

sfia

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Peace on Earth?

sfia

down to Earth

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Contents

Editorial

3 Peace on Earth?

Articles

4 *Prospects for Peace in Iraq* by Mike Phipps

8 *Peace in Afghanistan?* by Gabriel Carlyle

10 *Israel/Palestine: Is it Now or Never?* by Tony Klug

13 *Nuclear Weapons – A Dying Religion* by Bruce Kent

Poetry

7 *The New Temple* by Muhammed Iqbal, introduced by Mohammed Talib

26 *Galaxy of Days* by Daphne Gloag

Reviews

18 David Paterson reviews *Give a Boy a Gun* by Alistair Liddle with Ruth Scott

19 Michel Morton reviews a book and a pamphlet about Israel/Palestine: *A Time to Speak Out* by Anne Karpf and others (ed); *Visions of the Endgame* by Tony Klug

21 Mary Michaels reviews the poetry of Phil Poole

25 *How It is*. Cicely Herbert visits Miroslaw Balka's Installation at the Tate Modern, London

Regulars and Occasionals

14 Letters

15 Cartoon by Josh

16 SOF Sift by Richard Wood Penn

17 Radio Rockall

23 SOF Sermon by Stephen Mitchell

27 Mayday Notes

Front cover image: Afghan mother waiting for help from Médecins sans Frontières

Back cover image: *The Shepherds Visit the Newborn Jesus* by Rembrandt



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

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

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

Peace on Earth?

Can the angels' Christmas song ever become a reality?

When I was ten I was sent to an odd little school in the wilds of Devon with just 30 girls (and several ponies). Like many of her generation, the headmistress never married because, we girls gathered, she had lost the man she loved in the Great War. So she had become a teacher and started her school, carrying it on all through the Second World War and into the 1950s, when I arrived. She was a formidable woman. Though thoroughly English, she would terrify our country parents by rushing out to greet them gabbling at them in French, and every Christmas term every girl in the school had to learn to recite in French Luke's story of the angels appearing to the shepherds to announce the birth of Jesus. *Or il y avait*, we called it, because that was how it began: *Or il y avait dans ces contrées-là des bergers...* Our headmistress was right: many things you learn by heart when young stay with you. Sixty years on, thinking in bed late at night about writing this Editorial, I found I could still remember it word for word with its tremendous climax of an *army* of angels appearing in the heavens and singing **Peace on Earth**: *Et au même instant il y eut avec l'ange une multitude de l'armée céleste louant Dieu et disant: Gloire à Dieu dans les lieux très hauts, Paix sur la Terre et pour les hommes bienveillance.* Sixty years on we still do not have peace on Earth but wars and weapons all over the place, particularly in the Middle East.

The child whose birth the angels announced is called *Prince of Peace*, and *Emmanuel* meaning 'God with us'. In a sense this story of God coming *down to Earth* is about *bringing home* to us what has always been the case. God is nowhere else. 'God' has been used as a 'supernaturalisation' (a poetic trope akin to personification or metaphor) of beings and forces of Cosmos and Earth, from which we evolved, and forces in us, including the moral forces – some still in a rudimentary state – such as love and kindness. That baby, to whom the shepherds bow down, is the hero, the supreme representative of the 'human form divine', which has the *potential* to bring about a world of justice and peace. But it is up to us to make it happen, or as the young say nowadays, down to us.

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

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

The story tells us that *every* child, born into any circumstances, however unpropitious, embodies 'the human form divine'. *Every* child is a reason – *logos* – why peace on Earth is so urgent. And anyone who has given birth, attended a birth or seen a newborn baby feels something of that 'great mystery'.

Jesus, whose birth the angels announced singing 'Peace on Earth', grew up to weep over Jerusalem's lack of peace. 'As a hen gathers her chicks' he longed to gather it together. 'And when he drew near and saw the city he wept over it, saying "Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace!"' (Lk 19:41). He entered the city and was executed as a subversive. He had taught: 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.' (Mt. 5:9)

This Christmas issue of *Sofia* is called *Peace on Earth?* With a question mark. We sometimes feel so helpless about what we can do for peace. That sense of powerlessness became outrage when on February 15th 2003 the largest peace demonstration London had ever seen (and in many other cities) was completely ignored by our Government and quickly followed by an invasion called *Shock and Awe*.

The least we can do is keep ourselves informed and become part of that public opinion that demands and longs for peace. For this issue we have invited four peace campaigners to write about the areas in which they are active and the prospects there. Mike Phipps is an activist with Iraq Occupation Focus and co-editor of its fortnightly e-newsletter. Gabriel Carlyle is Afghanistan news editor for *Peace News*. He will be speaking about Afghanistan at the *Peace News* Winter Gathering in Nottingham, 15-17 January 2010. Tony Klug has written extensively about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for nearly 40 years, is a special advisor on the Middle East to the Oxford Research Group and vice chair of the Arab-Jewish Forum. Two works by him are reviewed in this issue by Michael Morton. Bruce Kent has been a leader and outstanding figure in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament for decades. *Sofia* is grateful and proud to publish their contributions.

Perhaps some readers will be inspired to do more than just read (some will already be doing more). War is wasteful. We weep for all the thousands killed, maimed and made homeless in war zones and for our own soldiers – very young in some cases – who die, or come home without comrades or mutilated or driven mad. There is no supernatural agency to bring about peace on Earth. It is down to us.

Prospects for Peace in Iraq

Mike Phipps examines the difficulties of securing a lasting just peace in Iraq.

The prospects for peace in Iraq depend on how one defines this tricky concept. Tacitus long ago noted how occupying armies equate desolation with peace. A military operation as devastating as that launched by the US and its allies on Iraq may have some success in imposing the short-term peace of the graveyard, but a lasting, just peace remains elusive. This is because of the catastrophic nature of that invasion, not for western reputations, but for the Iraqi people themselves. One in two households in Baghdad alone have lost a family member. A million have died. A further million have been left disabled. The war has created five million refugees. Anthony Arnove estimates in *The Logic for Withdrawal* that close to sixteen percent of the Iraqi population has been uprooted. He adds: 'Basic foods and necessities are now increasingly beyond the reach of ordinary Iraqis, thanks to soaring inflation unleashed by the occupation's destruction of the already shaky Iraqi economy, cuts to state subsidies encouraged by the International Monetary Fund and the Coalition Provisional Authority, and the disruption of the oil industry. Unemployment is regularly estimated at somewhere between 50-70%.'

on every level, Iraq has been traumatised

To that can be added a culture of embezzlement that can be traced to the deliberate overpricing of contracts by multinational corporations in the first days of the Occupation. Today Iraq is an increasingly authoritarian state, which has institutionalised corruption in every aspect of public life. *The Independent* reported in June: 'Iraq is the world's premier kleptomaniac state. According to Transparency International, the only countries deemed more crooked than Iraq are Somalia and Burma, while Haiti and Afghanistan rank just behind.'

Brutality and torture are rife in its jails. New laws have been passed to crack down on the independent media. A violent crime wave of kidnappings for ransom, allegedly involving some members of Iraq's security services, is sweeping the country. Six years after the US invaded Iraq, 36 percent of Baghdad's drinking water is unsafe, according to the Iraqi Environment Ministry – in a good month. In a bad month, it's 90 percent.

Seventy percent of doctors are estimated to have

fled the country. Homelessness is widespread. Five years after the bombardment, people returning to Falluja find only destruction. Water shortages are destroying agriculture, power shortages crippling industry. Permanent damage has been inflicted on the country's historic cultural heritage. An Amnesty International report last year described the human rights situation as 'disastrous' with 'a climate of impunity [and] the economy in tatters.'

On every level, Iraq has been traumatised. As Naomi Klein notes in *The Shock Doctrine*, the opening US military bombardment provided the social and psychological disorientation to embark on a crippling economic policy. As the country burned, the invaders launched a programme of mass privatisation, free trade and flat taxes. Iraqi companies were sidelined in the reconstruction process, for purely ideological reasons, despite being able to do the work at one-tenth of the price of western contractors, whose results, lacking any meaningful oversight, were predictably poor. And the money wasted by mainly US corporations, it should be remembered, was Iraq's own. To ensure these policies took hold, local elections were overturned in favour of Occupation-appointed puppets. Opponents of these 'freedoms' were repressed as Saddamists or Al-Qaeda. Over 60,000 were jailed by US forces in the first three and a half years of Occupation and many were tortured.

Opposition to these practices was met with fierce repression. Three-quarters of the city of Falluja was flattened, with up to 6,000 people killed. Some 36,000 of the city's 50,000 homes were destroyed, along with 60 schools and 65 mosques and shrines. Up to 200,000 residents were forced to flee. The US admits that it used white phosphorous as a battlefield weapon in the assault on Fallujah. An Italian TV documentary showed images of bodies, which it said proved the incendiary, similar in effect to napalm, had been used against men, women and children who were burned to the bone. US journalist Dahr Jamail confirmed the dropping of incendiary bombs the size of tanks, which caused large fires. 'When anyone touched those fires,' he wrote, 'their body burned for hours.'

He also quotes eye witness reports, some from accredited journalists, of US soldiers entering houses and shooting people for not obeying orders in English, a language that local people did not understand. There were also reports of US soldiers shooting civilians who were waving white flags while they tried to escape the city, in some cases by attempting to swim the Euphrates, women and children included. Other witnesses saw American

tanks rolling over the bodies of the wounded lying in the streets. Call the desolation of Falluja ‘peace’, if you wish – in reality it was a war crime.

