth by William Anderson

Wild Wood by Roger Deacon

Tree Wisdom – The Definitive Guidebook to the Myth, Folklore and Healing Power of Trees by Jacqueline Memory Paterson

A Little Book of the Green Man by Mike Harding

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