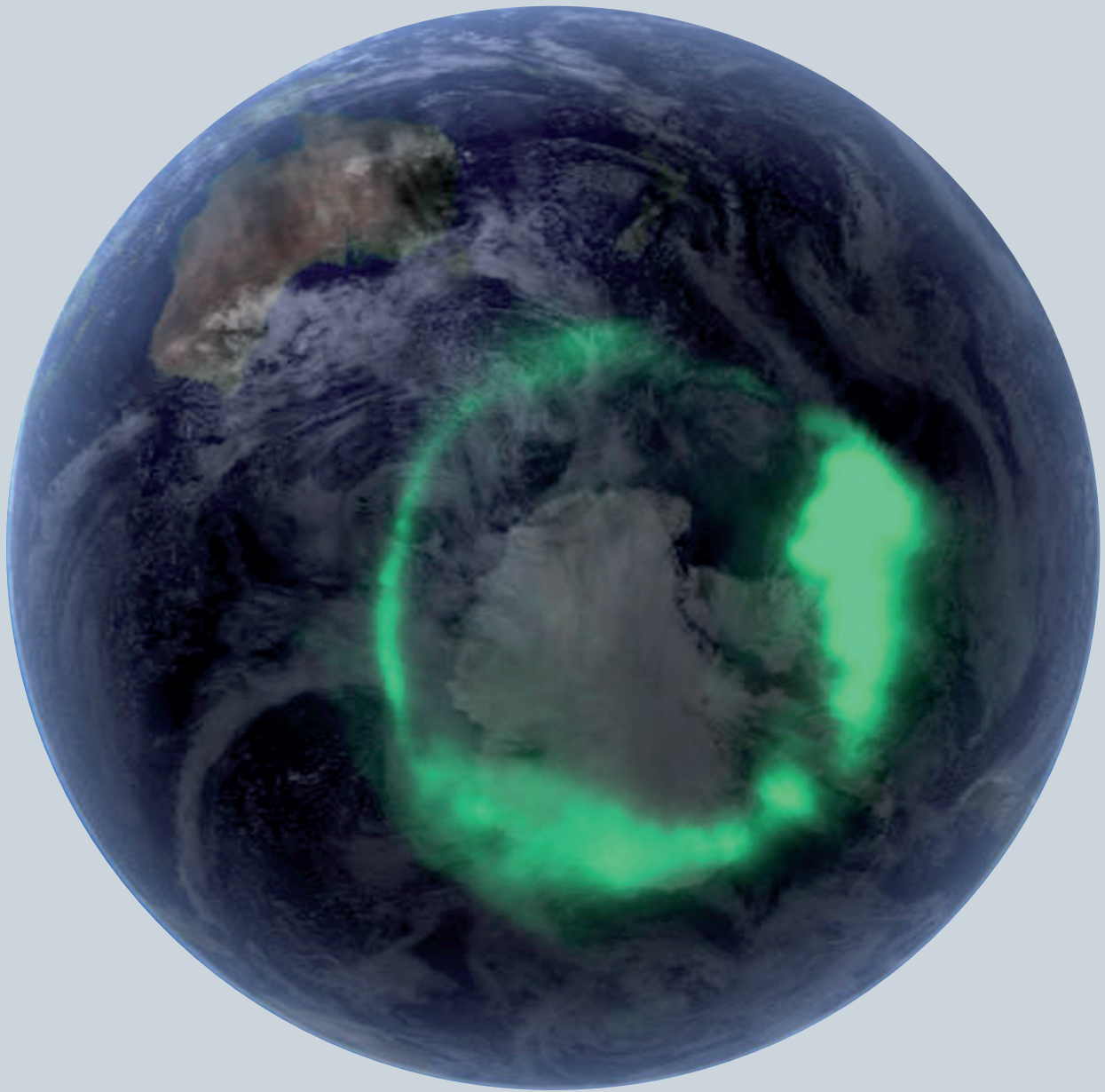


*sfia*

No. 93 September 2009



*Science and Religion*

*Making Meaning*

*CONFERENCE ISSUE*



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

## SUBSCRIBE TO THE MAGAZINE

Subscription to the magazine costs £15 per year (4 issues). Cheques made out to 'Sea of Faith' should be sent to Sofia Subscriptions, 9 Melbray Drive, Melton Mowbray LE13 1JS

## JOIN SOF NETWORK

**Sofia** comes free to Network members. New members are welcome and details of membership are available from the **Membership Secretary:**

**9 Melbray Drive,  
Melton Mowbray LE13 1JS  
membership@sofn.org.uk**

**Rates for 2009:** Sponsor: £60; Individual member: £30; concessions: £20. Extra copies and back numbers of the magazine can be ordered from the Membership Secretary for £4. Cheques should be made out to 'Sea of Faith'.

## OVERSEAS

**Sofia** is available in a variety of countries with payment accepted in local currency. US readers may pay membership or magazine subscriptions by cheques in dollars payable to H. Julien and marked 'for *Sofia*' at prices obtainable from him.

Address: H. Julien, 413 James Road, Palo Alto, CA 94306-4013.  
Tel. 650-813-1925 [hjulier@sbcglobal.net](mailto:hjulien@sbcglobal.net)

## CONTRIBUTIONS

Contributions to the magazine are welcome. Please submit unpublished articles that have not been submitted elsewhere, or if previously published, please state where and when. Proposals can be discussed with the Editor. Books for review, reviews, articles (which may be edited for publication) and poems should be sent the Editor:

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

Copy deadline is **40 days** before the beginning of the month of publication. Contributions should preferably be emailed to the Editor or posted as typewritten script. Contributions express the individual writer's opinion. They do not necessarily represent the views of the Editor or SoF Network or Trustees.

## LETTERS

Letters are particularly welcome and should be emailed or posted to the Editor at the address above.

## ADVERTISING

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

Rates are:

£132 full page                      £72 half page

£42 quarter page                      £28 1/8th of a page

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

## WEBSITE

For more information, visit our website at: [www.sofn.org.uk](http://www.sofn.org.uk)  
[webmaster@sofn.org.uk](mailto:webmaster@sofn.org.uk)

ISSN 1749-9062 © *sfia* 2009

# Contents

## Editorial

- 3 *Conference Issue: Science and Religion – Making Meaning*

## Articles and Features

- 4 *By What Authority?* by Jocelyn Bell Burnell  
8 *Thinking about Disability and Genetics* by Tom Shakespeare  
11 *Creationism as a Worldview: Implications for Education* by Michael Reiss  
15 *Has Everything Evolved?* by David Paterson  
16 *Reaching for the Moon 1: Sermon preached by Stephen Mitchell on Sunday July 19th 2009*  
18 *Reaching for the Moon 2: Memories of the 1969 Moon Landing* by Mary Lloyd and others

## Poetry

- 19 *The Earth is a Satellite of the Moon* by Leonel Rugama  
19 *Final Offensive* by Ernesto Cardenal

## Reviews

- 24 Michael Morton reviews *Dom Helder Camara: Essential Writings*, edited by Francis McDonagh  
25 *Jesus of Nazareth Ph.D?* David Boulton reviews *Jesus and Philosophy*, by Don Cupitt  
26 Christopher Hampton reviews *Well Versed*, Poems from the *Morning Star*, edited by John Rety  
27 *Trees*. Cicely Herbert braves the Treetop Walkway at Kew Gardens and visits the Corot to Monet Exhibition at the National Gallery, London

## Regulars and Occasionals

- 14 Cartoon by Josh  
20 Letters  
22 SOF Sift by Grenville Gilbert  
23 Radio Rockall

**Front Cover Image:** Photograph of the Earth with Aurora Borealis taken from space by the US Space Shuttle in 2007.

**Back Cover Image:** Cover of *This Life on Earth*, edited by Dinah Livingstone.



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

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

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

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

# Science and Religion

editorial

This 2009 Conference issue of *Sofia* contains edited versions of the talks given by our three speakers, Jocelyn Bell Burnell, Michael Reiss and Tom Shakespeare.

Professor Dame Jocelyn Bell Burnell, the astrophysicist, spoke about authority, in religion and, particularly, in science. Professor Michael Reiss, Director of Science Education at the University of London Institute of Education, discussed the teaching of evolution and the debate about 'creationism'. Writer and researcher Tom Shakespeare raised some questions about disability and genetics. These three very different talks ranged widely over their scientific fields and provided much food for thought and discussion. Our three experts all spoke extremely well and could be understood even by those, like me, who went to schools where science (except a little gentle biology) was regarded as unnecessary for young ladies.

At the Conference, we launched the new SOF book, *This Life on Earth* and it was rather delightful that one of our Trustees supplied a dozen bottles of best bubbly from her own vineyard (supplemented by a good many more bottles of ordinary Cava). Sales were also effervescent and the first edition of the book has now sold out. By the time this *Sofia* arrives, the second edition will be printed. So do order your copy if you have not already got one (see advertisement on this page) or buy more copies to give as presents.

In this issue of *Sofia* we also have the report of a Conference Workshop on Evolution run by David Paterson and a specially commissioned cartoon by Josh. The *SOF Sift* column continues with a contribution from Ottery St Mary in Devon and we have a new column from Radio Rockall (possibly a pirate?)

Please do continue to send your letters (and don't just write in when you want to moan about something!) But note that Ken Smith has retired as Letters Editor to concentrate on *Portholes* and local groups. So letters should now be sent to *Sofia* Editor, Dinah Livingstone.

On page 21 you will see an advertisement for the SOF Day Conference in Oxford on Saturday September 12<sup>th</sup>, which has been organised by the Oxford, Birmingham, Banbury and Southampton local groups. There is still time to book and it promises to be an interesting day.



SOF Network is pleased to announce its new title:

## This Life on Earth

edited by

Dinah Livingstone

Grandmothers, philosophers, priests and ex-priests, artists, civil servants, teachers, scientists and poets reflect on *This Life on Earth*, their own lives and attempts to make sense of it all, or more general aspects of this life on a beautiful planet, which is now intensely vulnerable. There are 23 prose pieces, all by members or associates of SOF Network, which regards religion as a human creation and a vital part of our human cultural treasury, and 15 poets, some members of the Network and some not, all contemporary except for one sixteenth-century Spanish mystic, who lives on in his poetry. *This Life on Earth* is many curious and particular autobiographies, a warning and a celebration.

\*

The book was launched at the SOF Conference in Leicester and has now gone into a second edition. You can order a copy from bookshops or from:

SOF Network,  
3 Belle Grove Place,  
Spital Tongues,

Newcastle upon Tyne NE2 4LH

for £9.50 plus £1.50 p. and p. per book (max. £6).  
Please send your name and address and your cheque made out to 'Sea of Faith'.

# By What Authority?

Jocelyn Bell Burnell questions authority in religion and science.

I used to be for many years the Quaker representative on the British Council of Churches. It was a good experience, but I was aware, particularly to begin with, of a sort of mismatch in where I was coming from and where the delegates from the other churches were coming from. It was a long time before I twigged what it was. And it clicked when I had a conversation with the then Archbishop of York, John Habgood, who also trained as a scientist, when he pointed out the following. Any church, any faith, any denomination, any sect can get its authority from one of several places: its holy writings – the Bible, the Koran; its history and traditions and, in particular, what its founder said; and thirdly, what's known technically as 'continuing revelation' – God speaking to us today. And it's because different denominations put different weights on these three that the differences occur.

For example, the Presbyterian Church of Scotland spends a lot of time considering the words in the Bible; British Quakers put a lot of emphasis on the third, continuing revelation, and pay much less attention to what the Bible says or to our traditions. So my initial problem with the British Council of Churches was that every time we had a resolution they would want to stuff a lot of biblical references in and I couldn't see why. I was born Quaker and brought up Quaker, so haven't actually a lot of experience of the other denominations, except through the ecumenical work I have done. But clearly there were different ideas of authority. In an encyclical of 1888, Pope Leo wrote: 'The highest duty is to respect authority.' – Remember the year – 1888 – because I'll come back to that. A slightly more flippant quote: 'I have as much authority as the Pope. I just don't have as many people who believe it' (George Carlin). Fair point. You actually only have as much authority as people give you. And you can lose it. It's an interesting thing, authority, it's a bit fragile, but if you're the Pope you have an enormous bevy of priests to help you keep your authority. The Dalai Lama takes a very different line: 'The ultimate authority must always rest with the individual's own reason and critical analysis.' No mention of a god, at least not directly.

However, the religious scene is changing, even in the Catholic church. You probably have heard of David Tracy, the Roman Catholic theologian from

Chicago. I believe it's his quote that says: 'I'm spiritual but I'm not religious.' And there's a lot of people saying that kind of thing. Formal religion is declining in this country, but interest in spiritual things is growing. Church denominations are shrinking, church collections are shrinking, but the retreat house that the church runs is full to the gills – at least, if they can afford to keep it open. And there are a whole load of new groupings, things like: New Age, Twelve-Step, Feminist Spirituality, Green Spirituality, a whole host of these. And I'm wondering, where's the authority in these? Or is authority a dirty word in these organisations? How do they govern themselves? I don't know. I think these groupings have been very influenced by feminist spirituality, which deliberately lacks identified leaders. If it doesn't have nominated leaders, it doesn't mesh properly with the conventional church structures, and so it's invisible, or less visible than it should be.

---

**I don't think science is half as clean-cut as many of us would believe.**

---

Now having been prompted to think a bit about authority in church circles, I then started saying to myself: 'I wonder how this carries over into science?' And so I started looking at the way science operates, the sociology of science. And here I want to stress again my experience is in physics and astronomy and what I am saying may not be true for all science, but I think it's accurate for my patch of science at least. And the first thing we need to recognise is that scientists, however objective they try to be, are doing science in a cultural context. And our cultural context is western, indeed US-dominated. Science used to be done by Arabs and Chinese, but we lost that, and our science tradition stems from the Greeks, so I think it's fair to call it western. It's largely northern hemisphere, it's largely male, it's more and more English-speaking, and it claims to place ultimate authority on the data from experiments. We are less white than we used to be, but minority people are probably still required to be honorary whites, indeed honorary white males, to play a part in science.