The longer the Occupation of Iraq has continued, the more its perpetrators have tried to reinvent their role as that of arbitrator between religious factions. Much is made in the media of Shia-Sunni divisions in Iraq, divisions which the Occupation consciously strengthened from the outset. In their book, *Iraq in Fragments*, Eric Herring and Glen Rangwala explain how the central state was carved up between religious parties and groups which used their privileged position to sell public sector jobs to whoever could pay. US-organised elections strengthened the sectarianism, with party lists based on Sunni or Shia affiliation. Victory meant jobs, favours and kickbacks for the group in power.

This civil conflict is perpetuated by the Occupation. As long as each side of the sectarian divide, itself largely created and bolstered by the Occupation, feels that it can outbid the other in the competition for US resources and empowerment, then it has a vested interest in the perpetuation of the conflict. The removal of the Occupation destroys that rationale. In the absence of the possibility of one side or the other securing the US materiel necessary to outflank the other, each side would be motivated to seek an accommodation with the other.

Even so, we should be a cautious about the ‘sectarian strife’ narrative. The biggest threat to peace in Iraq today are the arms in the hands of the US and other occupation forces and the tens of thousands of mercenaries contracted by the Pentagon. These private security contractors, incidentally, are completely outside Iraqi jurisdiction and some, like Blackwater, have been involved in high-profile attacks on civilians.

The Times reported in August that guards employed by Blackwater shot Iraqis in unprovoked and random attacks. Sworn statements from former company employees claimed that Erik Prince, Blackwater’s founder, ‘views himself as a Christian crusader tasked with eliminating Muslims and the Islamic faith from the globe’. The company was also alleged to have used child prostitutes at its compound in Baghdad’s fortified Green Zone again with Erik Prince’s full knowledge.

In the same month, the Obama administration extended a contract with Blackwater for more than \$20 million for ‘security services’ in Iraq. Since Obama took office in January the State Department has contracted with Blackwater for more than \$174 million in ‘security services’ alone in Iraq and Afghanistan and tens of millions more in ‘aviation services’.

Many hope peace can emerge from Iraq’s vibrant civil society. Even this, however, has been debased. Chosen organisations are funded by the US State



Muntazer al-Zaidi throws his shoe at President Bush

Department, groups that former US Secretary of State Colin Powell described as ‘an important part of our combat team’. Haifa Zangana’s book *City of Widows* highlights these issues in relation to NGOs working with women. She argues that these hastily created organisations have impeded the work of genuine grassroots groups. Female illiteracy is at its highest since the 1930s, privatisation is destroying free public services, and unemployment ‘has fuelled prostitution, back-street abortions, “honour killings” and domestic violence.’

The latest phase of Iraq’s misery began in 2007. The ‘surge’ – the increased deployment of US troops in 2007 credited with stabilising Iraq – led to nearly a million more refugees fleeing the country for Syria in that year alone.

An invasion based on deceit about non-existent weapons of mass destruction, an occupation which may have more to do with energy security in a world of diminishing resources, or the search for regional hegemony by the world’s leading superpower – such an invasion based on the most illiberal of motives cannot be transformed seamlessly into a humanitarian mission of reconstruction driven by the worthiest ideals. The forces occupying Iraq cannot rescue that country from the chaos and destruction that they have helped to create.

And this is true too for the politicians they have put in place. Zaid al-Ali, a British Iraqi lawyer who worked with the UN and interacted closely with most of the leading politicians in Iraq, wrote recently: ‘It is worth considering what type of person would accept to collaborate with the occupation forces in Iraq. If Iraq has become the most corrupt country in the Middle East, it is because the senior government officials are actually amongst the most corrupt people in the country. If violence is increasing, it is because the government is involved in promoting it. But there are many Iraqis who are competent, honest, and non-sectarian and who would be willing to rebuild their country, so long as the circumstances are correct. What this means in practice is that the US army must leave in order to create enough space for these people

to contribute.’

Barack Obama promised on the campaign trail to withdraw US forces. The way towards this was paved by the State of Forces Agreement, signed in the last months of the Bush Administration, which committed the US to just a small residual force. Or did it? Seumas Milne observed in *The Guardian*: ‘Briefings by Pentagon officials have also made clear this residual force could remain long after 2011. It turns out that the new security agreement can be ditched by either side, while the Iraqi government is fully entitled to invite US troops to remain, as explained in the accompanying “strategic” framework agreement’, so long as its bases or presence are not defined as “permanent”.’

In June 2009, *Foreign Policy in Focus* underlined this discrepancy between

appearance and reality: ‘The United States is looking to withdraw from Iraq in name only, as it appears that up to 50,000 military personnel will remain after the deadline... The larger loophole in the agreement is the treatment of military contractors. There has been little mention of the 132,610 military contractors in Iraq. Since September 2008, only 30,000 troops have left Iraq. The 134,000 soldiers that remain are just slightly below the number of troops that were in Iraq in 2003. These numbers are likely to remain well above 100,000 until 2010.’

A month later, the BBC reported: ‘Nearly a month after American troops officially withdrew from urban areas in Iraq, they are quietly going back in again, patrolling the streets of towns and cities where, despite improvements in security, violence remains an everyday occurrence.’ And in September it was reported that Obama had approved a Pentagon request to send an additional 1,000 troops to Iraq – just a week after the Pentagon added thousands of extra contractors to Iraq, ostensibly to replace US troops during the drawdown.

Iraqis, meanwhile, have had enough. The contempt in which the continuing occupation is still held is underlined by the lionising of the Iraqi who threw his shoes at President Bush. Muntazer al-Zaidi, viciously tortured in jail, was hailed as a hero on his release in September to offers of a new house, car and

much more.

Less reported, however, was the shooting dead by US soldiers the same week of a man who threw his slippers at a military convoy in Falluja. ‘When I saw Americans patrolling the streets of Falluja I lost my temper,’ he told reporters before he died. ‘Troops have withdrawn from cities, so why they still patrolling here in Falluja?’

Why indeed? His pointless, tragic death underlines the obstinate truth that no lasting peace in

Iraq is possible without a complete end to the Occupation. But this is just a first step. Last year, a conference of over 100 activists, many of them Iraqis, adopted a statement calling for Justice for Iraq, which is now being used as a campaigning tool to solicit the widest possible support for a principled withdrawal from that country. It states very simply:

- ‘We call on those states responsible for the invasion and occupation of Iraq to terminate their illegal and immoral war, and express our solidarity with the Iraqi people in their struggle for peace, justice and self-determination. In particular, we demand:

- An immediate end to the US and UK-led occupation of Iraq;
- Urgent action to fully address the current humanitarian crises facing Iraq’s people, including help for the more than three million refugees and displaced persons;
- An end to all foreign interference in Iraq’s affairs, including its oil industry, so that Iraqis can exercise their right to self-determination;
- Compensation and reparations from those countries responsible for war and sanctions on Iraq;
- Prosecution of all those responsible for war crimes, human rights abuses, and the theft of Iraq’s resources.

We demand justice for Iraq.’



Iraqis enjoy a statue of al-Zaidi’s shoe in Tikrit.

The New Temple

Mohammad Talib introduces this poem by Muhammed Iqbal, which he quoted in his talk to the Oxford SOF Conference in September.

Sir Muhammad Iqbal (1873-1938) advocated the political and spiritual renewal of Islamic civilisation across the world, but specifically in South Asia. Iqbal's poetry and philosophy, written in Urdu and Persian, emphasises the Islamic and spiritual redemption through self-development, moral integrity, and individual freedom. Some of his poems highlighting the theme are *The Secrets of the Self* (1915), *A Message from the East* and a series of lectures put together as *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (1934). His poem *Naya Shivala* (The New Temple) laments that the institutions of religion and their ideas and artefacts have divided people. In his relentless search for the divine, he proposes to build a new temple, but this time not in bricks and mortars but in the heart of the believer.

There is a deliberate non-conformism in this poem. The poet enjoys such respect across the religious divide and within the heart of institutionalised religion that the reference to Brahman, ka'abah or temple causes no offence to readers and above all, no one interprets these literally. Iqbal's notion of love draws upon the poetry and the thoughts of the Sufis, in particular Maulana Jalal al-Din Rumi, a persian Sufi sage and poet (1207-1273). The Sufis contrasted love with faith based on knowledge from books, personal experience of the divine with undiscerning acceptance of truth from authorities.

*

Mohammad Talib is Professor of Anthropology at the, Oxford University Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, and Fellow of the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies.

I shall tell the truth, O Brahman,
but take it not as an offence:
The idols in your temple have decayed.
You have learnt from these images to bear
ill-will towards your own people,
and God too has taught his preachers
the ways of conflict.
My heart was sick: I turned away both from
the temple and the ka'abah,
from the sermons of the preacher
and from your fairy tales, O Brahman.
To you the divine resides in stone idols:
for me, every particle of my country's dust is deity.
Come, let us reconcile those that have turned away
from each other, remove all signs of division.
Desolation has reigned for long
in the habitation of my heart.
Come let us build a new temple in this land.
Let our shrine be higher than any on the earth,
let us raise its spire till it touches the edge of sky,
let us awake every morning to sing the sweetest songs,
and give all worshippers the wine of love to drink.
There is power, there is peace in the songs of devotees:
The salvation of all dwellers on the Earth is in love.

Peace in Afghanistan?

Gabriel Carlyle argues that the US and Britain are blocking real possibilities for peace in Afghanistan.

Two years ago, whilst preparing a talk on Afghanistan, I drew up a list of the most common arguments then being used to justify Britain's participation in the war. Looking back on that list today, most have now imploded – sometimes in a dramatically public fashion. Then it still seemed necessary – even with a sympathetic audience – to review a fair amount of unfamiliar background information to rebut the pro-war case. No longer.

Warlords and rape laws

Are we in Afghanistan to protect democracy?

Earlier this year Afghan President Hamid Karzai approved 'one of the most notorious warlords in [the country], with the blood of many Afghans on his hands' (Human Rights Watch) as one of his two vice-presidential candidates, and the recent Presidential election was marked by massive fraud on Karzai's behalf.

Women's rights? Karzai recently approved a Taliban-style measure that effectively legalised marital rape for Afghanistan's Shia minority.

Reconstruction? While the US spends \$100m/day on the war, aid from all donors amounts to a mere \$7m/day – and 40% of this goes back to donor countries in corporate profits, consultants' salaries and other costs.

No alternative?

Two pro-war arguments remain, however. Namely, that most Afghans back the current policy, and that there is no alternative (Margaret Thatcher's infamous TINA). There *is* a kernel of truth to the former claim. Unlike in Iraq, where polls consistently showed large majorities regarded US-led forces as occupiers, a recent Afghan poll found majority support (roughly 60%) for the presence of US/NATO forces (Though Afghans are hardly gung-ho about the war: 77% oppose airstrikes, one-in-four Afghans believes attacks on US/NATO forces can be justified, and 73% oppose Obama's 'surge').

However, there *is* a realistic alternative to the current carnage that has the support of most Afghans: namely, genuine negotiations to end the war.

Afghans back negotiations

With good reason, a majority of Afghans fear the Taliban (in one recent poll 58% identified the Taliban as the biggest danger to the country, compared to 8% who named the US). Nonetheless, 64% think the government in Kabul 'should negotiate a settlement with Afghan Taliban.' In a second poll 54% said that they strongly (25%) or somewhat (29%) supported the idea of a coalition government with the Taliban. Moreover, most people in Britain back negotiations: in a March 2009 poll 66% of Britons said that the US/UK should be 'willing to talk to the Taliban in Afghanistan in order to achieve a peace deal.'

Realistic?

Of course, it's impossible to negotiate if you have no-one to negotiate with. However, contrary to their public pronouncements there is serious evidence that the Taliban are prepared to negotiate. For some time now the Taliban leadership has been talking through intermediaries about a potential peace agreement with the Afghan government. In May the *New York Times* reported the Taliban leadership's (unofficial) demands:

- an immediate pullback of US/NATO forces to their bases;
- a cease-fire and phased 18-month withdrawal of foreign troops;
- a peacekeeping force, drawn from predominantly Muslim nations, to replace the current occupation forces;
- the formation of a transitional government;
- nationwide elections after Western forces leave.

These demands are strikingly similar to the terms of a May 2007 resolutions passed by the Upper House of the Afghan Parliament, which called for a military ceasefire, negotiations with the Taliban and a date for the withdrawal of all foreign troops.

Blocking peace

Nevertheless, the US and British governments continue to oppose meaningful peace talks. In December 2007, Gordon Brown declared that: 'Our objective is to defeat the Insurgency by isolating and eliminating its leadership. I make it clear that we will not enter into any negotiations with these people.' More recently, Kai Eide, the UN's special representative in Afghanistan, scorned British Foreign Secretary David Miliband's call for talks with 'moderate' Taliban (rather than the movement's leadership) noting: 'That's an inadequate peace process and that won't work ... We have to have a political process that is all-inclusive. That's the only way to bring this conflict to an end.' Furthermore, having already killed thousands of Afghan civilians, the US and Britain now look set on further escalation.

No illusions

In preliminary talks with the Afghan Government, the Taliban have reportedly 'agreed to soften their position on such things as beards and burqas' (*Independent*) – for example, refraining from banning girl's education. It is impossible to take this at face value. Indeed, there are good reasons to distrust all of the parties that would have to be involved in a settlement, whether it's the super-corrupt Karzai government, the US-backed warlords that currently control large swathes of the country, or the US and British governments, both of which have repeatedly demonstrated a callous indifference to the lives and well-being of ordinary Afghans, whilst flouting international law with impunity.

Moreover, no-one should be under any illusions that a negotiated settlement will be easy or unproblematic, or that it will resolve many of Afghanistan's long-entrenched problems: its dire poverty; its abysmal women's rights situation; or the desperate need to bring its many war criminals to justice. However, for all its flaws a peace deal – and the withdrawal of foreign forces – is probably a necessary pre-condition for tackling these.



As the courageous female Afghan MP Malalai Joya has noted: 'The entire situation would be improved if Afghans were finally able to decide about their own problems ... If the United States and its NATO allies leave, the warlords will lose power because they have no base among our people. At least with withdrawal of foreign troops, we would have our independence. Today, we neither have freedom nor independence, justice or security.'

Our role

According to the *Sunday Telegraph's* Defence Correspondent, 'a power-sharing deal will have to be done with the Taliban if Afghanistan is to have any semblance of a peaceful future.' The rapid departure of British forces – desired by most Britons, according to the polls – would have a huge political impact in the US, helping to bring forward the day when the Americans will negotiate their way out. Here in the UK we need to pressure the British Government on this as hard as we can. Some sort of deal looks inevitable. The real question now is how many bodies will be piled up to postpone this outcome.

Gabriel Carlyle is Afghanistan news editor for *Peace News*. He will be speaking about Afghanistan at the *Peace News* Winter Gathering in Nottingham, 15-17 January 2010 (www.peacenews.info).

Israel/Palestine: Is it Now or Never?

Tony Klug offers a vision of the endgame for a possible just solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict but says the opportunity must be seized urgently or it will be lost.

We live – to paraphrase an old Chinese proverb – in precarious times. Our jumbled world is transmogrifying into a global village, with the promise of many splendid future benefits. But for now, it faces a torrent of emergent threats – catastrophic climate change, financial and economic meltdown, weapons of mass annihilation, global terrorism, pandemic disease, irreversible resource and species depletion, and endemic international conflict – to name just a few (so as not to cause alarm). Any one of these would-be disasters could drive us towards the abyss.

A succession of flawed peace initiatives has left one of the present crises – the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – on the verge of becoming unresolvable, a prospect ostensibly hastened by the assumption of power in February 2009 of the most hawkish government in Israel's history, together with deepening Palestinian factionalism. Yet, despite these setbacks, a brief window of opportunity has opened up owing to the providential election of US President Obama.

Will Obama will remove the peace process from the deep freeze?

The hope is that Obama will remove the peace process from the deep freeze. But this will be just a passing sentiment if the short time we have is not used to bring the dispute swiftly to an end. For this to happen, two things have to be got right simultaneously: the destination and the strategy. But this is a double act never yet achieved.

For some three decades following the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, there was neither a viable nor a commonly agreed destination. To the extent that the conflicting parties projected eventual outcomes during this period, they were either deficient or misconceived – the so-called Allon Plan and 'Jordanian option' for the Israelis, a version of the 'one-state' idea for the Palestinians,

UN Security Council Resolution 242 for the international community. The common flaw was their failure to embrace the key question at the heart of the conflict: how to resolve a bitter clash between two charismatic national movements? To Resolution 242, the Palestinians were just homeless refugees, not a stateless nation. To the PLO charter, the Jews were merely a religious minority, to be treated accordingly. To Israel's former prime minister Golda Meir, 'it was not as though there was a Palestinian people...they did not exist'.

To my mind, as someone who first called for the two-state paradigm in the early 1970s and fully expected to see it materialise by the mid 1970s, the subsequent 30 years were heedlessly squandered until, eventually, a solid international consensus – backed by majority Palestinian and Israeli opinion – emerged, around the turn of the century, in support of two viable states as the backbone of a solution. The consensus was reflected in Security Council Resolution 1397 in 2002 and, in the same year, the Arab Peace Initiative called for a comprehensive regional settlement with full normalisation of relations among all states of the region, including the Israeli and Palestinian states.

So finally the international community got the destination essentially right. But it still had to get the strategy right – and this it has persistently failed to do. While they had their merits, a range of initiatives – from the Oslo process, through the Road Map, the Annapolis summit and any one of the other dead-end, stillborn or toothless plans - rested on too many doubtful assumptions, were too vague about the objectives or let the parties too easily off the hook through a lack of an effective enforcement mechanism. All the while, the state that already existed steadily chiselled away at the territory of the putative other, bit-by-bit eroding the feasibility of the only destination that made sense. And all the while, leading members of the international community effectively sat on their hands and let it happen. You could almost say they encouraged it, if only by neglect.

In consequence, even the most pragmatic

Palestinian opinion has started to lose faith in the two-state outcome, some 20 years after the PLO in 1988 dropped its previous demand for the eradication of the state of Israel and officially committed itself to the two-state solution.

Variations on the one-state theme are now coming back into vogue in Palestinian circles, even though it may mean engaging in a bitter long-term struggle with uncertain consequences and reaching for an objective that has not been clearly thought through, is not necessarily favoured or truly believed to be achievable.

In parallel, Hamas rockets, which terrorised the population of southern Israel for years, have deepened the mood among Israelis that peace-making is futile – that

Palestinians are not serious about peace and that a state in the West Bank is merely a device to attack Israelis from closer range and finish them off. To many Israelis, ‘peace’ has become a four-letter word.

The principal casualty of these political currents could be the irretrievable collapse of the consensus destination. That would take us back to square one: no agreed destination – and therefore no call for a strategy to achieve it. Such a development – not far off – may usher in an era of indefinite strife. So it is vital that confidence in the consensus destination is restored. And the only way to restore it at this point is to move rapidly towards it. In effect, this would require substantial and irreversible progress towards two states in the first term of the Obama presidency – before the re-election campaign takes over. So we have maybe two years.

The challenge then is to formulate a strategy that will be effective in both forging the substance of the endgame and swiftly achieving it, and not be sidetracked by issues which, while maybe important in themselves, are not directly instrumental in resolving the conflict. Stimulating the West Bank economy, relaxing internal travel restrictions, reducing the number of roadblocks and checkpoints, and releasing some prisoners are essentially humanitarian measures that may make Palestinian life under Israeli rule more palatable, but they do nothing to end the occupation and further a peace settlement.