The other trap that I think we fall into in Britain is that we forget about the importance of creativity, subjectivity, imagination for creating the model or the hypothesis in the first place. You probably know the story of the benzene ring. Benzene is a ring-shaped molecule and it was the first ring-shaped molecule discovered and the guy who was trying to understand the structure of this molecule could not get it right, because he wasn't thinking 'ring'. One night he had a dream, about a snake swallowing his own tail and he said, when he woke up, 'I wonder if it's a circle like the snake swallowing his own tail.' And it was. Maybe that was his subconscious working on it, it may be pure coincidence, I don't know. The other critique that I wanted to make from my experience of being involved in a discovery is that when discoveries are written up afterwards, they are presented as logical, ordered, carried out by super-intelligent scientists. But actually it's a real mess – you're trying to understand what the heck is going on.

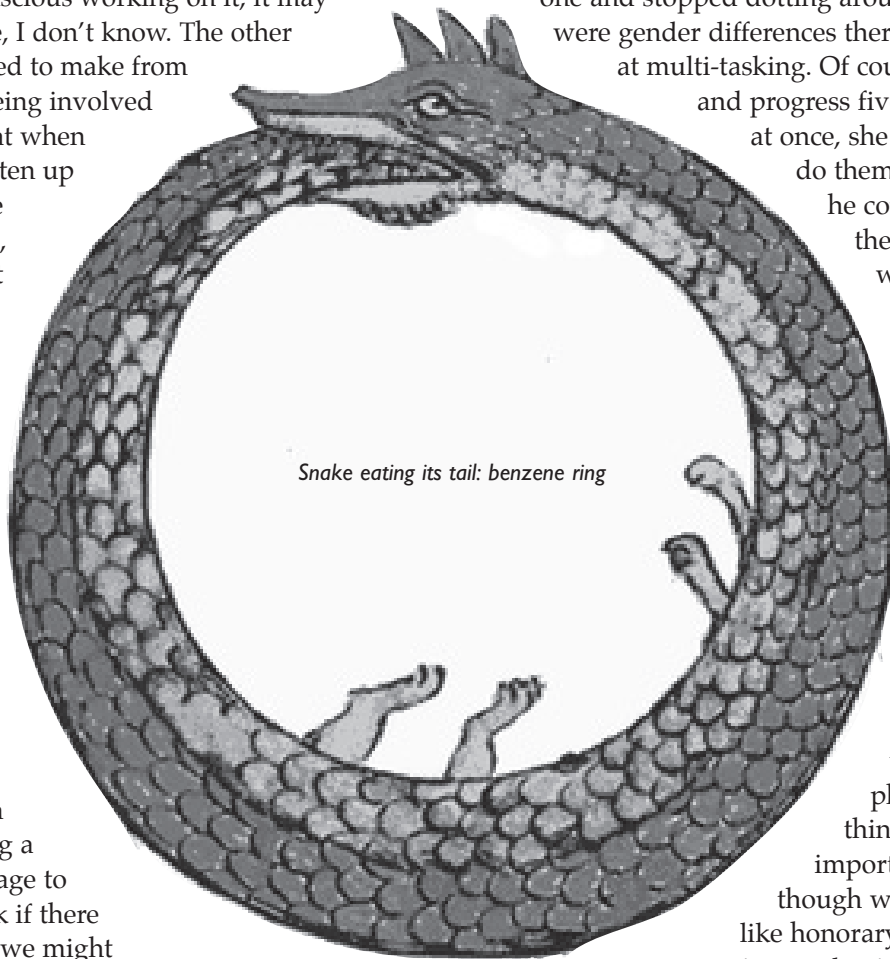
Scientists, my colleagues in particular, will claim to be highly objective. I have my doubts. I argue in vain with them that they bring a lot of cultural baggage to their science. I think if there were more females we might be more successful in this argument, but I am going to have to wait for that. But as a female I suspect that a lot of physics operates to male norms, a male ethos. It's been male-dominated for centuries, and inevitably it is the males who have named it, interpreted it, pursued it, and so on. Indeed I even suspect that what we call physics is a male interpretation of what's important in physics, and of the right way to do it, and women often come in from a different direction with different methods.

For example, when I was Dean of the Science Faculty of the University of Bath, my bailiwick included the department of computer science. The department was fairly largely male-dominated, but they were beginning to get some young

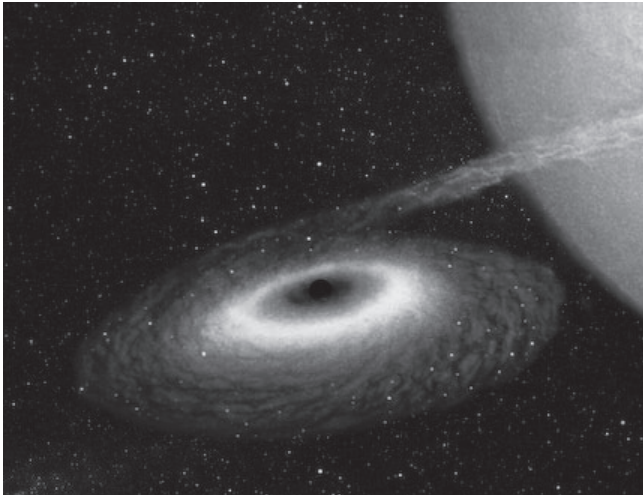
women lecturers and one young women lecturer arrived while I was there and, as is the practice at Universities, was given a mentor to monitor her progress during her first year. At the end of that first year she got an abominable report from her mentor – a very brilliant computer scientist. She said, when I met her afterwards, that she had reckoned that by the end of the third year, when her probation was done, she had to have five things established. She had to have a website, a lecture course, etc., etc. and she had started doing a bit of work on all of these. Her mentor was horrified: she should have focussed on one and stopped dotting around. I suspect there were gender differences there: women are good at multi-tasking. Of course she can start and progress five different things at once, she doesn't have to do them sequentially, but he couldn't do that and therefore he thought it was wrong to do it.

We're not always open to different ways of doing things and I regret, as Dean, I was a bit slow on the uptake on that one and didn't really challenge the department on their judgment. The few females that there are in the physical sciences I think provide a very important critique, even though we have to behave like honorary males in order to survive academically.

So, to authority in science. At this point, I think I need to distinguish between experimental science and observational science. Experimental science is where you can do the experiment again with the knobs set slightly differently or different concentrations or whatever. Observational science, in my definition, includes subjects like astronomy, geology, archaeology where you can't repeat the experiment. You can't say to the rocks, 'Do you mind if we redo that period of dramatic folding?' And with astronomy, you can't say, 'Can you change your temperature now please, star?' You just have to take what you've got. And I think some of the issues I am talking about come up more acutely in these observational sciences.



Snake eating its tail: benzene ring



*Cygnus X-1: 'We suppose it must be a black hole.'*

One piece of science, with which I was quite closely involved, concerned a pair of stars in the constellation of Cygnus, the swan. The pair of stars, or one of the pair, or something to do with the pair turned out to be a strong source of X-rays, so it goes by the name Cygnus X-1, the first X-ray source discovered in the constellation of Cygnus. It turns out that it's a pair of stars, but only one of the pair is visible. The other could be just faint – we don't see it – but that doesn't fit with the other data. The most likely interpretation is that the other one of the pair is a black hole, and this was the first example of a black hole in our galaxy. And for a long time I was reluctant to believe it, but, along with the rest of the astronomical community, I am now forced to believe it.

Not because anybody proved that there was a black hole in that pair, Cygnus X-1, but because they failed to disprove it. For twenty years the community tried to prove that there was not a black hole, that the invisible companion was something else. And all these attempts at other explanations had failed and the community, me included, said, 'Oh well, I suppose it's a black hole.' The scientific community has a role in forming consensus and actually saying, without saying it, 'Oh well, I suppose it must be a black hole.' And where you have such judgment and discernment and communities of people, you also have fashions and bandwagons and subjectivity. So I don't think science is half as clean-cut as many of us would believe.

The scientific community serves as gatekeepers. So if I come up with an utterly crazy idea like there are two black holes in Cygnus X-1, they say, 'Rubbish, Jocelyn, it's got the spectrum of a star. How can that be?' But there's a need in the scientific community for the person who stands apart, the rebel. In the UK we had a famous character called Fred Hoyle – some of you will have heard of him – who performed this

role. A very blunt Yorkshireman, who was very clever and who irritated – more than irritated: infuriated – everybody, particularly the more established ones, by promoting counter-theories, which had as much proof in them as the community's fashionable view.

This theme's been around for a while. Galileo: 'In questions of science the authority of a thousand is not worth the humble reasoning a single individual.' Thomas Huxley, who I think goes a bit too far: 'Every great advance in natural knowledge has involved the absolute rejection of authority.' That's a bit over the top. Or Einstein: 'Unthinking respect for authority is the greatest enemy of truth.' I think that's true.

So where does authority in science lie? The quick answer, which my colleagues would give, is 'with the data'. But actually, as I have already, I hope, demonstrated, I think some of it lies with the peer community, with colleagues, with people who helped form that corporate judgment that, 'Oh well, I suppose there is a black hole in Cygnus X-1.' I would also say: authority lies with those who control access – to funds, to publications, to recognition. And this too is subject to fashion and bandwagons.

About 35 years ago I was one of the editors of the astronomy magazine that had the largest circulation in Britain, called *The Observatory*. And we editors – five, six of us – did the refereeing ourselves. So people would send us papers and each of us would read it and say, 'Yes, publish,' or: 'Get them to modify this bit,' or: 'Not on your life, we're not publishing that!' And we kept getting papers from a guy who was convinced there was water on Mars. We knew there wasn't water on Mars. Every astronomer in the world knew that Mars was a dry planet, so we sent his paper back. And he would send in a slightly different paper about the water on Mars and we would send his paper back. And he would try a different tack and send us another paper about the water on Mars and we sent his paper back. Today, we know there probably isn't liquid water on Mars now, but it does look as if there's been liquid flowing on that planet at some time. And we think there may well be ice reserves on the planet.

When I was Head of the Physics Department at the Open University I had an open door policy. The office door literally stood open unless there was a confidential meeting going on inside. One Monday morning a senior colleague, in a considerable state of agitation about something, came to my office door and stood in the doorway, propping himself against the door frame. He was troubled because at the weekend he had discovered he could dowse for water. He was disturbed because scientists like proof of things but also an understanding of how

something might happen. He had the proof but not why and how. And there is no known mechanism in today's physics which will explain why a hazel rod or a bent coat hanger twitches when it goes over a water source. Yet my colleague was presented with that evidence. Now he is a very able physicist, he likes things black and white, he likes things nicely sewn up, and the fact that he could dowse and there's no known way that one should be able to dowse was profoundly disturbing. So he spent an hour and a half propping up my door frame while he talked, ostensibly to me, but actually at me and tried to work out what was going on. After an hour and half, he had more or less convinced himself that there must have been a slight depression in the field and his subconscious noticed this and as he walked across the depression, things twitched. Now I'm not sure that he was going to be able to hold on to that explanation. But at least it got him moved on that morning and allowed me to get on with some work. For a physicist to have really good evidence of dowsing or spoon-bending or a number of other things that we glibly label paranormal is very disturbing because it blows your world apart.

A number of us actually aren't very good at living with uncertainty, but it's actually one of things you have to do as a research scientist, and probably also, as a research theologian, and maybe just as a member of the human race. Research science leaves a trail of loose ends. You're working with incomplete pictures; things aren't neatly sewn up a lot of the time. You have to be able to live with 'I don't know' and you have to be able to live with change. I can see that for some this is very difficult because they want to impose order, want a sense of security and maybe they want a sense of being in control.

One of the big things to hit astronomy in the last 10 years, still a very big mystery, is what we call dark energy. You may know that the universe is expanding, the galaxies are gradually moving further and further apart. This is left over from the Big Bang, 13 billion years ago. You would expect that expansion to gradually get slower because there is gravitational attraction, albeit weak, between these galaxies and you think they'd hold each other back. But about 10 or 15 years ago we discovered that that ain't the case – in fact the expansion is getting faster. Something is pushing the galaxies apart, it's a sort of anti-gravity and this is something that we honestly do not understand at the moment. But one of the first things we had to do was give this thing a name. We called it dark energy: it's energy because it's pushing and it's dark because we ain't a clue what it is. And we feel more in control for having given it a name!

## You have to be able to live with 'I don't know' and you have to be able to live with change.

---

One of my favourite quotations come from Rilke's letters to a young poet, some of you may know it:

Be patient towards all that is unresolved in your heart, try to love the questions themselves. Do not now seek the answers which cannot be given because you would not be able to live them. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live some distant day into the answers,

I think that's good advice to a scientist.

I want to finish by at least identifying some of my baggage. This may not come as a surprise to you, but I should identify it anyway. Do you remember 1888 and Pope Leo's encyclical? Six days after it there was a commencement ceremony in the United States at Haverford College in Pennsylvania, which is a Quaker foundation. The president Isaac Sharpless gave the following advice to his graduates.

I suggest that you preach truth and do righteousness as you have been taught, whereinsoever that teaching may commend itself to your consciences and your judgments. For your consciences and your judgments we have not sought to bind; and see you to it that no other institution, no political party, no social circle, no religious organisation, no pet ambitions put such chains on you as would tempt you to sacrifice one iota of the moral freedom of your consciences or the intellectual freedom of your judgments.

How wonderful and amazing that that speech was made within days of the Pope Leo statement. And finally since I have used a lot of quotations: 'A quotation in a speech, article or book is like a rifle in the hands of an infantryman. It speaks with authority.'

---

This is an edited version of the recording of the talk given by Dame Jocelyn at the SOF annual conference in Leicester. Recording and transcription by Oliver Essame.

---

Professor Dame Jocelyn Bell Burnell is visiting Professor of Astrophysics at the University of Oxford and President of the Institute of Physics.

# Challenges, Questions, Answers: Thinking about Disability and Genetics

Tom Shakespeare raises some questions about disability and bioethics.

## Mapping the Territory

The challenge I offer the SOF network is situated in the context of four different issues. In this article, I will first map that territory, then ask what a non-realist approach to theology might offer as an ethical or spiritual response, and then end with some key questions to which I hope answers may begin to be found.

The first development is the transformation that the *disability rights* movement (politics) and disability studies (academic) have made to our understandings of disability and difference. Broadly, disability has usually been understood in terms of deficit – things that individual bodies or minds cannot do, or can only do badly. Words like ‘invalid’ and ‘retarded’ and ‘crippled’ and ‘deaf and dumb’ connote some of the negative values that have surrounded disability.

## For disability the analogy should not be with gender, race, sexuality, but with poverty.

---

Since the late sixties, disabled people themselves have challenged this pathological approach, often labelled ‘the medical model’. Campaigners have claimed that disability is like race, gender and sexuality: in other words, a social issue, not a personal problem. Attention has focused on the barriers that exclude people, not the individual medical diagnoses that people might have. This attention to the ways in which society disables brings to mind Hebrews 12.13: ‘Make a level path for my feet, so that the lame be not disabled’. In other words, do not add to the difficulties which people with impairments already have, by socially and physically excluding them.

This revolutionary approach to disability has not been all good. In my view, identity politics can have negative aspects – it sometimes becomes inward-looking, fosters self-segregation, imposes a single identity and voice on what is usually a plurality of perspectives and experiences. I worry that disability cannot be celebrated

so easily as being a woman, or gay, or from a particular ethnic tradition: for some people, impairment is tragic or damaging. Maybe the analogy is not with gender, race, sexuality but should be with poverty: we want to respect people in poverty, but we also want to remove poverty and prevent it occurring in future.

The second development is the extraordinary developments in *biomedicine* that have occurred in recent decades, particularly the sequencing of the Human Genome, advances in stem cell research, and new possibilities for diagnosing, and ultimately treating, disease. In some ways, genetic research dissolves the minority group approach of the disability movement: it shows we all carry up to 100 genetic mutations in our genome, we are all impaired. Genetics also reminds us that we are unequal: some people have better genes than others, translating into better health, higher intelligence, more talent. Unequal outcomes are not just a matter of unequal opportunities.

Biomedicine is an example of what has been called the ‘Baconian project’, after the seventeenth-century scientist and thinker Francis Bacon. The term refers to the ambition to use science to eliminate suffering and maximise choice, to rid humans of the burden of fate. The question is, how far does this go? How do we decide, as a society, about the costs and benefits of particular technologies? What choices should we make in our own lives?

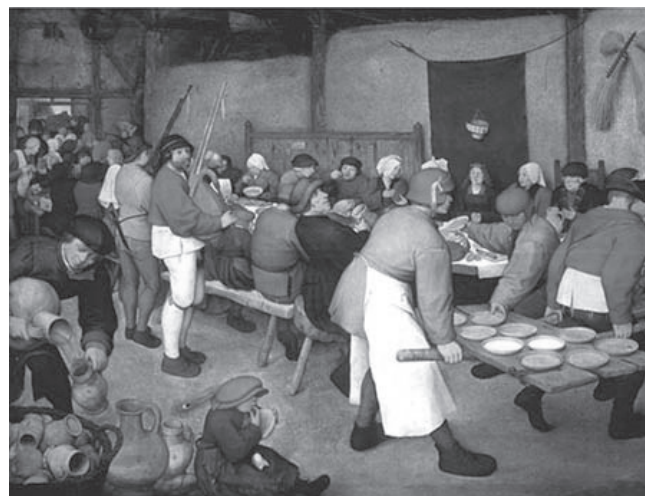
Third, *bioethics* is the philosophical and social response to the challenge of biomedicine. In Britain, the field is dominated by analytical philosophy, which draws on the thinking of utilitarianism and Kantian deontology. The contemporary bioethicist looks at problems posed by genetics or other biotechnologies in a rational, logical and consistent way. She, or more often he, would tend to dismiss emotional or faith-based perspectives, looking for evidence that a particular innovation would lead to harm to anyone. Notions such as ‘it’s unnatural’ or ‘we are playing god’ would be given short shrift. The ‘bioethics toolkit’ deploys four key principles: beneficence (do good), non-maleficence (do no harm), justice and autonomy. In practice, it is usually autonomy that prevails: individuals should be able to do what they like, as long as they do not harm others, for example the idea of reproductive autonomy.



A Finnish colleague once suggested that bioethics sees disability purely in terms of killing: abortion issues at the beginning of life, assisted suicide and euthanasia issues at the end of life. Disability activists have been enraged by the arguments of prominent bioethicists such as Peter Singer and John Harris, who see disability as a wholly negative experience best avoided. More widely, bioethics is ill equipped to deal with limitations of the 'Baconian project', because it draws on the same intellectual foundations of the Enlightenment. Robert Song argues that this is what hampers Jurgen Habermas' recent attempt to develop a critique of biomedicine. There is a need to find another way of thinking about nature, including our human nature, which goes beyond trying to subdue and control it. Also, John H Evans has suggested that the problem with bioethics is that it explores the means, not the ultimate ends. He thinks this is because there is no agreement on what our goals should be, in contemporary pluralist society. Therefore we spend our time arguing about procedural issues, not questions of ultimate value.

Fourth, Christian *theology* has been generally conservative in its response to biomedical advances. Christians are less negative about suffering than utilitarian bioethicists, and more concerned about the value of the embryo (life begins at conception), and life in general. The notion of humans being created in God's image can translate into a reluctance to manipulate or improve on the species. This could be contrasted with a Jewish theological approach, based on *tikkun*, the idea of humanity as unfinished, and humans as co-creators with God: this partly explains the importance of science and medicine in Jewish culture, and the strength of biomedical research in Israel. Judaism does not tend to have concerns about the early embryo (up to 40 days the embryo is 'as water').

On disability, Christianity has mixed messages: disabled people are objects of charity, or of healing missions, but they are also valued because of equal worth in the eyes of God. For example, the L'Arche communities inspired by Jean Vanier have enabled people with intellectual impairment to live alongside non-disabled people in the community. The visually impaired theologian John Hull writes that Jesus 'first accepts the infirmities of humanity by healing them, but finally he accepts the infirmities of humanity by participating in them, by becoming one of them'. He quotes Isaiah 53:3: 'He was despised, shunned by all, pain-racked and afflicted by disease.' Disabled theologian Nancy Eiesland, who died in 2009, wrote of Christ as a person with physical impairment in *The Disabled God* (2004), where she challenges the church to remove barriers: 'People with disabilities will accept no less than the church's acknowledgement of us as historical actors and theological subjects and its active engagement in eliminating stigmatising social practices and theological orientations from its midst.' (p.67)



*The Great Feast: Pieter Bruegel, Peasant Wedding*

## What would a Non-realist Position look like?

I am not a theologian, not a scientist and not a philosopher. But I am interested in coming to an ethical and religious understanding of contemporary disability and biomedicine. My trajectory echoes many in the SOF movement: brought up an Anglican, lost my faith at University, came to Quakerism at the age of 30. I read and valued *The Sea of Faith*, read the non-realist Quaker John McMurray (1891 – 1976), and would identify myself as a religious humanist, although not entirely sure what the implications of that are.

Probably the best account of the implications of this position for bioethics is Richard Holloway's *Godless Morality*, where he argues: 'It is better to leave God out of the moral debate and find good human reasons for supporting the system or approach we advocate, without having recourse to divinely clinching arguments.' I agree. But I do wonder then, what is the added value of the 'religious' part of religious humanist? Is there a difference between the perspective or values of the non-realist religious perspective and the secular bioethics perspective?

What appeals to me in secular bioethics is that it is not woolly. It is rational, accessible and offers clear answers. But I recognise that it does so by eliminating all that is complicated about human social life: relationships, feelings, emotions. For that reason, I prefer alternative bioethics, arising from feminist approaches or from Aristotelian virtue ethics, which emphasises living virtuously and trying to promote human flourishing. But virtue ethics does not help when faced with a specific dilemma around a genetic test or a new technology.

## Asking the Questions

I realise that we can't answer any question definitively, and that it's better to accept the diversity of opinion. But I do feel we need to develop a platform, a place from which to begin to answer questions. Bioethicists

like John Harris are always ready to provide answers, and so are religious fundamentalists. Therefore it behoves us to think about the issues and come up with some broad ideas for answers. Questions which I do not feel contemporary bioethics answers well, questions which arise from my own research and experience, include the following:

*On prenatal diagnosis and selective termination:* does it matter if we eliminate disability? Screening is currently incomplete and imperfect, so this is a hypothetical question, but it is interesting to think about whether disability is part of natural diversity, and therefore valuable, or whether it is something which we can and should prevent, to improve human wellbeing. We were pleased to eliminate smallpox... Would it matter if there were no more people with Down's syndrome in the population?

*On pre-implantation genetic diagnosis (embryo selection):* lay people often respond to the idea of choosing embryos to be free of disease, or to be the preferred sex, or even to have other preferred characteristics, by saying 'Children should be a gift not a commodity'. What, in a post-religious world, does this mean, and does it capture something important about parenting, something which our emphasis on choice and control ignores?

*On enhancement of human characteristics,* through genetics or pharmaceuticals or nanotechnology: how far should this go? We compensate people for the social lottery (welfare state, redistributive taxation). Should we now compensate people for the natural lottery (the genes you are born with)? Jackie Leach Scully has distinguished between nudges (small improvements, like helping everyone to live to 80) and transformations (living to 150). The former might be desirable, the latter unacceptable. But add together the nudges and you get a transformation.

I want to find answers to these questions which are more humane than those provided by bioethics, and less conservative than those provided by most orthodox theology. I want to ensure that disabled people are included and respected, but I also want to improve health and prevent disease.

## Final thoughts

Many of our immediate reactions to biomedical innovations can be summed up in terms of the 'yuck factor': we disapprove of that with which we are unfamiliar. So, in time, humans have found railways, cars, birth control, heart transplants and assisted conception to be unacceptable, unnatural and even 'playing God'. Now, we accept all of these as beneficial and progressive. So we should be cautious about our immediate reactions, and ask some more rigorous questions about who might be harmed, and what of value might be lost.

Personally, I do not object to any of the biomedical advances I have described, but I do worry about our overall direction of travel. Like US ethicist Dan Callahan, I believe that the exponential growth of medicine cannot go on: it is unaffordable on a global scale, and it prevents us coming to terms with the limitations of our embodiment, and finding meaning in the predicament we face: being born, being mortal, being frail. Robert Song asks how can sickness be integrated into a morally valuable life which has come to terms with finitude, and how are we to care for each other, as vulnerable human beings: 'our greatest task is to learn our own humanity'.

Finally, perhaps it is relevant to cite Luke 14: 12-24, the parable of the Great Feast. When the rich man's invitations to prominent people are rejected, he tells his servants to invite others to his table: 'Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.' Perhaps that says something important about the values which should predominate in our discussions.

---

Tom Shakespeare is a Research Fellow at Newcastle University. His publications include *Disability Rights and Wrongs* (Routledge, London 2006).

---

## Further reading

Eiesland, N. L. (1994). *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*. Nashville: Abington Press

John Harris (2007) *Enhancing Evolution: the ethical case for making better people*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

John M Hull (2003) A Spirituality of Disability: The Christian Heritage as both Problem and Potential, *Studies in Christian Ethics*, vol.16 no. 2, pp. 21-35

Hans Reinders (2008) *Receiving the gift of friendship: profound disability, theological anthropology and ethics*, Grand Rapids: Wm B Erdmans Publishing.

Jackie Leach Scully (2008) *Disability Bioethics: moral bodies, moral difference*, Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.

Tom Shakespeare (2006) *Disability Rights and Wrongs*, London: Routledge.

Robert Song (2002) *Human Genetics: Fabricating the Future*. Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press.

John Swinton & Brian Brock (editors) ( 2007) *Theology, Disability and the New Genetics: Why Science Needs the Church*. London: T & T Clark.

Jean Vanier (1999) *Becoming Human*, Mahwah: Paulist Press.

# Creationism as a Worldview: Implications for Education

Michael Reiss argues that when teaching evolution, teachers should allow students to raise any doubts they have, even though creationism and intelligent design are not scientific theories.

## The Rise of Creationism

To some people's surprise and consternation, and others' delight, creationism is growing in extent and influence, both in the UK and elsewhere. Definitions of creationism vary but about 40% of adults in the USA and perhaps 15% in the UK believe that the Earth came into existence as described in the early parts of the Bible or the *Qur'an* and that the most that evolution has done is to change species into closely related species. For a creationist it is possible that the various species of zebra had a common ancestor but this is not the case for zebras, bears and antelopes – still less for monkeys and humans, for birds and molluscs or for palm trees and flesh-eating bacteria.

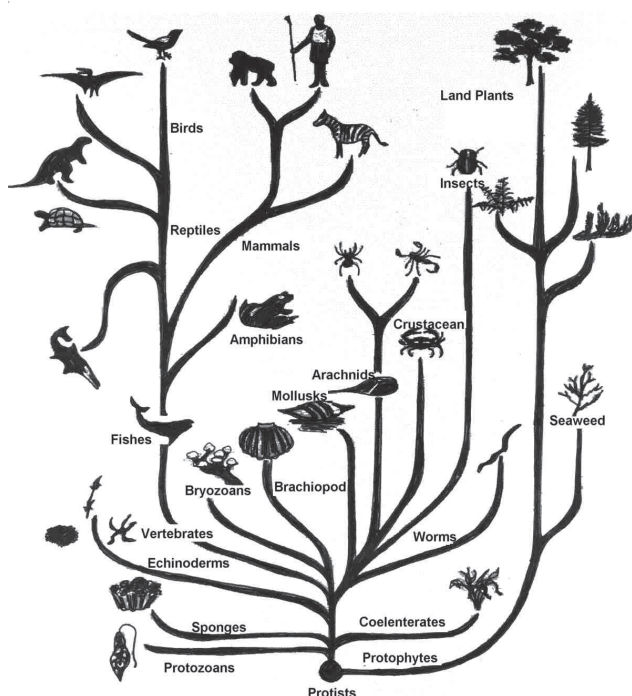
At the same time, of course, the overwhelming majority of biologists consider evolution to be the central concept in biological sciences, providing a conceptual framework that unifies every disparate aspect of the life sciences into a single coherent discipline. Equally, the overwhelming majority of scientists believe that the universe is of the order of about 13-14 billion years old. Even though evolution and cosmology are well established scientific theories, they are at the centre of a prolonged, possibly deepening, religious controversy.