Reining in settlement expansion is a different matter owing to its potential to fatally subvert

any peace process based on two entities. It is for this reason that President Obama called for a full settlement freeze but, by not being prepared to back up this demand with firm enforcement measures, he has allowed himself, in the short term at least, to be finessed by the Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu. However, not even the settlements issue should be allowed to impede the urgent prosecution of a broader peace strategy.

This said, an authentic Palestinian invitation to the settlers to stay if they wished under Palestinian state sovereignty would take the sting out of much of the issue. Some settlers may take up this offer, some may accept compensation for



returning to Israel – especially if the bribes were large ones – and some might remain in settlements that are transferred to Israel as part of an equitable territorial swap. A menu of such choices coupled with an end to all government subsidies plus a definitive deadline for the withdrawal of Israeli army

protection following a peace agreement could be more practical and effective than threatening hundreds of thousands of settlers with the dubious prospect of the Israeli military driving them out by force. At the appropriate time, a new coalition government in Israel would need to be assembled to initiate such steps, with Kadima replacing the far-right parties, or it may require a new election.

President Obama recently got his fingers burned by attempting to steer the parties into resuming direct negotiations and into reviving what are euphemistically called ‘confidence-building measures’. But he was badly advised, as there is no reason to believe that negotiations between these innately unequal parties will be any less of a sham than before, or that efforts to build trust between an occupying authority and an occupied people will be any less hollow than in the past. These are dead-end tracks. The time for goodwill-based bilateral negotiations has come and gone. Without firm outside guidance and pressure, no substantive progress can be expected.

In my recent Fabian pamphlet, *Visions of the Endgame*, I put forward an alternative strategy that is designed, in quick time, to flush out the ultimate positions of the belligerent parties and

drive forward a robust peace process, predicated on a clear horizon and an effective enforcement mechanism that would not easily be derailed by the first atrocity or be disrupted by the furtive manoeuvrings of any party.

The strategy would comprise three phases. The first move would be an invitation from, say, the 'Quartet' (US, UN, EU, Russia) to the principal belligerent parties to tender their realistic visions of the endgame – within the parameters of the international consensus – by a fixed deadline of around six months. This would place the ball firmly in their respective courts, impel them to take responsibility and should catalyse new political currents within each society. If, for any reason, the members of the US-led Quartet are unable to act collectively, the US President could still proceed on his own authority.

In the second move – whether the parties observe the first deadline or not – the Quartet would formulate a *definitive* plan to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and resolve the wider Arab-Israeli issues. The plan would draw on the proposals submitted by the parties, and also on past agreements and near-agreements, and other sources. The endorsement of the plan by the UN Security Council would give it added political weight and solid international legality.

In the third step, the Quartet (or the US government as the case may be) would preside over the implementation of a schedule of interim moves along a fixed timetable towards the final settlement, rewarding implementation and penalising failure at each stage. This would constitute the principal enforcement mechanism that has been so lacking in the past.

The belligerent parties would be free to negotiate and agree any matter bilaterally among themselves during the first two phases, extending over a period of roughly one year. Whatever they agree would go into the definitive plan. What they fail to agree, would be left to the Quartet to determine. Crucially, the default position would no longer be the status quo, which has invariably favoured just one party.

So where are we right now? Following his election, President Obama moved more quickly than some had anticipated to set out his stall in support of two states and to achieve a settlement freeze. Despite his lack of success to date, this remains his policy. So the intended destination is clear enough. Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, in attempting to balance these demands with the

exigencies of holding his coalition together, felt obliged in his speech in June 2009 to utter, for Likud, the hitherto forbidden phrase 'a Palestinian state', even if he hedged it with strict preconditions. More recently, he has been trying to shift the public debate from the West Bank settlements to Jerusalem where he feels he may generate stronger national and international support, especially among American Jews, although he may be wrong about this.

While gleefully pocketing his short-term victory over the US administration on the settlement freeze, Netanyahu may discover, over the longer-term, that he has more than met his match in Obama. In his first few months in office, the US president has shifted the debate with – and within – Israel towards the nature and shape of a Palestinian state. The world now waits as he contemplates his next big move. It should involve taking the positive element from Netanyahu's speech – the Palestinian state – and inviting him, and the other parties to the conflict, to flesh it out in detail. It is vital he maintains the momentum and keeps his eye firmly on the big picture – the endgame – and not get sidetracked by other issues.

He is yet to visit Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories as president. It could be a big moment. A well-timed visit – maybe coordinated with a separate or simultaneous visit by the Saudi King Abdullah – and a common appeal from them to both peoples could help generate new currents in both camps and spark off a momentum towards peace, redolent of the Sadat effect 30 years earlier. But such an initiative is only worth taking as part of a broader, coherent strategy. Obama still has the wind with him, but time and direction are both of the essence. He simply must not allow the wind to blow itself out. In the words of the old classic, it's now or never.

Dr Tony Klug has written extensively about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for nearly 40 years. He is a special advisor on the Middle East to the Oxford Research Group and vice chair of the Arab-Jewish Forum. Formerly, he headed Amnesty International's international development programme. He is the author of the Fabian pamphlets *How Peace Broke out in the Middle East: a Short History of the Future* and *Visions of the Endgame: a Strategy to Bring the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Swiftly to an End*.

This article is based on a talk given by the author to the United Nations Association in Oxford on 13th October 2009.

Nuclear Weapons – A Dying Religion

Veteran CND campaigner Bruce Kent looks forward to an end of belief in a nuclear ‘deterrent’.

For a long time it was a very powerful force. It had its prophets and priests. Those who didn't conform to its precepts and its world vision were marginalised and even ridiculed. It is not yet dead but the signs of its mortality are very clear. It was the religion of nuclear peace. Nuclear weapons, so the priests and prophets claimed, had magical properties. If we possessed them then peace was more or less guaranteed. If we did not then the future would be perilous: the Soviet dragon would get us.

Later on, when and if that dragon retreated, some future mini-dragon might appear. That possibility had to be always guarded against. It was a religion which dominated the media, politics, and both faith and non-faith systems alike. Its adherents came from all ends of the spectrum from atheists and agnostics through to religious fundamentalists of all varieties.

Is such old thinking about nuclear weaponry really on its way out? It was Einstein who said: ‘Everything has changed except our modes of thinking, and thus we drift towards unparallel disaster.’ Perhaps he would now hope that old nuclear convictions have passed their sell by date.

The most evident sign of this shift has come with Barack Obama. I have been in the nuclear weapons abolition field for over 50 years. For 50 years we have been fobbed off with rhetoric about supposed reductions. This was no more than economic good housekeeping. It did not raise the question of abolition. Now at last we have a world leader who has made the elimination of all nuclear weapons everywhere one of his goals. He could not have been clearer about his ultimate vision in Cairo in May 2009 .

More than that, he has taken positive steps himself. Steep cuts are under discussion with the Russians. No funds for yet another proposed US warhead. Abandonment of a missile shield in Poland and the Czech Republic. He has even done

the near impossible: acknowledged that Israel is a nuclear weapon state and must be part of future abolition negotiations.

The old religion always ignored legal obligations, but they are there in the Non-Proliferation Treaty of 1968 with its clear commitment in Article VI to negotiating nuclear disarmament. Even more forcefully that legal obligation was stressed by the International Court in 1996, which ruled that ‘there exists an obligation

to pursue in good faith and bring to a conclusion negotiations leading to nuclear disarmament in all its aspects under strict and effective international control’.

Another nail has been driven into the coffin of old dogmas with the publication of a draft convention which covers all the issues that those negotiating abolition will have to

face. They include setting up a nuclear inventory, outside inspection on demand, a verification agency of the United Nations with international powers, the criminalisation of anyone trying to develop or acquire nuclear weapons, and international legal protection to be given to whistle-blowers. A future Vanunu will hopefully not have to spend 18 years in prison.

The old religion depended on many assumptions all of which are now challenged. One such was that nuclear weapons – and there still are about 27,000 in the world – are safe. The long list of accidents which have occurred since 1945 were simply ignored. Worse, human misperceptions which led to near catastrophe were never given the publicity they should have had. It is too long a story to tell here, but I think it highly likely that we humans owe our continued existence to a Colonel Petrov, who refused to tell his superiors in 1983 what he thought he was seeing – a major missile attack on the Soviet Union. Had he done so, the odds on World War III would have been high indeed.



Bruce Kent campaigning



Only this year a major disaster by a hair's breadth did not happen in the Atlantic. Had two submarines, one British and one French been a few metres closer they would have had a catastrophic head-on collision. Both would have sunk. Apart from nuclear pollution would warheads have exploded? Thankfully we did not have to find out.

The old religion had only one threat in mind: a military attack from another country which, it was believed, could be deterred by nuclear weapons. Now it is terrorists who are said to threaten us and we have come to realise that deterrence cannot work, if it worked at all, against suicidal people or those without a territorial base. No one ever suggested nuking Dublin or Belfast as a

means of intimidating the IRA.

'Forty years of peace' they chanted to each other across the tables on *Newsnight* and *Panorama*. Apart from the obvious fact that wars are not inevitable or compulsory, the Nato/Warsaw Pact nuclear cold war stand-off simply meant that hot conflict was transferred to satellite countries: Afghanistan, Angola, Nicaragua, Vietnam and the rest. Millions died as a by-product of nuclear deterrence and the cold war between the two blocs.

Finally, many have lost faith in the old religion because they simply can not see why it is reasonable to claim that some countries can have nuclear weapons but others cannot. What sin might Iran be committing that Britain has not already committed? The silly nationalism which led Ernest Bevin to push us down the nuclear road in 1947 is still alive and well even in late-comers like India and Pakistan. If nuclear weapons mean status then all want status. But nuclear proliferation is clearly a road to a less, not more, secure world.