This highly publicised schism between a number of religious worldviews, particularly Judaeo-Christian views based on *Genesis* and mainstream Islamic readings of the *Qur'an*, and modern scientific explanations derived from the theory of evolution, is exacerbated by the way people are often asked in surveys or interviews about their views on human origin. There is a tendency to polarise religion and science in questionnaires that focus on the notion that either God created everything or God had nothing at all to do with it. The choices used in many public polls erroneously imply that scientific evolution is necessarily atheistic, coupling complete acceptance of evolution with explicit exclusion of any religious premise. Most surveys contain only a small number of options that makes analysis easy, 'clean' and strictly numeric. The limited number of categories forces people to codify their views to fit into, at best, three or four predetermined categories and misses more nuanced information about what they are actually thinking. In fact, of course, people have personal beliefs about religion and science that cover a wide range of possibilities.

## The Significance of Origins

If one asks whether dinosaurs and humans coexisted, that is manifestly a scientific question (to which I consider the correct and scientific answer to be 'no'), and any religious attempt to answer the question differently is bound to lead to conflict. If, though, one asks why the universe has precisely the values of the various physical constants that it does (values which, if only minutely different, would preclude the evolution of any life, let alone life sufficiently intelligent to be asking this question), then this is perhaps less of a scientific question, so that conflict is less likely to be seen as inevitable.

Most of the literature on creationism (and/or intelligent design) and evolutionary theory puts them in stark opposition. Evolution is consistently presented in creationist books and articles as illogical (e.g. natural selection cannot, on account of the second law of thermodynamics, create order out of disorder; mutations are always deleterious and so cannot lead to improvements), contradicted by the scientific evidence (e.g. the fossil record shows human footprints alongside animals supposed by evolutionists to be long extinct; the fossil record does not provide evidence for transitional forms), the product of non-scientific reasoning (e.g. the early history of life would require life to arise from inorganic matter – a form of spontaneous generation rejected by science in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century; radioactive dating makes assumptions about the constancy of natural processes



Tree of Life

over aeons of time whereas we increasingly know of natural processes that affect the rate of radioactive decay), the product of those who ridicule the word of God, and a cause of a whole range of social evils (from eugenics, Marxism, Nazism and racism to juvenile delinquency).

By and large, creationism has received similarly short shrift from those who accept the theory of evolution. Many scientists have defended evolutionary biology from creationism. The main points that are frequently made are that evolutionary biology is good science, since not all science consists of controlled experiments where the results can be collected within a short period of time; that creationism (including 'scientific creationism') isn't really a science in that its ultimate authority is scriptural and theological rather than the evidence obtained from the natural world; and that an acceptance of evolution is fully compatible with a religious faith.

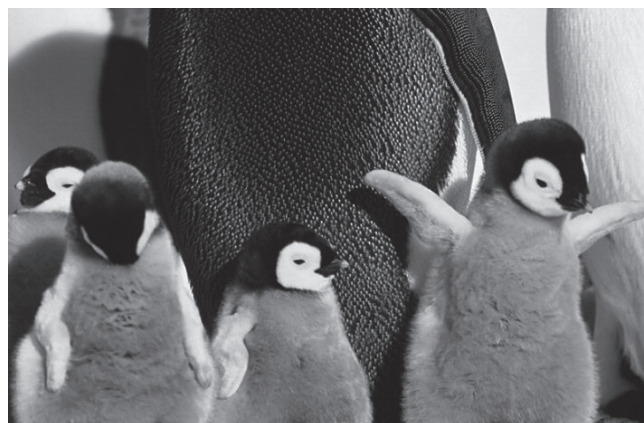
## March of the Penguins

*March of the Penguins* is a stunning 2005 National Geographic feature film. It runs for approximately 85 minutes, has a 'U' (Universal) certificate (i.e. is deemed to be 'suitable for all' though, according to the back of the DVD casing, it 'contains mild peril') and is accompanied by a beautiful coffee table book available in the original 2005 French and a 2006 translation into English. For a photo gallery, downloads, a trailer, desktops, a screensaver and buddy icons see the official website, which gives a good impression of the exceptional footage in the full length film. The website also starts with the words of Morgan Freeman that begin the English (USA) film: 'In the harshest place on Earth, love finds a way. This is the incredible true story of a family's journey to bring life into the world.'

The film has been an exceptional success. It won an Academy Award (an 'Oscar') in 2006 for Best Documentary Feature and was awarded Best Documentary at the 2005 National Board of Review. In terms of revenue it is the most successful nature film in American motion picture history, taking over US\$100m at the box office and in rentals. Its success gave a boost to the cartoon film *Happy Feet* with its rap-dancing Mumble and Christmas 2006 in the UK saw an explosion of penguin merchandise – I was even given a *Happy Feet* Advent Calendar from Marks & Spencer with five penguin finger puppets as well as the more traditional 25 pieces of chocolate.

## The film *March of the Penguins* has been a great success among the Christian Right.

The reasons for the success of *March of the Penguins* are no doubt several: the photography is phenomenal; the emperor penguin's story is extraordinary; the adults are elegant; the chicks are irredeemably cute as they look fluffy, feebly wave their little wings and learn to walk; the way in which the birds survive the Antarctic winter is awesome; the plaintive cries of mothers who lose their chicks in snow storms are heartrending. But one perhaps unexpected reason is that the film has been a great success among the Christian Right.



*March of the Penguins*

For example, if one enters ' "march of the penguins" Christian' into Google, at the time of writing (22 July 2009), one finds 70,000 hits. Second of these is a review of the film by Mari Helms on ChristianAnswers.Net, which describes itself as 'a mega-site providing biblical answers to contemporary questions for all ages and nationalities with 40-thousand files'. After a fairly detailed summary of the subject matter of the film, and reassurance that viewers won't find much in the film to be objectionable (noting, for instance, under the sub-heading 'Sex/Nudity' that: 'The penguins mate during the film, but it is understood, not shown'), the review goes on to discuss the lessons that the film has to teach about love, perseverance, the existence of God and friendship/camaraderie. An extended quote from the review [underlinings indicate hyperlinks to other pages on the ChristianAnswers.Net website] illustrates the presuppositions of the author:

FRIENDSHIP/CAMARADERIE: All the penguins wait to start their journey until the last of them is out of the water, giving a sense of unity. As the penguins make their journey, they will all stop from time to time until one of them picks up the trail again, and then they all start moving. It is similar to what we are called to do in the body of Christ. [1 Corinthians 12:27-28](#): 'Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues.

While the fathers are caring for their unhatched chicks and braving the harshest of weather, they all huddle together in a huge heap for warmth. The ones on the outside rotate, so they all have a turn in the middle. [Philippians 2:2-4](#): 'then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.'

I was truly fascinated by the lives of these penguins, maybe because I felt we as humans could emulate much of it and be better followers of the [gospel](#) of Jesus Christ. They all worked together towards a common goal; there was no fighting, gossiping and disorder. There was apparent 'love,' cooperation and order. [1 Corinthians 12:25](#): 'so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other.'

This quote manifests an integrated relationship between science and religion. The worldview is one in which it is straightforward to read from penguin behaviour to human behaviour, though it is worth noting that the argument is neither entirely anthropomorphic (in which non-human behaviour is interpreted as if it was the behaviour of humans) nor one in which the natural world is seen as *the* source of instruction as to how humans should behave. Rather, it is scripture that has primacy; the natural world is then held up, not so much as a model for us to imitate, but as an illustration of how the natural world can manifest that which God wishes for humanity.

Such a reading of nature in *March of the Penguins* is facilitated by the wonderful photography which enables the viewer to read into the footage as much as (s)he reads from it. Indeed, Luc Jacquet has been quoted as saying that his intention was to tell the story in the most simple and profound way and to leave it open to any reading. So I, with a PhD and post-doctoral research in evolutionary biology (though also a priest in the Church of England with a conventional, albeit non-fundamentalist, Christian faith), can see it as a manifestation of the extraordinary ability of natural selection over millions of years to enable an organism to survive and reproduce in the most inhospitable of environments, while others see it as a clear manifestation of Intelligent Design.

This latter reading is despite the fact that the film begins by talking about how Antarctica used to be covered in tropical forest before it drifted South and then says of the emperor penguins: 'For millions of years they have made their home on the darkest, driest, windiest and coldest continent on Earth.'

## Classroom Specifics

So how might one teach evolution in science lessons, say to 14-16 year-olds? The first thing to note is that there is scope for young people to discuss beliefs about the origins of the Earth and living things in other subjects, notably religious education (RE). In England, the DCSF (Department for Children, Schools and Families) and QCA (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority) have published a non-statutory national framework for RE and teaching units which include a unit asking: 'How can we answer questions about creation and origins?' The unit focuses on creation and the origins of the universe and human life, as well as the relationships between religion and science. It can be downloaded from <http://www.qca.org.uk>.

In the summer of 2007, after months of behind-the-scenes meetings and discussions, the DCSF Guidance on Creationism and Intelligent Design received Ministerial approval and was published. As one of those who helped put the Guidance together I am relieved it seems to have been broadly welcomed. Indeed, the discussions on the Richard Dawkins.net forum have been pretty positive and *The Freethinker*, 'The Voice of Atheism since 1881', described it as 'a welcome breath of fresh air' and 'a model of clarity and reason'.

The Guidance points out that the use of the word 'theory' in science (as in 'the theory of evolution') can mislead those not familiar with science as a subject discipline, because it is different from the everyday meaning (i.e. of being little more than an idea). In science, the word indicates that there is a substantial amount of supporting

evidence, underpinned by principles and explanations accepted by the international scientific community. The Guidance goes on to point out: 'Creationism and intelligent design are sometimes claimed to be scientific theories. This is not the case as they have no underpinning scientific principles, or explanations, and are not accepted by the science community as a whole. Creationism and intelligent design therefore do not form part of the science National Curriculum programmes of study.'

The Guidance then goes on to say: 'Creationism and intelligent design are not part of the science National Curriculum programmes of study and should not be taught as science. However, there is a real difference between teaching 'x' and teaching *about* 'x'. Any questions about creationism and intelligent design which arise in science lessons, for example as a result of media coverage, could provide the opportunity to explain or explore why they are not considered to be scientific theories and, in the right context, why evolution is considered to be a scientific theory.'

This seems to me a key point. Many scientists, and some science educators, fear that consideration of creationism or intelligent design in a science classroom legitimises them. However, just because something lacks scientific support doesn't seem to me a sufficient reason to omit it from a science lesson. When I was taught science at school, and taught it extremely well in my view, what I remember finding so exciting was that we could discuss almost anything, providing we were prepared to defend our thinking in a way that admitted objective evidence and logical argument.

In an interesting exception that proves the rule, I recall one of our advanced level chemistry teachers scoffing at a fellow student who sat with a spoon in front of her while Uri Geller maintained he could bend viewers' spoons. I was all for this approach. After all, I reasoned, surely the first thing was to establish if the spoon bent (it didn't for her) and if it did, then start working out how.

## Creationism and intelligent design should not be taught as science.

---

So when teaching evolution, there is much to be said for allowing students to raise any doubts they have (hardly a revolutionary idea in science teaching) and doing one's best to have a genuine discussion. The word 'genuine' doesn't mean that creationism or intelligent design deserve equal time. However, in certain classes, depending on the comfort of the teacher in dealing with such issues and the make up of the student body, it can be appropriate to deal with the issue. If questions or issues about creationism and intelligent design arise during science lessons they can be used to illustrate a number of aspects of how science works such as 'how interpretation of data, using creative thought, provides evidence to test ideas and develop theories'; 'that there are some questions that science cannot currently answer, and some that science cannot address'; 'how uncertainties in scientific knowledge and scientific ideas change over time and about the role of the scientific community in validating these changes' (all quotes from the National Curriculum for science).

Having said that, I don't believe that such teaching is easy. Some students get very heated; others remain silent even if they disagree profoundly with what is said. The DCSF Guidance suggests: 'Some students do hold creationist beliefs or believe in the arguments of the intelligent design movement and/or have parents/carers who accept such views. If either is brought up in a science lesson it should be handled in a way that is respectful of students' views, religious and otherwise, whilst clearly giving the message that the theory of evolution and the notion of an old Earth/universe are supported by a mass of evidence and fully accepted by the scientific community.'

I do believe in taking seriously and respectfully the concerns of students who do not accept the theory of evolution while still introducing them to it. While it is unlikely that this will help students who have a conflict between science and their religious beliefs to resolve the conflict, good science teaching can help students to manage it – and to learn more science. Creationism can profitably be seen not as a simple misconception that careful science teaching can correct, as careful science teaching might hope to persuade a student that an object continues at uniform velocity unless acted on by a net force, or that most of

the mass of a plant comes from air. Rather, a student who believes in creationism can be seen as inhabiting a non-scientific worldview, that is a very different way of seeing the world. One very rarely changes one's worldview as a result of a 50 minute lesson, however well taught.