The problem with a dying religion is that too many have invested careers and reputations in it. Its priests and prophets know well that banging the nationalist drum in the *Mail* or the *Telegraph* will conjure up all sorts of ancient myths – even the Napoleonic one. This can still be heard in the corridors of Whitehall. How could we get rid of ours and take the risk that the French might be

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letters

Dear Editor,

In the Yorkshire Dales recently (August 26) I called upon Ruth Robinson. She's confined to a wheelchair now, and the state of her lungs is such that she needs continuous oxygen. But she is being very well cared for by her family, and is in good spirits. 'Don't know why I'm bothering to hang on,' she said cheerfully, reciting a lengthy list of SOF people to whom I must pass on her greetings. Which I hereby do. It was a necessarily brief but also rather inspiring visit.

Don Cupitt
Cambridge



the only ones left with an independent nuclear weapons in Europe?

Not that ours are independent anyway. The 'Moss Bros' deterrent Harold Wilson once called ours. And how right he was. Do many people know that we actually borrow our Trident missiles from the United States, return them for repair and get another set in exchange.

How can we British help the world to move towards a global understanding that common security based on interdependence is the only security to be had? It is a good moment to ask that question. Our country is at a cross roads. We either spend billions, perhaps £75 billion, on replacing our Trident nuclear submarine fleet or we become the first of the major nuclear powers to give up nuclear weapon status. A choice has to be made. No nonsense please about 3 submarines instead of 4: that is a purely cosmetic device designed to placate old believers who find change too difficult.

To say 'NO' to Trident replacement would release massive sums of money which would ease

our present economic crisis and enable a variety of humane and positive projects to go ahead . Internationally we would be giving strong support to Obama at a time when he much needs it, and great encouragement to those participating in next May's NPT review conference in New York.

Einstein was wrong. Old modes of thinking do change and we can help to speed up the process. As the Final Report of the First United Nations Special Session on Disarmament in 1978 said: 'Enduring international peace and security cannot be built on the accumulation of weaponry by military alliances nor be sustained by a precarious balance of deterrence or doctrines of strategic superiority.' It is time to move to a religion of common humanity, global law, mutual security and social and environmental responsibility.

Bruce Kent, a former Catholic priest, was CND General Secretary from 1980-1985 and Chair from 1987-1990. He is now CND honorary Vice-President.



Cartoon by Josh

SOF Sift

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

From Richard Wood Penn (Northampton)

I have never had specific objectives in life and no particular burning ambition. For many years this seemed to me to be something about which I should feel guilt – and it bothered me a bit (not a lot) that I did not have any such feelings. And eventually I got around to Lao Tzu: *‘A good traveller has no fixed plans, and is not intent on arriving.’* Suddenly a breakthrough: I didn’t feel guilty about not feeling guilty.

Life, as Herman Melville said, *‘is a journey that is homeward bound’* as indeed, from a spiritual point of view, it is. In my case the journey started in the early 1950s when I was 7 or 8 years old with a question which followed a few days after my first – and only – visit to Sunday school. My upbringing was scrupulously neutral so far as any religious considerations were concerned; my visit to Sunday school was a result of my own wish to join in something most of my friends seemed to enjoy. I loved the Bible stories and the characters – and especially the illustrations and maps of the Holy Land – but in much the same way that I had enjoyed the adventures of Henry the Green Engine, Rupert Bear and Christopher Robin. Anyway, the question:

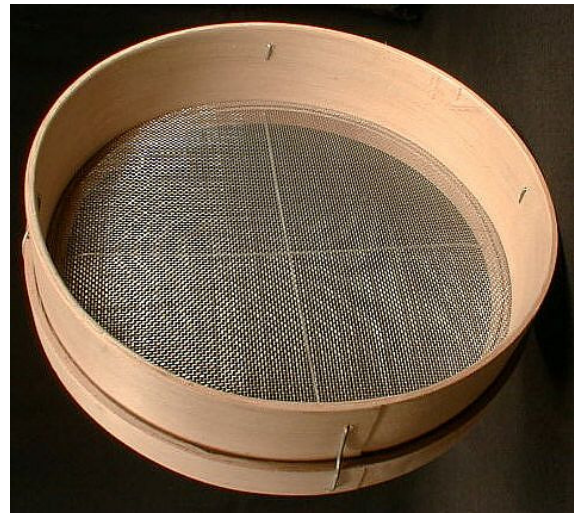
‘Mum, where is heaven and where is hell?’

The answer:

‘Here and now, on this Earth. It is the kind of life that you and only you can make for yourself and those around you.’

The conversation lasted about two minutes and I can recall it with crystal clarity – it took place in the kitchen of the house in which I was born and brought up. I accepted it as an absolute truth then and have never questioned it since. And that was that for the next 20 or so years – I just got on with work, marriage and family life – and reading. Reading habits – eclectic to say the least – mostly non-fiction; science (following school), mythology, radio-controlled models, history, social issues and restoration of classic cars. But something was focussing my sub-conscious – and it all started in 1984 with a BBC television series.

The Sea of Faith was presented by Don Cupitt (then Lecturer in the Philosophy of Religion and Dean of Emmanuel College Cambridge) and was accompanied by the publication of his book, the introduction to which read: On Dover beach in the 1860s, Matthew Arnold found an image of the decline of religion, the



‘melancholy, long, withdrawing roar’ of the Sea of Faith. Twenty years later Nietzsche was proclaiming the death of God. Notwithstanding this, Don Cupitt proposed that Christianity should be practised without dogma, as a spiritual path, an ethic, and a way of giving meaning to life. This opened up a to me the path which I have followed ever since:

*I give you the end of a golden string,
Only wind it into a ball,
It will lead you in at Heaven’s gate
Built in Jerusalem’s wall.*

Jerusalem – William Blake)

The next stage of my journey was to last another 25 years and it involved reading, lots of reading. One thing above all else with which I have come to terms is the utter inter-connectivity of all, most particularly the physical with the meta-physical.

And after all these years? A changed perspective – I had achieved ‘repentance’ but not in the accepted New Testament sense, rather as the original Greek language gospel meaning ‘change of consciousness’. In my case it was an awakening of consciousness – no longer was I guilty of Joseph Campbell’s ‘sin of inadvertence’, of not being alert, not quite awake’. And then in February 2009 I watched the series *Christianity* on Channel 4. In Episode 7 Professor Colin Blakemore discussed with the Rev. David Paterson the ‘Sea of Faith’. It could not be coincidence: I Googled ‘Sea of Faith’ and here I am... Funny old world, ain’t it?

If I may be permitted one final quotation, this time from T S Eliot’s *Four Quartets*:

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

Contributions are invited from SOF members for this SOF Sift column (approximately 750 words). Pieces are especially welcome from those who have never written for *Sofia* before.

R

adio Rockall

Bill's Bridges

From the Rockall Pirate

Conflict often focuses around bridges, those narrow stretches of communication, which may become immortalised: *The Bridge at Remagen, A Bridge Too Far, The Bridges of Madison County*. Most famous, perhaps, is *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. Curiously, this infamous railway bridge, which still has spans completed in 1945, was not built over the Kwai but when the tourists came searching for it after the famous film, the Thais with ingenious lateral thinking simply re-named the river. The more difficult search for peace often involves building another bridge.

Bill joined the Beds and Herts Regiment as a patriotic, rightwing 20 year old in 1941. By 1943 he was a prisoner at Kanchanaburi building a railway bridge over a river. He saw it completed and felt the excitement of seeing the first steam locomotive coming up through the jungle like Colonel Nicholson in the film. Bill's bridge held but he almost broke, when having been tortured by the Japanese he experienced the one thing he said was worse, 'Seeing and hearing your friends being tortured.' The translator at the torture sessions was a Korean, Takashi Nagase, whom the prisoners grew to hate as much as their Japanese captors.

In 1944, at the Changi camp in Singapore, Bill heard a man praying for their captors and preaching, 'Love your enemies, and pray for those who ill-treat you.' Bill began to change and started to learn Japanese in order to be an interpreter. He said he owed his survival to the dropping of



the A-bombs on Japan in 1945, but by now he was, 'a peacemaker and a socialist, believing in the basic equality of all human beings, of whatever, race, religion, country or class'. Then he began to feel 'survivor guilt'.

Meanwhile, following the Japanese defeat, Nagase had guilt feelings. 'I decided to judge myself and expiate the crimes we committed during the war.' Once again he became an interpreter, but this time for the Allied War Graves Commission set up in September 1945. He felt intimidated by the victors, but also by thousands of graves and unburied bodies. Over the years he visited the line many times and said he gradually 'felt calmer.'

To express his 'reverence for life and to relieve suffering', Bill decided to study medicine, specialising in psychiatry: still in the beds and hearts. He regarded war as a disease and he joined the Quakers particularly because of their Peace Testimony.

In 1976, over 30 years after the war, Nagase planned to 'build a bridge' between old allied prisoners and their old Japanese captors. Resistance was formidable but Bill was one of the first to respond positively. Official groups ignored the plan but on 25th October 1976, 3 British, 18 Australian, 2 American and 51 Japanese, walked the whole of the Bridge on the River Kwai – and

back. Bill was in London organising a parallel event in Westminster Abbey. Bill and Nagase met many times in Japan and England but especially in Thailand, building their bridge from opposite sides and finding the peace both desired.

I know all this because I knew Bill Allchin. What is more, he introduced me to SOF shortly before his death on 1st January 2001.

David Paterson reviews

Give a Boy a Gun

by Alistair Liddle with Ruth Scott

Darton, Longman and Todd (London 2009) Pbk. 224 pages.
£12.95. ISBN 978-0-232-52763-6.



reviews

Alistair Little grew up in Northern Ireland during the Troubles, was recruited into the paramilitary Ulster Volunteer Force at the age of 15, and drawn into a cycle of violence. When he was 17 Alistair shot a man dead; he was arrested, found guilty, and detained (because of his age) 'during the Secretary of State's pleasure'. He was released on licence 12 years later. The Royal Ulster Constabulary at first attempted to recruit him as an informer, but he refused to be drawn back into the continuing violence. He was re-imprisoned for another year.

But meanwhile he had been befriended by people who believed in him, and after his final release and a very tough time coping with life outside prison, of which he had no adult experience, he became involved in conflict transformation, and has travelled to strife-torn places all over the world with his own special input of experience and the telling of his story. The BBC television award-winning drama of the story, called *Five Minutes of Heaven* starring Liam Neeson and James Nesbit, was shown on BBC2 on Sunday April 5th 2009.

I found the story exciting, moving and deeply inspiring. It has been very ably put together as a book by Ruth Scott (an Anglican Priest with SOF sympathies), but the story is Alistair's own, and I could hear what impact hearing him in person must have. It is a story of shattering involvement in events, and of intelligence and integrity in working through the implications. The pain, guilt and sorrow are there, and the anger and the seductive pull of violence, and the inner conflict. Alistair's story is one of wounding and being wounded, and this is what makes it such a potent source of healing.

He is not – he says – interested in the politics of it all, but with the experience of growing up in a society where people defined themselves not by what they had in common but by what set them apart; where the other was the enemy and the enemy was less than human, which justified hatred and any violence they thought necessary to defend their way of life. As a teenager he was seduced by a sense of justice and a culture of violence into hatred, and he now also experiences being a victim of the same dehumanising because of his past. The paramilitaries, he says, were significant players in the violence, but they were not the only cause. It is much easier to condemn violence than to understand why it happens.

He calls what he is now doing 'conflict transformation'. It is not 'conflict resolution', or 'reconciliation', or 'forgiveness'. These may come, but first each must be able to tell their story without reserve or contradiction, and they must know that their story has been heard. Then they may be ready to hear the story of the enemy they have regarded as less than human.

Conflict is a part of human nature. It is what makes people work – and fight – for justice. Conflict is there inside each of us, and between ourselves and others. It can be used creatively, not only destructively. (I was reminded of Gandhi's insistence that non-violence is not passive.)

Religion plays a minor role in the telling of the story. In Northern Ireland the hatred was between Catholics and Protestants but the baggage was historical and cultural; Alistair was brought up in a Christian (Protestant) family, and he did not learn violence from them; he learnt it on the streets. He regarded himself as a Christian during his time in prison, but remained an angry, bitter man with a violent temper. Those who befriended him before and after his release were religious people of various sorts (even, eventually, Catholics). It is they who enabled him to use his experience so creatively. I found myself thinking how religion is both part of the human problem and part of the solution, and that the test lies in a deep respect for the humanity of others.

This book is not just about Northern Ireland, but about the whole issue of violence between the peoples of the world. The victim's story, and the perpetrator's story, and the story of the bystanders who kept their heads down and appeared to take no part, must all be heard. They share a common humanity and are involved in a shared history in which the issues of justice, conflict, hatred, pain and the longing for peace must be transformed by a simple and desperately difficult process – listening to each other.

David Paterson is a former Chair and then Secretary to the Board of SOF Trustees. He is the convener of the Oxford SOF local group.

Michel Morton reviews

A Time to Speak Out: Independent Jewish Voices on Israel, Zionism and Jewish Identity

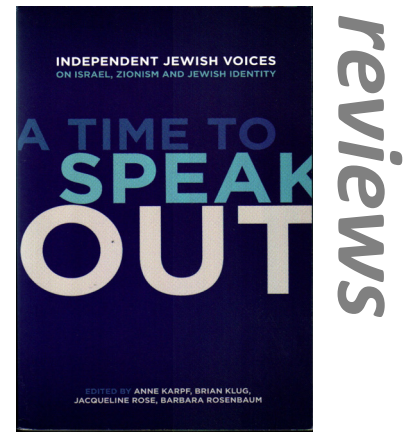
by Anne Karpf and others (ed)

Verso Books (London 2008). Pbk. £9.99. ISBN: 9781844672295 and

Visions of the Endgame: A Strategy to Bring the Israel-Palestinian Conflict Swiftly to an End

by Tony Klug

The Fabian Society (London 2009). £5.00. Or downloadable free: fabians.org.uk
ISBN: 0978716341086.



William Butler Yeats' poem *The Second Coming* contains a much-quoted line: 'the best lack all conviction, while the worst/are full of passionate intensity'. It was applied to the troubles in Northern Ireland, when the hard men received more of a hearing than the moderates. It could also be true for the Israel and Palestinian conflict. We hear more of Likud and Hamas than the voices of the ordinary people who lack passionate (or sometimes violent) intensity but who are generally courteous, friendly and most welcoming to outsiders. Their voices are usually unheard.

The whole conflict is bound up with recent history, of what happened after WWI. But it is history that has been forgotten. In reality, it was the growing dependence of the US and European industry on a single source of oil in the Middle East that started it all. What turned it into an intractable problem was its conflation with the irreconcilable claims of Arabs and Jews to Palestine. The Balfour Declaration and the idea of a Jewish National Home was one of the post-dated cheques that Britain signed to win the Great War and it might have been honoured without detriment to the Arabs.

The British Mandate, a story in itself, opened the conflict with a crucial mistake. In 1921 they authorised a Supreme Muslim Council to direct religious affairs and it appointed Mohammed Amin al-Husseini to be the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem for life. An extreme anti-Semite, al-Husseini set about organising the destruction of Arab moderates. Some of these had welcomed Jewish settlers with their modern agricultural ideas and sold them land. Arabs and Jews might have lived together as two prosperous communities. But the Mufti's terror gangs silenced Arab moderate opinion and mobilised the people behind the extremists. Then the 1939 White Paper, which virtually brought Jewish immigration to a halt, in effect repudiated the Balfour Declaration. Soon

after came the first reports of the 'Final Solution'. They aroused not pity but fear, and many countries including the USA tightened visa regulations. By the end of the War the control of Palestine had slipped from the grasp of the British. Jewish terrorism, from the Stern gang and Irgun, combined a cell-structure, modern technology and political murder. It was the paradigm for all modern terrorists and was imitated by Arab extremists, who continue its use to this day.

The other determining factor was the influence of the USA. As the American Jewish community developed a sense of self-confidence it showed its political pressure to become the best-organised lobby in America. In the end, the USA's backing for the state of Israel was the last idealistic action that America took before the *realpolitik* of the Cold War took over. And even in 1948 everyone expected the Israelis to lose. The Arab armies were more numerous and better equipped. They should have defeated Israel easily. But they did not, and the creation of the new state established a new power in the Middle East and finally ended European anti-Semitism. But it created the Arab refugee problem. In the end it was the work of terrorists – on both sides. Israel has become a very well-armed state with nuclear weapons and extensive security forces backed to the hilt by the USA. It is an extreme situation. Fifty years on It is time once more for moderates to speak.

The present book, *A Time to Speak Out*, is a collection of short articles sponsored by a network of Jews in Britain called 'Independent Jewish Voices' (IJV). It is only one contribution to the intricate debate, but it is a fascinating one. The writers come from diverse backgrounds, occupations and affiliations but they all have a strong commitment to social justice and human rights. The articles are grouped in four sections dealing first with Israel and Palestine and then the climate of debate or how the way the relationship

between the two is argued – or evaded – in the Jewish world. Next on the matter of human rights the third section examines the principles that generate dissenting opinions that the contributors express and their religious or secular sources. Lastly in ‘Jewish Identity and Diversity’ some writers consider the Jewish communities that preceded the state of Israel or argue for a future in which the state of Israel is not found to be the centre of Jewish life.

Tony Klug, who wrote an admirable piece in the previous work, returns with a short study in the Fabian Society’s series *Fabian Freethinking*. His subject is a possible strategy to bring the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to an end. *Vision of the Endgame* sets out carefully what really every moderate knows and probably the extremists do as well. That is, the solution to the conflict will have to be a Palestinian sovereign state in the West Bank and Gaza with an international road and rail link between the two across the Negev. (Israel is currently building roads and railways in that very region). To reach this settlement there will have to be a ban on further Israeli settlements in the Territories, in some cases a withdrawal. It must also include a recognition of the state of Israel by Hamas, Hizbollah and the neighbouring states, including Iran.

Sadly, Tony Klug is not as fluent in this pamphlet as he is in his article for IJV. He tends to use far too many awkward metaphors, truisms and worn-out expressions. Even the homespun philosophy of the quotes that head each section are wearisome. On the first few pages the ‘proverbial butterfly’ flapping its wings, ‘nailing political sails to the mast’ and ‘plunging new depths’ make the reader wince. His prose verges on sententiousness more than once and yet his analysis and his conclusions are sensible and sound.

The consensus in support of two states, which took nearly forty years to evolve, effectively replaced the international accord of UN Security Council Resolution 242 from November 1967. This viewed the Palestinian people essentially as homeless refugees rather than a stateless nation (and was the reason that the PLO refused to support the resolution for many years). In March 2002 the Security Council rectified this flaw in resolution 1397 which called for two states, Israel and Palestine, living side-by-side within secure and recognised borders. Late in the day, the UN finally admitted that there were two national movements and that no solution would be possible that did not

accommodate both. Yet, in the context of both our books, it is worth considering the origin and appeal of both these movements.

Zionism, onto which all sorts of conspiracy theories and malevolence have been heaped, was really a proud but distressed people’s response to centuries of contempt, humiliation and periodic oppression. Its motive was achieving justice and safety for one people and not one of doing damage to another. Yet that is what happened and at some point Israelis will have to come to terms with this.