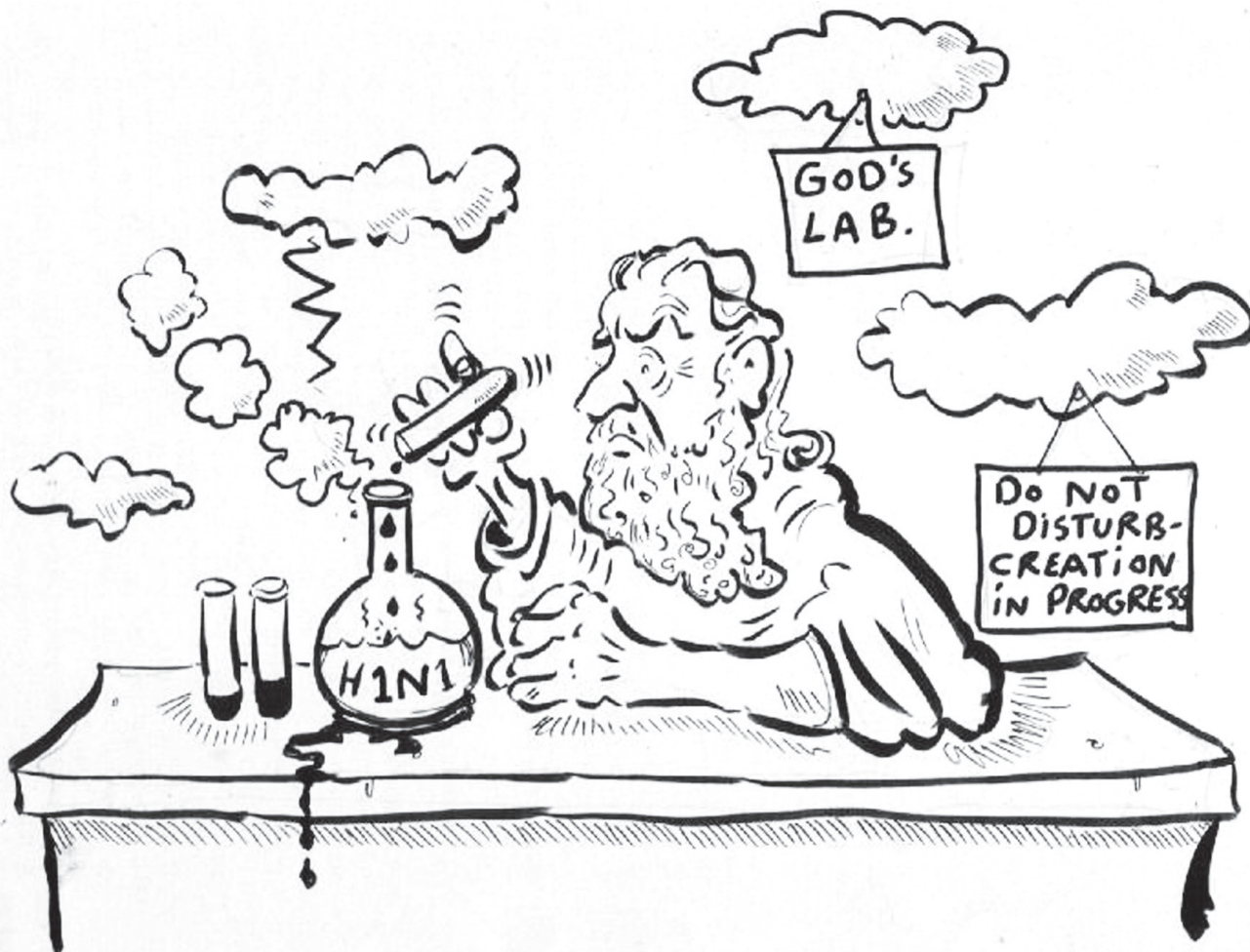
My hope, rather, is simply to enable students to understand the scientific worldview with respect to origins, not necessarily to accept it. We can help students to find their science lessons interesting and intellectually challenging without their being threatening. Effective teaching in this area can not only help students learn about the theory of evolution but better to appreciate the way science is done, the procedures by which scientific knowledge accumulates, the limitations of science and the ways in which scientific knowledge differs from other forms of knowledge.

---

Michael Reiss is Assistant Director and Professor of Science Education at the Institute of Education, University of London. He did his PhD on evolutionary biology and is a priest in the Church of England. [m.reiss@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:m.reiss@ioe.ac.uk)

---

## Intelligent Design?



Cartoon by Josh

# Has Everything Evolved?

## Report of a Conference Workshop led by David Paterson

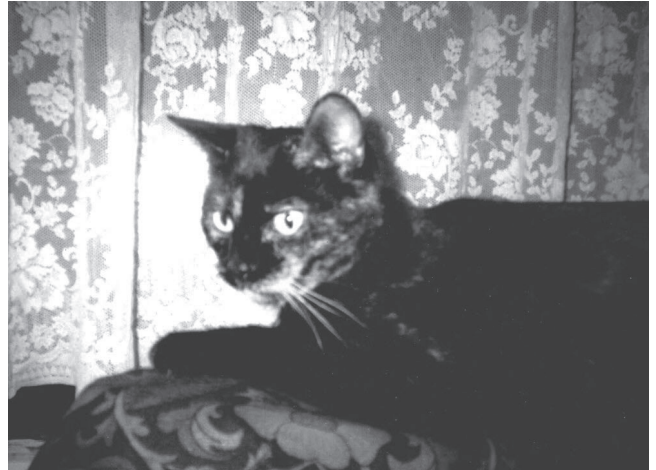
At last year's Conference there was a thought-experiment workshop called *Matter All the Way Up and Spirit All the Way Down*, which explored the idea that science and art are emergent properties of the evolutionary process (see report in *Sofia* 89, September 2008). It left us wondering whether consciousness (i.e. self-awareness) could also be traced through the evolutionary process.

A second thought-experiment workshop, at this year's Conference, was titled *Evolutionary Emergence*, and was introduced with some ideas influenced by Stuart Kauffman's book *Reinventing the Sacred* (Basic Books 2008, ISBN 9877-0-465-00300).

The huge time-scale of the cosmos (quantum events on a scale of femtoseconds:  $10^{12}$  and the age of the universe  $10^{15}$  seconds), taken with the enormous complexity of the relationships that can be formed between different molecules in proximity to each other, means that – far from being an unlikely event, hard to explain – a molecule which can replicate itself and then evolve by mutation and natural selection is a near-certain event, and indeed has most likely happened many times. Evolution of life is not anywhere near so rare and miraculous a series of events as has often been supposed. Far from having to invent a supernatural designer, we can see the ability of the physical world to organise itself as something to marvel at, even to worship perhaps. The natural world – and specially the biosphere – is itself sacred, and all the god we need.

But there remains the question of human consciousness. Together, the group traced animal behaviour in the evolutionary process, and saw survival value for a species which develops social behaviour; and that this could lead to communication and – eventually – to language. We noticed that one way of describing consciousness is 'talking to oneself'. We noticed that an ability to understand and communicate about 'something which is not present' would have survival value, and that such an ability could lead to abstract thinking. Both abstract thinking and a sense of time are important markers in the development of consciousness in a human child.

Someone in the group said that in replicating themselves, molecules meet together and get excited, just like human lovers. (Even silly pictures are sometimes quite profound!) The evolutionary process is about different elements uniting – to make molecules – to make life – to plants – to insects – to flowering plants – and so on in beauty and complexity, with human consciousness the newest event in the universe (well, as far as we know, anyway!). The complexity and uniqueness of consciousness is that it enables us to be independent of our environment – to shape it rather



*What does the cat think?*

than only to be shaped *by* it. And it doesn't stop there, because consciousness also continues to evolve in depth and sophistication – in patterns of communication, in language, poetry, music, and ever-new ways of exploring ideas. We split into three groups of four at this point, and they reported back with the following ideas:

- Distrusting the over-intellectualisation of modern man's approach to the world
- Appreciation of beauty, leading to creation of art, music, etc., perhaps originated in evolution because we needed to be attracted and enthused by certain things (e.g. potential food, sexual partners, babies needing protection). This has become a kind of 'vestigial organ', so that we now appreciate these things, even if they are not directly relevant to survival.
- Evolution of consciousness gave early human beings a sense of time, awareness of mortality, a sense of otherness, an appreciation of sounds and rhythms evolving into music and eventually language – also recognition of pattern and colours that developed into art.

Some loose ends were revealed in our thought-experiment. One is the idea of 'real'. Are quantum events 'real'? Are these supposed particles 'real', are probability waves just human inventions like religious stories? But then – what is 'real'? Does quantum theory have something to say about the phenomenon of consciousness? I think there may be a place for a third thought-experiment workshop at the next Conference on Religion and Social Justice.

---

David Paterson is Secretary to the SOF Board of Trustees and a former Chairman. He is the Convener of the Oxford SOF Group, which is organising a Day Conference on Saturday September 12<sup>th</sup> (see notice on page 21).

# Reaching for the Moon I

Stephen Mitchell preached this sermon at St Peter's Church Moulton on Sunday 19th July 2009, the Sixth Sunday after Trinity

Tomorrow – July 20<sup>th</sup> – is for most of us here a remarkable anniversary. Today – forty years ago – we were glued to our television sets eagerly awaiting news of the little spacecraft winging its way to the moon. Tomorrow it will be forty years since Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin set foot on the moon. Like most kids at that time, I was fascinated by the whole enterprise. There were a further five moon landings. Twelve men in all set foot on the moon.

The next proposed landing on the moon is around 2025 by the Russians, who plan to have a permanently manned moon station. Who knows, the Chinese might be there next. But there is something about it that I find rather disturbing. It's partly the fact that it may be 60 or more years since the first moon landing before people again set foot on the moon. It's the same sort of feeling you get when you see a house restoration which someone started years ago and then abandoned. And the house still has its knocked-down walls and half-stripped-off wallpaper. Or perhaps it's like discovering a temple, which centuries ago fell into disuse and now it's overgrown and falling down. And we wonder what happened. Why did someone abandon the restoration? Why did the temple fall into disuse? What happened to that civilisation? What happened to the moon quest? What happened to the 60s?

There are people who say it was all a hoax: the biggest cover-up the world has ever known. No one ever went to the moon. And all the film footage is faked. Look at the flag, they say, it's blowing in the wind - and there's no wind on the moon. Actually look more carefully and it isn't blowing: it's swinging on a bar and the folds remain the same. There are people who say it was done purely for political reasons. But the cold war is over now. The Russians are no longer our enemy. There is no need for the space race. There are people who say it was a waste of money. No one can afford that sort of money these days. The next moon landing will have to be privately financed and in these recessionary times no private entrepreneur can afford it. And – and this

is probably the main reason – people say there is too much to do here on Earth. There's the hungry to feed, wars to end and – most of all – climate change and global warming to conquer. But it still seems to me disturbing.

I suppose what is disturbing besides the sense of a lost age and a great achievement long ago, is the thought that human beings are in every sense earthbound. Of course we always were earthbound. But in those heady 60s, I suppose there was a feeling that human beings could do anything and go anywhere and one day – just as the Pilgrim Fathers had crossed oceans to discover the New World, so future generations would cross deep space to discover new planets and establish new worlds out in space. But now that iconic image of the Earth seen from the moon makes the Earth seem even smaller, even more fragile, even more vulnerable. And here we are. Compared to the hostility of the moon's waterless and airless climate, Earth may seem in every sense a luxurious home. But Earth – as the trips to the moon have emphasised – is a tiny speck in the vastness of the universe. And life on Earth is sustained by the merest tissue of an atmosphere that is already punctured and in danger of becoming even thinner. Life on Earth, and even more so after our trips the moon, seems to hang by a very, very, very thin thread and seems so utterly insignificant. There is nothing new about this rather disturbing thought. The psalmist over three thousand years ago looked up into space and wrote:

When I consider thy heavens, even the works of  
thy fingers,  
the moon and the stars which thou hast ordained,  
what is man, that thou art mindful of him,  
and the son of man that thou visitest him?

But our trips into space, our landings on the moon – now over forty years old – and our awareness of the complex balance of the world's eco-system bring an added bleakness to our situation. There is the feeling that, just as the footprints on the moon's surface and





*Earthrise: The Earth from the Moon, 20th July 1969*

the abandoned moon rovers are the only surviving relics of our trips to the moon, so we wonder if one day there will be as little evidence here on Earth that, once, human beings lived and flourished on this planet. Again, this is only the human condition writ large and finely observed by the psalmist:

Like as a father pitieth his own children  
 even so is the Lord merciful to them that fear him.  
 For he knoweth whereof we are made  
 he remembereth that we are but dust.  
 The days of man are but as grass  
 for he flourisheth as a flower of the field.  
 For as soon as the wind goeth over it, it is gone  
 and the place thereof shall know it no more.

Such realism seems to be the starting place for the spiritual life and there have been a number of ways of meeting this truth about human life. One is to rubbish life on Earth. Compared with future glories,

this life is a sham. It's of no value and we should escape from it as far as possible, shut ourselves away and wait for the next life. Here we are strangers in a foreign land and we should wait and prepare ourselves for our true home in heaven.

However, this is not quite the Christian approach. It does rather belittle life on Earth and it doesn't exactly encourage us to get involved and make the most of life here and now. There are probably two better things for us to work on. One is to celebrate human achievement. The days of man may be as grass but human beings do flourish as the flower of the field. Like Solomon in all his glory, adorned as the lilies of the field, human beings achieve remarkable and great things. And landing one of their kind on the moon is one such considerable achievement. Even if it was part of a political game, it was still a remarkable triumph of human ingenuity, technology, and teamwork. Whatever your thing is – whether golf or cricket or promenade concerts; whether farming or pharmaceuticals; or just the everyday business of shopping, feeding and clothing ourselves – marvel at the things human beings achieve. We are extraordinary creatures. Of course we are, we're made

in the image of God and to contemplate human achievement is to contemplate the things of God.

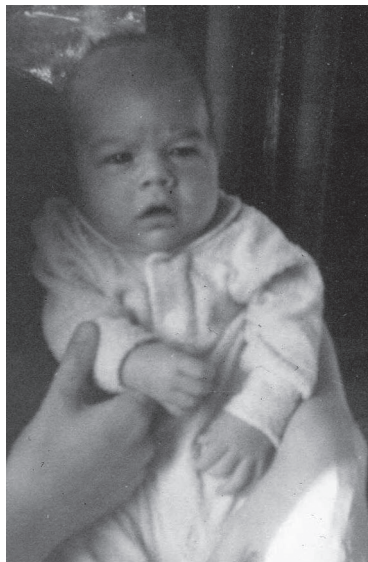
The second thing to work on is the old spiritual advice: live in the present. We have this happy coincidence in English that the present is a present, a gift. Of course the past has important lessons to teach us and the future has to be planned for, but it's in the present that we can give our attention, respond to need and demonstrate our love. It's simply no good wishing back the 60s with their political idealism, groundbreaking pop music and technological growth. Today is the day – as the gospel is always reminding us – to bring in the kingdom of God and it's in the present moment that we can lose ourselves in the infinity of heaven.

---

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.

# Reaching for the Moon 2

Mary Lloyd sent this memoir of watching the moon landing with her newborn son.



Daniel

We were staying in Barry, at my father-in-law's house, an old Victorian pile with views high over the town and out across the Severn Estuary. I'd been vaguely aware all day that the men were getting quite excited by the moon shot, speculating on when they'd land and staying up till gone midnight in the hope they might witness the actual moment of impact. I'd been rather out of all this – tucked up with my first baby, born a month to the

day before – and asleep by 9 p.m. with all the bed-time routines completed.

When he woke at about 3.30a.m. I stumbled around the unfamiliar furniture. The bedroom was hot and stuffy but downstairs the living room opened on to a veranda. Through the dark house we went, my restless, whining little bundle, the blankets and nappy bag and me. Pulling back the curtains and opening the French doors, the spectacle of the lights of streets and docks, right out to the island, lay below a fine, clear July sky illuminated by a glorious moon. I had started feeding him before I remembered – gazing out – that human beings just might already be walking around up there. Very slowly, gently, carefully, I managed to tune the old black and white TV to BBC1, the image shifted in and out of focus and the American voice came across clearly, just starting the count-down.

By the time they actually landed and the hatch was beginning to open, Daniel had drunk enough to be gazing at me in wide-eyed satisfaction. I turned his face to the screen as the astronauts emerged from the spacecraft, saying to him, 'You won't remember this, lovely boy, but you ARE seeing it. The first time men have ever stood on the moon. And I'll remind you when you're older.'

Despite Vietnam, despite my condemnations of the US for so much of the damage they were inflicting around the world, despite the continuing fear of the tension between America and Russia – and, most of all, despite well-founded suspicions that this would be yet another scientific breakthrough of immense value to the arms industries – it was, nevertheless, magic in a way I found totally unexpected. There was just the hope – looking at the men on screen indoors and the setting where they were

standing in that beautiful sky outside – the hope that this might make things different. That humanity would begin to recognise how beautiful and fragile our planet is, how much we need to cherish and care for it, and gain at least a sense of 'all being in it' together. For a few brief weeks, the moon-landing seemed a fine epitaph to the best of the spirit of the 60s – the decade when, for a time, we believed that things really could change. And I wanted my son to know he was part of all that, too.

## More Moon Memories

### *From Dave Bracy:*

Where was I on July 20th 1969? Well, it may come as no surprise to those who know me that I was holding a drink at the time. It was a party held at the Officers, Club on Lowry AFB in Denver Colorado. And we were dragged out, drinks in hand, to view the module descent on a very fuzzy TV. I was in the USA, under secondment to a British Government Organisation involved in monitoring S.A.L.T. because of the connections I had made in 1966 when I visited the laser labs of University of Colorado, Boulder. But for some of us the landing was not the heart stopping event. This came later, when Eagle took off. They had had to jettison some load because there was concern that too much fuel had been used to find a good landing place. We were not sure if they were going to make it. In fact Command Module Columbia, piloted by Mike Collins, had to drop down in orbit to ensure safe docking with Eagle. Later on, a cadet at Cape Canaveral, not recognising Commander Collins, asked him 'what he did'. He replied: 'Oh I'm just a driver – but it is a rather expensive bus!'

### *From Michael Smart:*

I was working at this time on employment and labour relations in Smithfield Meat Market (a very sensitive subject) for the Prices and Incomes Board. The day after the landing, the Chairman said ruefully, 'We can put a man on the moon, but we are not able to put a fork-lift truck in Smithfield.' Such was the opposition of the traditional market workers – a naturally tough lot – to changing their working practices, though I believe this was remedied some years later.

### *From Hugh Hubbard:*

In Balsall Heath, Birmingham doing vacation social work plastering a house of a poor immigrant family and helping on a children's playground. We crowded round a TV to watch the landing. As a child I used to look at the stars, planets and moon with a small telescope mapping them with the help of Patrick Moore's books. When the Americans landed on the moon I no longer looked at it – not wanting to look on a piece of American real estate!

## 1969: Leonel Rugama *The Earth is a Satellite of the Moon*

Apollo 2 cost more than Apollo 1  
Apollo 1 cost enough.  
Apollo 3 cost more than Apollo 2  
Apollo 2 cost more than Apollo 1  
Apollo 1 cost enough.  
Apollo 4 cost more than Apollo 3  
Apollo 3 cost more than Apollo 2  
Apollo 2 cost more than Apollo 1  
Apollo 1 cost enough.

Apollo 8 cost a bomb, but they did not mind  
because the astronauts were protestants  
and read the Bible from the moon,  
amazing and delighting all christians,  
and when they arrived  
Pope Paul VI gave them a blessing.  
Apollo 9 cost more than all of them put together  
including Apollo 1 which cost enough.

The great grandparents of the Acahualinca people  
were less hungry than the grandparents.  
The great grandparents died of hunger.  
The grandparents of the Acahualinca people  
were less hungry than the parents.  
The grandparents died of hunger.  
The parents of the Acahualinca people  
were less hungry than that people's children.  
The parents died of hunger.  
The Acahualinca people are less  
hungry than that people's children.  
The children of the Acahualinca people  
are not born for hunger,  
and they are hungry to be born,  
in order to die of hunger.  
Blessed are the poor because theirs shall be  
the moon.

---

On 20<sup>th</sup> July 1969 US astronauts Armstrong and Aldrin trod on the moon, leaving their footprints in the lunar dust. Huellas de Acahualinca is a very poor district of Managua, where the footprints of the ancient Indian Acahualinca people are preserved in volcanic rock. When poet Leonel Rugama was studying to be a Catholic priest in Managua, the seminarians used to go for walks there. Leonel left the seminary when he decided there was 'no alternative but the struggle'. He joined the Sandinistas (FSLN) fighting to overthrow the brutal, US-backed dictator Somoza, and died in a battle with the dictator's National Guard in Managua on 15<sup>th</sup> January 1970. The poem is in *Poets of the Nicaraguan Revolution* (ed. and trans. Dinah Livingstone, Katabasis, 1992).

## 1979: Ernesto Cardenal *Final Offensive*

It was like a trip to the moon  
with all its precise and complicated details  
taking into account all that was foreseen  
and also what was not.  
A trip to the moon in which the slightest mistake  
could be fatal.

'Workshop calling!' – 'Hullo Assumption!' –  
'Hullo Maizefield!'

Workshop was León, Assumption Masaya,  
Maizefield Estelí.

And young Dora María's placid voice from *Workshop*  
saying enemy reinforcements were surrounding them  
dangerously,

her calm singing voice:  
'Workshop calling! Can you hear me?'  
Rubén's voice in *Estelí*. Joaquin's voice in *Office* –  
*Office* was Managua.

*Office* would run out of munitions in two days' time  
(*'Over!'*)

Precise instructions in code where the landing  
would be...

And Dora María: 'Our rearguard is not well covered.  
*Over!'*

Serene calm voices crossing back and forth  
on the Sandinista radio.

And there was a time when the two forces  
were balancing,

balancing, and things were very dangerous.  
It was like a trip to the moon.

And there was no mistake.

So many working together in the one great project.

The moon was the Earth. Our bit of Earth.

And we got there.

And now Rugama,  
it's beginning to belong to the poor; the Earth is  
(with its moon).

---

In May 1979 the Sandinistas launched their Final Offensive which overthrew the dictator Somoza. They entered Managua in triumph on 19<sup>th</sup> July 1979. Poet Ernesto Cardenal became Minister of Culture, Dora María Tellez became Minister of Health. The Sandinistas ran a prize-winning literacy campaign, made enormous advancements in public health and education, redistributed land, giving land titles to peasants and supporting co-operatives. The Revolution was defeated in 1990 mainly through the implacable violent hostility of the USA, which squeezed Nicaragua's economy, mined her ports, financed and trained the Contra rebels, who exhausted the country in war, specialising in attacks on villages, schools and health posts. Translation by Dinah Livingstone first published in *Nicaraguan New Time* (Journeyman, London 1989).

**Please send your letters to:**

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



**Degrees of Freedom**

What do young people – or any people – need? I'd say – serious discussion concerning degrees of freedom. If I believed in a realist God, I would thank it for the 1970s Women's Movement – (something with which the Churches have not yet caught up). It can be seen, now, to what extent the movement was Marxist-derived, in so far as it stressed that, given *consciousness raising*, an understanding of one's situation, a degree of freedom might be possible. Some of the good results of all this are still with us. However, since then, what with the genome project, a general interest in genetics, and developments in endocrinology, we may suspect that we are more determined than we thought or hoped.

It is important at this juncture not to lose concern with degrees of freedom. After all, there are parts of the world into which the idea that women might be anything other than creatures determined to fulfil one animalistic role has not entered. I believe that the novelist Margaret Atwood, author of *The Handmaid's Tale*, will be speaking at the Manchester Literature Festival (October 15-25). Creative people may be better at testing the wind than most.

When I was 13, I decided to bunk off from the Congregational chapel. Then I read *Brave New World*, and scuttled back because at least the church seemed to care about individual conscience. You'll recall that the novel is about a (fabulous) society in which people are entirely determined by their origin in test tubes, according to grades of intelligence. The implied discussion is – might such a society flourish, without certain evils, given that everybody has a nice time according to his or her 'manufactured' nature? In such a society there is no room for a rift in the lute. Forty years later, as I was learning the profession, the students at Leeds Metro as is now, were protesting against a proposed talk by a genetic determinist, horrified by such a creed. Bliss was it, in that dawn. I, of course, was against them, because they were using their right to protest to prevent free speech!

What can we do now? Stress the importance of benevolence, but not lose sight of the idea of degrees of freedom? Unfortunately the fascists may succeed whilst we are slaking our fears with anything from *Britain's Got Talent* to the interesting circus over MP's expenses. Am I saying the SOF should be a bit more concerned with political philosophy and less bothered as to whether or not the world started in 4000 BC? Probably.

**Anna Sutcliffe**  
 14 Drummond Court, Leeds LS165QE

**George Matheson**

I was delighted to read Anna Sutcliffe's article in the June 2009 issue of *Sofia*. It so happens that the Edinburgh church – now Stockbridge Parish Church – associated with George Matheson, is the one I attend today. He is still remembered there: the church office is called the Matheson Room, and his portrait is displayed on a stairway. George Matheson was blind, yet performed his duties without complaint. Apart from the hymn mentioned in the article, he wrote others. Although he lived a hundred years ago he was what we would now call an interfaith enthusiast, at a time when such views would not have been considered by most Christians. One of his hymns that we still sing is *Gather us in*. Its last verse reads:

Some seek a Father in the heavens above,  
 Some ask a human image to adore,  
 Some crave a spirit vast as life and love;  
 Within thy mansions we have all and more;  
 Gather us in.

His lines may not constitute the greatest poetry, as Anna Sutcliffe says, but it does have one of the main elements of poetry: it touches the deep emotional 'presence' at the heart of things.

**William G. Harrison**  
 4, Lampacre Road, Edinburgh, EH127HT  
[wgharrison1925@googlemail.com](mailto:wgharrison1925@googlemail.com)

**Jennifer Jaynes – A Response**

In response to Jennifer Jaynes's review of my book *Progressive Secular Society and other Essays* (*Sofia*, March 2009), I wish to express my appreciation of the positive points she made. However, I would also like to take issue with two negative points, as follows:

Firstly, she claims that my use of the ontological term 'energy' was chosen for metaphorical effect by a 'basically arts-based writer'. Arts-based I may be, but in fact I use the term exactly in the way it is deployed by Werner Heisenberg, the leading modern physicist,

whom no one can accuse of using scientific language to achieve metaphorical effects. My reference to Heisenberg is made completely clear in the substantial quotation from him given on page 13 of the text. Incidentally, in this quotation Heisenberg speaks of the identity of energy with mass – a point to which Jennifer refers.

Secondly, regarding the essay 'Do Humanists Need the Concept of Evil?' Jennifer speaks of my references to Hitler, Stalin and Pol Pot. She says I do 'not delve deep enough into the aetiology' of their actions. This point is connected with a subsequent one: that 'we need to study behaviour at the edges of a human psychological continuum.' Manifestly, this is a psychological issue she is raising. Now while it is true that I do not go into extensive psychological detail on Hitler etc., I do say that humanists, while having a concept of evil, should at the same time be scientific, and consider the causes of the actions which they deem evil. So, the psychological sphere is not ignored. I do not use the term 'evil' in some non-psychological and therefore metaphysical sense, which omits considerations of causality. Thus it is not deployed as, in Jennifer's words, 'a Christian term impervious to useful analysis'. In fact, I repeatedly say that a humanist concept of evil must be absolutely independent of religious notions.

Finally on this point, usage of the term is not confined to Christianity, contrary to what Jennifer's words imply, or indeed to the religious sphere as a whole. On page 71 I refer to its deployment by Sartre, whom no one could describe as a religious believer! As a matter of interest, other atheistic philosophers who have deployed it are Schopenhauer and Santayana.

**Tom Rubens,**  
94 St. John's Court, Queen's Drive, London N4 2HN

## Disappointed, Down Under

I always read *Sofia* with interest and appreciation. But Hershey Julien's letter in *Sofia* 92 has brought up to consciousness an underlying disappointment. I don't expect a magazine that takes religious faith seriously to manage without the concept of the supernatural 100 percent of the time, but I do think *Sofia* could do more to challenge contributors, or to ask them to be more self-aware and self-critical about writing in dualistic and supernatural terms. I find also that I regret that *Sofia* has not been grappling with some of the big issues that follow either from purposefully choosing to operate without 'the supernatural', or from some of the major developments of the last few centuries, wilful blindness to which has contributed to the increasing irrelevance to 21st Century life of most of mainstream Christianity. Here are a handful of examples of what I have in mind:

- The transformation of our understanding from a static, hierarchical and mechanical view of everything to an active, developmental and

complexly interactive view, a transformation which we associate with the name of Charles Darwin.

- The work of Piaget, Kohlberg and especially James Fowler on human development and how moral standards and religious faith (may) change as humans age.
- Matters of the environment, climate change and the recent credit and financial crisis are, I suspect, not only political, ethical and or economic concerns. They may be marginal or irrelevant to those forms of religion that are so heavenly minded they are very little earthly use, but that cannot settle the matter for readers of *Sofia*. Have we, or should we have, something to say about these matters?