Many of the contributors to IJV do. Jeremy Montagu (‘You shall not follow a multitude to do evil’) does so in the light of the Torah. Jews have known what it is to be oppressed but self-defence does not entail oppression. In Britain, Howard Cooper (‘Living in Error’) is saddened by the time it took for Jewry, even the Chief Rabbi, to say in public what many were thinking in private. The Palestinians likewise did not set out to damage anyone. They only wanted what was their entitlement. While other Arabs were receiving independence and prosperity in neighbouring countries, the Palestinians were paying the price for losing out in a kind of geographical lottery. Dispossessed of their land, degraded and made second-class citizens, their fate came mainly from being in the way of another people’s anguished grand enterprise. Almost everything that has happened since is in some ways a consequence of this. It would be a welcome addition to hear ‘independent Arab voices’ as well.

We know something of divisive political problems. Secret histories and concealed hypocrisies lie hidden behind the swept streets, ancient institutions and grand public buildings of Britain and other rich nations. In Israel and Palestine the exploitation, injustices and abuses of power are more open, more blatant and in a strange way more honest. Legitimacy is really longevity. It is hard to pass off your sovereignty as natural when everyone remembers their grandparents being pitched off their land. There is a great deal of profound, sensitive and noble thinking from the writers of the IJV. Just as there is from the people in Israel. Tel Aviv is a tolerant, vibrant and modern city. It should make radical change more possible than in Europe where injustices have become more entrenched and subtly concealed over many centuries.

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

The Poetry of Phil Poole

Mary Michaels reviews
Rude Elf (2008), *Lakes Seen*
(2007), *Maistattenrohr* (2007)

by Phil Poole

Woodpecker Press (London) £3 each.
Contact philhenrypoole@yahoo.co.uk



Phil Poole

The cover of Phil Poole's pamphlet *Rude Elf* shows him standing alongside a smiling man in sixteenth century costume holding a hurdy-gurdy. The poet himself appears to be wearing breeches, doublet and black-brimmed hat with jaunty feather, but on second glance it's apparent that these have been felt-tipped onto the photograph. Clear signal that this is a writer who does not take himself too seriously. Inside the pamphlet the poems also seem often to be sporting a jaunty cap, but it would be a mistake not to recognise the head underneath. Poole has referred to himself as 'inventor of the notion of resolute flippancy'. Flippancy or – as I would term it – wryness, is certainly present but there is also a good deal more: Poole has travelled, particularly in Germany, has read a good deal of classical and continental as well as English poetry, and has pondered. Though they read like conversational digressions, picking up rhyme schemes and abandoning them at will, his poems abound in allusions to scientific theories, mythology, philosophy, Heidegger, Hölderlin, Milton and Blake.

Nevertheless each is firmly grounded in the here and now of a particular incident or place; he is as appreciative of the natural world as of the world of ideas. In his lakeside poems, fugitive effects of light and weather are conjured up in haunting observations; 'a solid nothing and a strange effect/of this foaming whiteness: the carried over/sounds across the waters; the early train ...' (*Wife Disappears*). In 'Maistaettenrohr' tadpoles, water-boatmen, butterflies, wagtails and 'water blackbirds /not usually /the sort of birds that need to be together...' create an idyllic summer afternoon whose potential over-sweetness is punctured by the buzzing of hornet, reminding that 'gods kind to failure made success pay with madness'; a thought to sober but not destroy the return home 'transcendental, on our bicycles'. A strong visual sense comes into play also in 'Morandi,' which is less about the Italian painter than about the poet's late mother; 'Morandi and my mother in/her fluctuating heartbeat years/painted a small world of shivers:/the countless shock of objects sharing/shrunken space;

bottles, cups, vases/but hers were full of flowers ...'

At a reading Poole gave at Torriano Meeting House in September, the audience had the chance to appreciate both the accurate eye and the dispassionate rumination, in a set of recent work which dealt specifically with his experience of medical investigations. These poems did not strike one as having been undertaken as any kind of therapeutic project; rather, as emerging from a habit of writing from his life as it occurs, a life that had recently included radionuclide scans, a gastropscopy, a biopsy operation. The sophistication of modern-day diagnostic equipment, 'Three million pounds the machine/five hundred the radioactive sugar/in the injection' ('PET Scan') they suggested, tends to increase the powerlessness of the patient ('that subtle word'); lying with mouth propped open for the passage of the 'long black snake' of a camera in 'Gastropscopy' he could only notice that; 'The photos that the snake's eyes take/are behind me. The specialist/... seems to be quite excited./ He puzzles at the screen that's/by me unseen ... He's been down a lot of people's/throats in his career/like a racer knows the standard tracks/where the sharper curves are/ navigates his pet, deftly, without fear ...'

The bargaining stage of coming to terms with serious illness was represented by a piece titled 'Little C' where the cancer is viewed as 'an insurgency' in the body; 'I attempt negotiation/so that this coup may fail./ Better food, more exercise – /will loyalty prevail?' A little further down the road, however, the writer was ready to dismiss the urgings of an insalubrious acquaintance ('His words increased in eagerness/as did the rankness of his breath') towards an alternative therapy promoted on a glossy American web site: 'Throw all the pills away/flood the body with oxygen .../ I'll get out more, I agreed/inwardly, nothing wrong with fresh air ... I promised to look her up ... you can't improve on god the website said/Her cosmetics did

their best.’ (Dr Day.)

‘Dawn Before Op’ parodied a temporary crisis of self-pity; ‘Crying I gasp, “Don’t cry”, twice/choking on sputum, clenched teeth ...Do I impress the young nurse/pinging my ear temperature?The sky inauspicious grey/two birds flit across the dawn/and then a third, an omen?’ When the nurse replies to this voiced or unvoiced thought (or possibly to something or somebody else altogether) she already seems very far away; ‘“Don’t think so”, I hear her say.’

The professional detachment of the medical staff was echoed in the poetic efficiency of the four stanzas of ‘No Cure’. Here the doctor’s ‘pink rose dress’, ‘sympathetic air’ and expression of interest in the writer’s life all seemed deployed to soften the delivery of the diagnosis; ‘she’s had to say this before/ (Christmas trees don’t come in June)/she tells me, “There is no cure”.’

The final poem read from this group, ‘Inverforth House Gardens,’ was a fine demonstration of his ability to pass a wry comment on a personal existential dilemma while expressing both the absurdity and the poignancy of human life in general. Walking in a North London park in order ‘to think about dying/because I am – unfortunately – as one says’ he is caught in a downpour and has to take uncomfortable refuge in a shelter whose dilapidation – cavernous, boarded-up with a gutterless roof – curiously seems to mimic the state of his own body. He’s joined in the shelter by a pair of young women who chatter and flutter like a whole flock of sparrows; excited newcomers to London who nevertheless insist, “It’s not London rain!” The storm becomes spectacular; ‘Lightning and sky-crash overhead.../Hail now dancing, jumping on the lawn/makes fleeting models of fir trees frozen in ice./The rectangular pond is veiled in a foot of spume ...’ but no bolt from heaven gives the poet ‘an honourable way out’. The young women’s chatter dies down with the storm, the sun even starts to come out, but not the worms; the poem concludes, ‘Perhaps the worms all drowned’.

See also Phil Poole’s prose piece ‘Poetry and Woodcarving’ in *Torriano Nights: a Festschrift for John Rety* 2009 Acumen Publications, 6 The Mount, Higher Furzeham, Brixham, South Devon, TQ5 8QY £7.00

Mary Michaels’ poetry collection *The Shape of the Rock* was published by Sea Cow (London 2003) and her latest collection is *Caret Mark* (Hearing Eye, London 2008).



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:

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Please send your name and address and your cheque made out to ‘Sea of Faith’ or ‘SOF’.

sf Sermon

Stephen Mitchell preached this sermon at St Stephen's Church Higham (Suffolk) on Christmas Eve 2008.

They say everyone is famous for fifteen minutes. I often tell kids at school that I was famous for fifteen minutes when I appeared on a BBC programme broadcast on Easter Day some years ago. It was in the series *The Heart of the Matter* presented, you may remember, by 'The Thinking Man's Crumpet' Joan Bakewell. As you can imagine, any programme produced by the BBC to be shown on Easter Day was going to be controversial. Sure enough, that Easter Day morning the front pages of all the broadsheets were covered with news of the *Heart of the Matter* programme to be shown later that evening.

When I tell kids about this at school, I give them three pieces of advice for when they are famous for fifteen minutes. Buy a scrapbook I tell them. You can buy one at Woolies, I say – except you can't anymore. And why do you need a scrapbook? To keep the newspaper cuttings in. And I have quite a few scrapbooks full of cuttings to show them.

If you are wondering about the other pieces of advice I give them for when they are famous for fifteen minutes – whether winning the X Factor or witnessing a bank robbery – the second piece of advice is to buy a big lever arch file to put their fan mail in (or hate mail). And then, thirdly, to write a book because if other people are making money out of them, they might as well make some themselves!

Remarkably, I was given the last word on this Easter Day *Heart of the Matter* programme. (Yes I know – you're beginning to wonder if it's all got too much for me and that I've forgotten it's Christmas Eve. Don't worry I will get there!) But right at the end of this Easter *Heart of the Matter* programme, as Joan Bakewell wandered down the nave of Durham Cathedral, they edited in a memorable sound bite 'It's good,' I was heard to say, 'to imagine even the death of the church'.

People hearing this as the last word of the programme may have heard it as the gloomy and pessimistic outlook of a priest who ought to be thrown out of office. Far from it. We ought indeed to look forward to the death of the church. The day the

church comes to an end should be a day of great rejoicing.