I would also like to see *Sofia* become wider-ranging and more ambitious in its book reviews. But having said all that, I want to affirm that *Sofia* is a magazine I look forward to and read with enjoyment and enlightenment.

**Donald Feist,**  
Dunedin, New Zealand  
[feist@clear.net.nz](mailto:feist@clear.net.nz)

Ken Smith has retired as *Sofia* Letters Editor to concentrate on *Portholes* and local groups. Please continue to send all local group news, reports of meetings, announcements of forthcoming events to him at [portholes@sofn.org.uk](mailto:portholes@sofn.org.uk)

## ***SOF NETWORK REGIONAL CONFERENCE***

**Organised by Birmingham, Banbury,  
Oxford and Southampton local groups**

**Saturday 12th September 2009**

**10am – 4.30pm**

**Friends Meeting House**

**43 St Giles, Oxford**

### ***RECLAIMING THE NARRATIVES OF FAITH***

#### ***Speakers:***

**Muhammad Talib,**

**Victor Anderson,**

**Dinah Livingstone**

**Details and tickets: David Paterson  
487 Marston Road, Oxford OX3 0JQ  
07765 416 801**

**[davidpaterson129@hotmail.com](mailto:davidpaterson129@hotmail.com)**

**Cost (with refreshments) £7 if booked in advance,  
£8 on the day.**

# SOF Sift

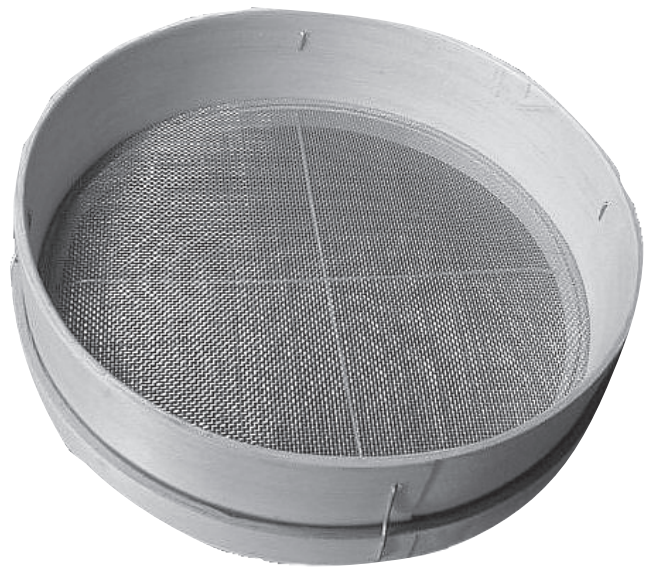
A column in which Network members think out loud about SOF and their own quest.

From Grenville Gilbert  
(Ottery St Mary)

This life on Earth is all that I know. (I had been led to believe that I knew something about a place called 'heaven' where someone called 'God' lived but this has proved to be false – see below). When I say 'all', I don't mean it in a belittling way. It's a wonderful 'all'! It's just that I have come to realise that my life on this Earth is the only life that I can know, really know. Oh, I know a little about other people's lives, thanks to a commonly agreed language but that's not the same as knowing what its like to be them. It's just the same with frogs or with any other living creature for that matter. But to be perfectly honest, I'm not too worried about it. I don't even know if trees are conscious or not! And then there is that super-hero that I first heard about at convent school – God. The number of people that I've known over my 59 years who claim to know all about Her; even claim to speak her language and to know precisely how she feels! But I now know that they have been telling little 'piggy porkies'.

I've got Don Cupitt to thank for letting me in on that little secret. Well it must be a secret because the churches don't let on about it. It's just like Santa Claus; adults were never very forthcoming on him either. Anyway, thank you Don, though why you keep on having to write so many books, God only knows; it's costing me a fortune and the basic message always seems the same. I'm beginning to wonder if you are beginning to doubt things; maybe you believe in God after all! Having said that, I believe that you are right; you can't get outside of your own head to see what's there, let alone talk about it. No, I only know this life on this Earth. All that I can do is to live it; just like the sun, day in day out. Mind you, I still can't help wondering where my life comes from; I didn't bring it about, so what clever clogs did?

Even old Darwin and Dawkins (sounds like a firm of accountants or perhaps an advertising agency, specialising in bus adverts!) haven't answered that one. They only answered the simple questions about evolution of species – all that survival of the fittest stuff. Obvious when you think about it – if it's fit for purpose, it's fit; if it isn't fit for purpose, it hasn't got



a cat in hell's chance of surviving! No, the really big question is how did life itself originate? Who wrote the code? Who programmed the chick, all that way back in time, to peck its way out of the egg in today's incubator? Not even a don from Emmanuel or New College has answered that one, albeit, I would dearly love to hear what they have to say. I guess that the answer lies necessarily outside of matter and energy, outside of time and space, even outside of language (including the language of DNA). And, of course, this in turn means that the answer also lies outside of the realm of science. I suppose that rather like the proverbial goldfish that only knows the confines of its own bowl of water; we too can only ever perceive answers in terms of our own human language and our own human experience.

So, maybe it was God after all (or whatever her name is in God language)! The lack of any other plausible explanation is certainly the reason why I continue to believe in God (but not in her existence). It's like the works of Shakespeare (with or without monkeys sat at typewriters); I cannot believe that the works wrote themselves and, furthermore, I cannot believe that they would ever be likely to do so, even if they had eternity within which to do it. It's all too much of a coincidence! Maybe, we need to have a look from the inside. Maybe, someone has sewn the answer into our lining! Maybe, we have been given an inner eye (but literally, for God's sake, don't tell R D or else he will try to make us believe that it is all down to cumulative selection!). I believe seriously that the God explanation is worth exploring. It's why I joined SOF many years ago – to be a part of the exploration network. And it hasn't been disappointing!

---

Grenville Gilbert is Churchwarden of Ottery St Mary Parish Church, Devon.

# Radio Rockall

## I'm Sincere, I Haven't a Creed

*Cat-lover Verity Roth was tuning in her crystal set: she found a disputation in progress between Dr Sid Sofer, Rev Alf Alfa and Prof Dick Dorking.*

SS: Well, Dick, it's significant that someone has the courage to shout about the absence of God.

DD: Ah, but the real problem is that God's non-existence remains only probable – like fairies or bendy-buses. His total absence remains elusive.

AA: Precisely, and that is why we can confidently bowl down that corridor of uncertainty and skittle you both out. It is things like our sense of awe at our amazing world – called Intelligent Design – that convinces people; and don't forget that most people still believe in a Great Being even if that Being isn't defined properly as in my Course.

DD: Piffle and waffle, Alfa, although it is true that I, even I, feel a certain wonder as I find yet another mindless fundamentalist that I can humiliate.

SS: Yes, fundamentalists are problematic. Their problem with me is all my doubts; my problem with them is all their certainties. Come to think of it, Dick, you fall into that category yourself.

DD: What? A moment ago you were agreeing with me.

SS: Not quite, I thought of you as a modern version of Nietzsche's watchman proclaiming the death of God – as then understood – although this was not, of course, understood for another hundred years.

AA: If Nietzsche has been misunderstood by educated, intelligent, academic intellectuals, what hope is there for the rest of us?

DD: Quite!

SS: The point is that some people started doubting the idea of god the moment he was invented but they could not resist inventing their own gods, like Jung's god crapping on a church, whom others doubted, and so on.

AA: So there is room for me to invent God, or rather, re-invent the True God, as published in the latest edition of my Course.

DD: However you put it, you are wrong! Without evidence there is no God. God doesn't exist, he's not there, he's an ex-god, he's finished, he's dead!

SS: Well, Dick, it's significant that someone has the courage to shout about it.

*And there Verity dropped her cat.*



## The Heat of Hell

*Notes of a rejected workshop from SOF Conference on Science and Religion by Stu Dent*

A question, which has puzzled theologians for hundreds of years, is how the Hell does it work? Basically, is Hell a source of heat, or does it absorb heat? If it is a source of heat, what is burning? If it absorbs heat, is it actually getting hotter? Technically, is Hell exothermic or endothermic? Does it give out or take in heat? Since there is no Authority, we must turn to religious-science: the Reliance Model.

1. We must assume that if souls exist, then they have some mass, however great or small, which can influence the heat of hell.
2. We must consider the rate at which souls are entering or leaving hell. But here we must assume that once a soul enters hell it never leaves so the leaving rate is zero. Therefore, we concentrate on the souls entering hell.
3. Now many of the world's religions state that if you are not a member of their religion you will go to hell. Since there is more than one religion with that belief and since people do not belong to more than one religion at a time we can safely say that all souls will go to hell. But fear not, this is about the physics of hell, not deciding your soul's destiny.
4. With current birth and death rates, we can expect the number of souls entering hell to increase enormously.
5. We must also consider the volume of hell. Apart from it being infinitely bigger than heaven, since everybody goes to hell, and remembering Boyle's Law from school science, for the temperature and pressure in hell to stay the same, the balance of the mass of souls and the volume of hell must also stay the same.

So we reach two possible outcomes with serious implications for global warming: On the one hand, if hell is expanding at a slower rate than the rate at which souls are cramming into hell, then the pressure and temperature will increase until all hell breaks loose. On the other hand, if hell is expanding at a faster rate than the speed of souls entering hell, then the pressure and temperature will drop until hell freezes over. So there we have it: totally – and safely – inconclusive.

Michael Morton reviews

## Dom Helder Camara: Essential Writings (Modern Spiritual Masters)

by Francis McDonagh (ed.)

Orbis Books (New York 2009). 189 pages. £10.99. ISBN: 978-1-5705-823-2.

Many people will know that Karl Marx called religion the 'opium of the people'. Far fewer, I would guess, will recall that he added that it was 'the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world'. It was this that the South American bishops began to look at and act upon during the late 1960s. Earlier in the decade, the Ecumenical Council of Vatican II had been a qualified success particularly with regard to the role of the Church in the modern world. In 1967 Pope Paul VI's Encyclical *Populorum Progressio* had also examined the need to help the poor in what came to be called the 'Third World'. But it was all done from a European perspective. The second Conference of Latin American Bishops, summoned by their coordinating Council, known by its Spanish acronym CELAM, met in Medellín, Colombia in 1968 and resolved on a brave and radical initiative – a preferential option for the poor. The Latin American Church would break from its identification with the state and its other-worldly view of salvation symbolised by the eighteenth-century Baroque and identify with the people at the most elementary level.

Helder Camara was a charismatic and influential figure in the debates of CELAM. He had been appointed Archbishop of Olinda and Recife, the state capital of Pernambuco in NE Brazil, in 1964 at almost the same time as a right-wing military junta under General Humberto Castelo Branco seized power. Although silenced by the regime for his outspoken views, he soon became an international celebrity for his writing and championship of those in need. This present book is edited by Francis McDonagh, who has spent the last twenty years following development and religious issues in Latin America, including three years living in Recife as a correspondent for *The Tablet*. His deft editorship offers a good selection of the (mainly English) writings of Dom Helder Camara and an insight into his mind, his spirituality and his commitment. The selections from his many books highlight Dom Helder's distinctive blend of prayerfulness and social vision. They point toward the renewal of the church, the transformation of the social order, and the healing of a wounded planet.

Dom Helder's writing uncovers a genuine and very moving compassion for the poor, the needy and the marginalised both in the *favelas* and the *sertao* – the backlands of rural Brazil. He combines this with a deep faith in God's presence in creation. Interspersed with

poetry, the text remind one of the vision of St Francis of Assisi. A faith

that loves the Earth. His writing reveals that the many problems about Christian faith as a religion were submerged in genuinely serious problems about society. However, the 'option for the poor' was a reasonable political choice but not as novel as some advocates of liberation theology seemed to think. In reality it was very naive about the use of biblical texts. The flaw in an interpretation of the scriptures from a left-wing stance is that it is equally possible to interpret the Bible from a right-wing stance as well. Moreover, nothing in the modern history of the Church inclines people to trust the judgement of priests in politics. Politics does not solve religious questions; at some stage or other what emerges from political dialectic is the demand for an end to discussion. Liberation theology was a kind of politicisation of orthodoxy, an attempt to make orthodoxy more palatable by gently secularising it. But it all made the defeat of liberation theologians and activists possible during the years of Pope John Paul II. Men like Helder Camara and his one-time protégé, Cardinal Paulo Evaristo Arns of Sao Paulo, were gradually marginalised by the Roman Curia and then replaced by right-wing establishment men on their retirement.

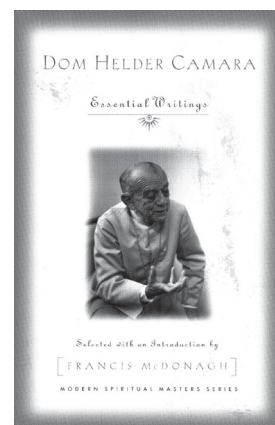
The book is not just the testimony of a kind, caring and highly single-minded pastor. It is also the tip of an iceberg revealing a sad and unhappy chapter of the Catholic Church in South America. The Theology of Liberation, inspired by the writings of Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, was set to be a binding force throughout the continent. Unfortunately it was regarded as Marxist, anti-establishment and dangerous. Reading Dom Helder's account, many people will wonder why. Dom Helder was always puzzled that he was labelled with an attachment to Communism. 'Christianism is much more revolutionary,' he said.

---

UK distributor: Alban Books, 14 Belford Road, Edinburgh, EH4 3BL. Tel: 0131 226 2217. [sales@albanbooks.com](mailto:sales@albanbooks.com)

---

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



reviews



# Jesus of Nazareth PhD?

David Boulton reviews

## Jesus and Philosophy

by Don Cupitt

SCM Press (London 2009). Pbk. 110 pages. £16.99. ISBN 978-0-334-044338-6

So, Don has come back to Jesus! More than 30 years after his first stab at the subject in a 1977 BBC book called *Who was Jesus?*, he's back for another crack at decoding the sage of Nazareth. And this is vintage Cupitt. His aim, he tells us, is 'to right an historic wrong'. The earliest followers of Jesus made him into a cosmic personification of what they dimly remembered and largely invented of his teachings, embedding it all in 'almost entirely fictional biographies'. We can't be sure of anything the New Testament tells us about the life and actions of Jesus. From the miraculous birth stories to the passion narratives, it was all made up by those who found Jesus easier to sell as a holy spirit, than a wholly human teacher. But now that Jesus as a god is 'all washed up', it's time to rescue him from the Church, which turned a subversive prophet into 'the insipid Christ of popular faith'.

Fortunately, Cupitt argues, if we can know virtually nothing of Jesus' life, we can make a reasonable stab at recovering his core teachings. Here he relies on the work of the Jesus Seminar scholars. Indeed, I suspect this little book is Cupitt's acknowledgment of the debt he owes the Seminar and its parent body, the Californian-based Westar Institute, which elected him a Fellow and arranged for publication of his books in the USA when the SCM Press in Britain (temporarily) dropped him. *Jesus and Philosophy* is dedicated to Westar's founder, Bob Funk, and Cupitt's Jesus bears more than a passing resemblance to Funk's.

Cupitt uses my summary of the Jesus Seminar's work (in *Who on Earth was Jesus?*) to separate out a scholarly consensus on the authentic teachings of the historical Jesus from the theological mystifications of the four spin-doctors who wrote the canonical gospels. What emerges is 'a notably *secular* teacher who does not appeal to religious law', and whose 'kingdom' teachings offer 'a secular hope, the age-old dream of a good society here on this Earth'. Above all, says Cupitt, Jesus' authentic teaching was strongly antinomian – that is, against obedience to law, rules, and religious ordinances. 'Here we glimpse Jesus' radical humanism, his understanding that morality itself only becomes really moral when human beings have fully appropriated it to themselves. No god can possibly tell me what morality is. Only my own heart can do that.' (The old evangelical idea that we are saved when we take Jesus into our heart takes on a new meaning!).

Cupitt draws out 'the philosophical implications of Jesus' commanding ethical vision'. Jesus is not a rationalist and realist, who wants us to regard existing

reality as fixed and rational, and to stay within its bounds. He wants

us to step outside existing reality and choose a new world. He called this new world 'the kingdom of heaven', a glimpsed alternative to our default reality, what I have called an *enabling dream*: that is, a vision that propels us into action, spurred on by the realisation that only we can make it happen (which is why I obstinately refer to it as the *republic* of heaven). In my own books *The Trouble with God and Who on Earth was Jesus?* I place Jesus in the utopian tradition. Cupitt goes further: 'The long-lived, slow-acting, indelible Dream... we owe *most of all* [my italics] to Jesus of Nazareth.' In his final chapter, Cupitt concedes that the Dream 'seems to be impossible'. If we all sell up everything we have, who would there be to sell to? We cannot all live like holy vagabonds. So the Dream will always be just that: a dream. But 'the compromise might be justifiable, so long as the Dream is not idle, but influential and productive'. So long, I would say, as it remains an *enabling* dream, subversively gnawing away at the foundations of received wisdom, received morality, and received notions of social and economic order. As Cupitt concludes, 'If the Dream is sufficiently vivid and attractive, it will shape our values and the orientation of our lives, so that in the very long term it will tend to become self-fulfilling.'

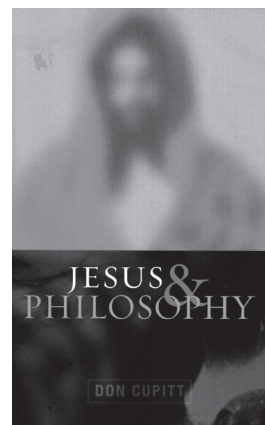
Of course, Cupitt lays himself wide open to the familiar charge that he, like everyone else who looks for the real Jesus, comes up with a reflection of himself: Jesus as proto-Cupittian philosopher of religion, antinomian nihilist, moral relativist, and so on. The charge wouldn't worry him. I imagine he would respond that every concept of Jesus is necessarily a reconstruction, and that a relevant living Jesus is of more use to us than a dead historical one. But Cupitt's Jesus is both historical and relevant. He was 'the most important pioneer in antiquity of a kind of radical humanism in ethics that is still up to date and challenges us even today'.

---

Copies of this book are available from bookshops or from SOF Network, 3 Belle Grove Place, Spital Tongues, Newcastle upon Tyne NE2 4LH at the special price of £12 plus £1.40 p. and p. Please enclose your cheque made out to 'Sea of Faith'. Enquiries: [chair@sofn.org.uk](mailto:chair@sofn.org.uk)

---

David Boulton is a former editor of this magazine.  
[www.historicaljesus.com](http://www.historicaljesus.com)



reviews

## Christopher Hampton reviews *Well Versed: Poems from the Morning Star*

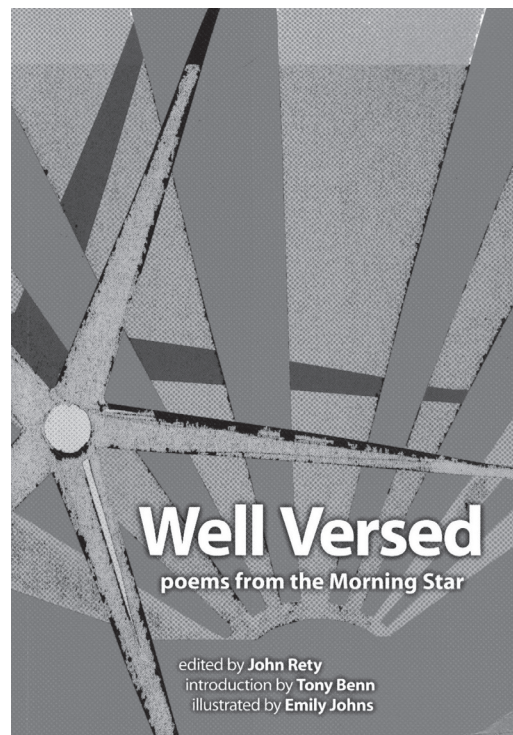
edited by John Rety

Hearing Eye (London 2009). Pbk. 138 pages. £10.  
ISBN: 978-1-905082-42-1

It is no surprise that so many of the poems in this anthology, put together by John Rety from the first two years of poems in the weekly *Well Versed* column of the *Morning Star*, should cover such a wide field, including many of the political and social issues that have so disfigured and coloured our world over the last decade. It would have been strange if this had not been so. And a number of these poems have the kind of sharp edge to them that probes these issues in the spirit one has come to expect of the *Morning Star*, where clarity, anger and indignation respond to the inequalities and injustices we are dominated by as capitalism moves into new markets, new spaces, new killing grounds against our deeper needs and wishes.

It is, though, difficult to judge the quality of these poems as a collection in purely poetic terms, because they cover such a wide variety of themes; and if certain pieces stand out for their striking use of language, it is most often the content that takes first place. For these poems are not overtly ambitious. They tell stories, they speak directly of things that happen on ordinary days in the city, in the countryside, to a friend or a mother or someone trying to make his/her life work for others. But looked at as a whole this is a generous and open-ended collection, demonstrating the nature and diversity of individual opposition to the destructive policies we've all been struck by in recent years – making it clear that people (and the voices here) do not take things passively, but speak up and speak passionately about things that matter.

Few though they may be, the best of these poems are given voice and form by the rhythms and the formal patterns that are the sign of their authenticity. And even if one finds that the content of many of them isn't matched by the form, still most of them speak the language of feeling and of quest, of direct human involvement, of resistance and of longing. For it is after all in the nature of things only rarely that content and form, the meaning and the sound, come together to create the electric presence and the energy that is the



reviews

mark of all true poetry, as one hears it spelled out in Maureen Duffy's lament on the death of a poet-friend who 'honed the art of naming / things and places and taught us with your passion / against the grain, how poetry still matters'. (*Naming*, 45)

One senses this happening as one reads through this collection – how words are lifted, raised to new heights, how feeling and intensity of formal structure become fused; for then it is as if, at every level, it is the way the language moves (as in poems by Kathleen Gallagher, Arthur Clegg, Gillian Spragge, Brian Docherty, Peter Campbell, Lucy Hamilton, Dinah Livingstone and Mario Pettrucci, to name a few) that matters, to become a voice that is unimpeachably humane, civilised and civilising, made to last, to rise above the destructive forces we are so deeply negated by, to re-make our world. Of course the *Morning Star* has to take into account the blunted realities and the brutalising consequences of the world's politics; but here, well enough versed to reach out to the paper's readers, is an alternative to all that – the utopian alternative, the world yet to be born, to be realised, built to answer humanity's cooperative creative needs.

---

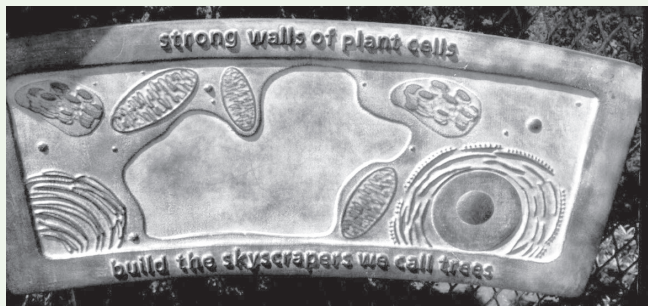
Christopher Hampton was a lecturer for many years at the University of Westminster and the London City Literary Institute. His *Penguin Radical Reader* was reissued by Spokesman Books in 2006 and his most recent poetry collection *Border Crossings* appeared from Katabasis in 2005.

# Trees

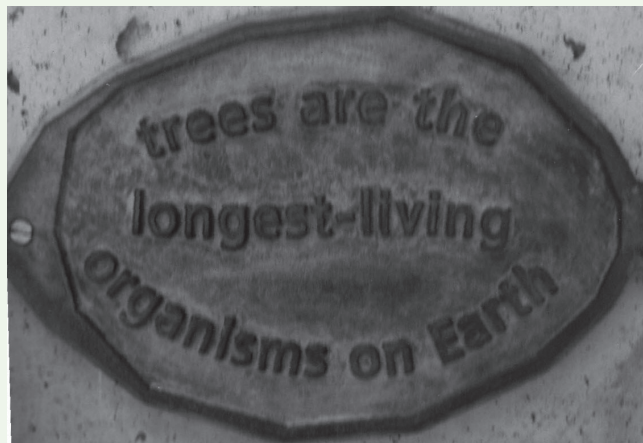
## Cicely Herbert braves the Treetop Walkway at Kew Gardens and visits the Corot to Monet Exhibition.

The Council of the London Borough of Camden has many failings, and one shining virtue – it has an excellent record on the environment and a past history of protecting trees. ‘Developers’, of whom there are many in the area, will often regard a tree as a mere inconvenience, an unwanted nuisance, to be dispensed with as soon as possible, and replaced by concrete, shopping centres and flyovers. My own small back garden is overhung by the branches of a great old ash tree, which stands on the ancient route to Hampstead Heath (another blessedly protected space). I like to imagine that the poet, John Keats, who lived close by, might have known and walked beneath the ash.

Another leafy haven, Kew Gardens, in south London, lies under the direct flight path of international planes approaching Heathrow Airport. One cannot fail to be aware of their continuous looming presence, and the whine of their engines as, at three minute intervals, their pilots prepare to land. In 2008, a ‘Treetop Walkway’ was installed in Kew Gardens. This ‘rhizotron’ has been ‘designed on a Fibonacci numerical sequence often found in nature’s growth patterns.’ Visitors are invited to climb steps 18 metres high, and then, like gods, to look down on the moving canopy of sweet chestnut trees, limes and oaks. At the time of its installation, the secretary of State for the Environment, Hilary Benn, wrote that ‘the walkway is a reminder of the need to conserve the world’s trees and forests which hold 80% of all remaining land-based wild life.’ A visit to the treetop walkway is a moving and thought-provoking experience, and one highly recommended to all those with a head for heights, and for anyone with a concern for the future of our planet, who understands the importance of trees for our very existence and for humanity’s survival.



The French artist Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot, was born in France in 1796. The son of a draper, Corot lived as a child in Rouen. He drew and painted trees, almost obsessively, all his life. I own a small picture inherited from my mother, which I have loved since childhood.



The sketch is of a group of trees, under which a figure can be faintly discerned, and in the distance, as in a dream, one can make out a classical temple, which could be Italian. On the back of the picture’s frame my grandmother has written, in a firm hand, ‘Proof before letters of etching by Corot **GENUINE**’ – underlining the word ‘genuine’ twice. And who is to say that Granny was wrong? Apparently Corot was a generous artist, prepared to sign almost anything presented to him, who ‘produced 3000 etchings, of which 10,000 are in America.’ Whatever the truth, I prize the little picture.

Corot’s work plays a central part in an exhibition currently showing at London’s National Gallery, entitled *Corot to Monet*. All the pictures on display belong to the gallery itself and entry is free. The exhibition covers the period when, for the first time, artists began to leave their studios and paint nature in the open air. The climax of the show comes as something of a surprise, because it is so unlike anything else to be seen there. Four enormous paintings, apparently completed by Corot in the space of a week, are entitled *The Four Times of Day*. These pictures were, apparently, at one time owned by the pre-Raphaelite artist Lord Leighton. Corot’s work has always been admired and loved by other painters, and indeed by poets, and that, surely, is the greatest accolade for any artist.

A short and fairly informative film accompanies the show, and can be viewed in comfort as a respite for the footsore. This is an intimate and pleasurable exhibition, where, unlike at many ‘blockbusters’ of recent years, it is possible to study each picture in an atmosphere of calm. It is, in short, a delight, and I left the National Gallery feeling profoundly grateful to all those who honour, protect, and safeguard our rich heritage of trees.

---

The Corot to Monet Exhibition is on at the National Gallery in London until 20<sup>th</sup> September 2009. The Treetop Walkway is in Kew Gardens, London, and included in the admission price.

---

Cicely Herbert is one of the trio who founded and continue to run *Poems on the Underground*. She is a member of SOF.

# This Life on Earth



edited by **Dinah Livingstone**