The church isn't, and wasn't meant to be, a permanent structure but the means of bringing in the Kingdom of God on Earth. As a matter of fact some scholars doubt if Jesus ever used the word church but that's by the way. The church is a means to an end. Like the ark. Remember Noah's ark, which is often used as a metaphor for the church. When Noah had rescued the animals, weathered the flood and parked the ark on Mount Ararat, he didn't then carefully stow the ark away in the garage for another rainy day. It had done its job. The people were safe.

Remember the name for the pope, the pontiff. Pontiff means bridge-builder. Another common image for the church, the bridge to salvation. Once the faithful have crossed the bridge, traversed the great gulf, there's no going back. The bridge has done its job. The people are safe.

So with the church. Christianity is not about the church but the Kingdom of God. It's about what we pray for every time we say the Lord's prayer: 'Thy kingdom come on Earth as it is in heaven'. The point is the Kingdom of God on Earth and when the kingdom comes, the church will have done its job.



Justice and Peace will kiss each other.
16th century coin Gdansk

So how are we doing? How is progress to date? How far established is the kingdom of God on Earth? How far across the bridge have we got? Are the flood waters going down? Can we see the tip of the Kingdom of God mountains coming into view? It's an important question to ask and especially these days when the church seems to be under threat – under threat from those who mock what they understand as the church's beliefs; under threat from the business of maintaining medieval and Victorian church buildings; under threat from the cost of its priesthood. These are all concerns for us to address. But we have to address them, not because we are interested in the maintenance of the church, but because we are interested in the kingdom of God. When the church got round to defining its

teachings and beliefs in the fourth century, it really only defined two doctrines. One was the doctrine of the Trinity and the other was the one that we celebrate at Christmas, the Incarnation: And his name shall be called Emmanuel, 'God with us'. Or in the words of John's Gospel:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God . . . in him was life, and that life was the light of men... The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. . . The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

There are two things worth remembering about this doctrine. The first is that if humanity is good enough for God then it's good enough for us. And until we have learnt to be content with the human condition, until we are happy to be human, then we haven't begun to accept the incarnation. If we aren't happy to be human beings who grow old, who are limited in our perspective, who die, then we put ourselves above God. And one test of how well we are doing in establishing the Kingdom is to see how well we are doing in accepting the human condition.

And then it's worth remembering that if God makes his dwelling among us, then this is where his kingdom is established, and established by us. We inherit the spirit of God to establish the Kingdom of God – a kingdom of justice, peace, love and joy.

if God makes his dwelling among us then this is where his kingdom is established, and established by us

So another test of how well we are doing is to see how just, peaceful and joyful our society is. And we shouldn't be too modest. In the West, in certain areas, we have made extraordinary strides. Millions of people have the chance to live comfortable lives, with opportunities for work and leisure undreamt of by previous generations. And that's because the hopes, ideals and values that were once the preserve of the church have become established as the hopes, dreams and values of the institutions of society.

They have become enshrined in laws and bills of rights, in codes of practice and institutional policies. Wherever people are striving to promote justice, equality and respect we should rejoice that the kingdom of God is being established.

There was a time when the music of the church was only heard in the church. There's the story of

Mozart, who went to the Vatican and heard the papal choir singing Allegri's *Misereri* (which could only be heard in the Papal Chapel). But to show off Mozart's prodigious talent, his father took him to hear the piece and having heard it, Mozart came out and wrote the whole piece down from memory. Now you can buy a CD of it and listen to it anytime, anywhere.

So with the values, the peace and justice of the Kingdom of God. It isn't meant to be locked up in the church but to be found at all times and in all places. And wherever we discover it we should rejoice. Here are a few lines from Philip Andrews' *Suffering and Hope*:

There is dignity here –
we will exalt it.
There is courage here –
we will support it.
There is humanity here –
we will enjoy it.
There is a voice calling through the
chaos of our times;
there is a spirit moving across the
waters of our world;
there is movement, a light,
a promise of hope.
Let them that have eyes to see,
see.
Let them that have ears to hear,
hear.
Behold, we bring you good tidings of great joy:
the Incarnation.

There is so much ridiculous debate about the church these days. Even Polly Toynbee, for whom I have a lot of respect, couldn't help beginning an article in the Guardian with the word 'antidisestablishmentarianism'. Richard Dawkins is always adding his pennyworth, poking fun at the church and its beliefs. Many of these critics miss the point. As a distinguished Bishop said on that Easter Day *Heart of the Matter* programme, the point is love, the point is justice.

And the question for all of us to ask tonight is not how far have I got in believing all this but how far have I got in helping to establish the kingdom of God. The question for our church is not how secure a future has the church got in this place and this country, but how secure is the kingdom of God in this place and this country. That's why we reflect on this story at the heart of our faith, that's what we pray for tonight, that's why we are here.

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

How It is

Cicely Herbert visits Mirosław Balka's Installation at the Tate Modern, London.

Some years ago, as I approached my fiftieth birthday, I attended a course held in Wales, funded by the Inner London Education Authority, and designed to stretch and test the limits of teachers' imaginations, by placing them in unexpected and even perilous situations. Once, at midnight, we climbed Cader Idris, the second highest mountain in Wales, and, from the summit we watched the sunrise. It was an unforgettable experience. On the evening of our arrival at the base, some of us were taken to a disused slate mine and invited to abseil down it. Among our number was a former nun, who uttered such piteous shrieks as she descended, that it was easy to imagine we were entering one of Dante's circles of Hell.

Intrigued by the descriptions I had read of Mirosław Balka's Black Box installation in the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern, I hurried down to the South Bank, hoping to recapture some of the emotions and insights I had experienced in the depths of the Slate Mine.

How It Is claims to focus the participant 'inwards', both physically and psychologically, as you 'enter the darkness' and create your own journey, as gradually you 'collectively navigate the void.' Alas, the artist has either forgotten, or not yet realised how crass we have become as a society. The visitors and participants of this art installation, managed, collectively to hijack and effectively to sabotage what is an imaginative attempt to draw us inwards into a more 'spiritual and reflective dimension'. No such luck at the South Bank where merry laughter rocked the

Turbine Hall, as mobile phones, fitted with flash cameras, sent out the message: 'Here we are, in a black box, and there are so many of us, we keep bumping into each other. What a gas!'

This could be the modern definition of what hell has become: a fairground, with no comforting dark corners, and no quiet, where you can 'call up a friend' at the touch of a switch. I complained, of course. But it seems that little can be done to impose restrictions on members of the public, who are entitled to use this superb free space in the Turbine Hall as they see fit. Those in search of darkness and

quiet contemplation must look elsewhere. We are now a 24-hour society and real silence, even in the depths of the countryside, is increasingly hard to find.

When I was six years old, I spent two weeks in Moorfields' Eye Hospital with both eyes bandaged after an operation. It was at the height of the blitz on London, and as the bombs dropped all around us, my patient mother read me *Alice in Wonderland* several times over. Now that really did do something to my head.

Mirosław Balka's installation *How It Is* shows at the Tate Modern in London until 5 April 2010. Admission is free.

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



Galaxy of Days

Invisible matter – dark matter – is widely believed to exert the influence of gravity on galaxies, holding them together.

There is, you see,
the dark barn in Rembrandt's nativity scene,
halo of darkness round
the centre of light.

It's hard to think of unlit walls,
invisible dark air, rather than the light
from the baby, shining like the elation
of a child who goes higher and higher on a swing,

while his reflected glow is falling
on Mary with her composed
quiet gaze, and on the shepherds,
concentrating, at the edge

of darkness. But the unseen barn
holds them all together,
has infinite possibilities
in the rich browns shading to black.

It's a peopled dark, it hides
those bounding lines you showed me always.
It's peopled like our joined souls,
which had unknown linkages and secret

webs of words surrounding
our galaxy of days,
that bright centre held
by what was closed to sight.

Daphne Gloag

This poem is from Daphne Gloag's new collection *A Compression of Distances* (Cinnamon Press, Blaenau Ffestiniog 2009). The Rembrandt Nativity scene mentioned in the poem is reprinted on the back cover of this *Sofia*.

Daphne Gloag was a medical journalist and editor after studying classics and philosophy. *A Compression of Distances*, her second collection, is dedicated to her husband Peter, who has died.

that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith

S.T Coleridge

The logo for Sofia, featuring the word 'sofia' in a stylized, lowercase, blue serif font. The 's' and 'f' are connected, and the 'i' has a dot.

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O magnum mysterium et admirabile sacramentum, ut animalia viderunt Dominum natum, jacentem in praesepeio.

O great mystery and admirable sacrament, that animals saw the Lord born, lying in a manger.

Responsory Christmas Matins

Et pour l'échauffer dans sa crèche l'âne et le boeuf soufflent dessus.

And to warm him in his manger the ox and the donkey breathe over him.



Théophile Gautier

Mayday Notes

Christmas

How gleefully some recent books from adherents of the Jesus Seminar announce that the nativity stories in Matthew and Luke are fictions – completely untrue.

Oh no! I thought. Here we go again, the old Puritan attack on Christmas. Under the Commonwealth, the Puritans abolished Christmas Day and Quakers, who arose around that time, mostly still do not celebrate it.

Of course, we know that the four gospels are not biographies of Jesus but theologies, with some more, some less, reliable supporting biographical material. It is quite possible that the nativity stories were mostly made up, though some scholars have suggested that Luke the evangelist may have had a particular extra source. Mary, who ‘kept all these things and pondered them in her heart’, certainly comes across very vividly in his story. For even if the Christmas story is largely legendary, legends do gather round heroes, and we know at least, that Jesus was a real person born about that time, who grew up to preach the Kingdom of God, or Reign of Kindness, and be executed under the Romans. And the *theological* point being made, of divine incarnation as a baby in very humble circumstances to bring ‘peace on Earth’ is a very important one; the story of God coming *down to Earth into humanity* is true. No wonder this tremendous myth has accrued powerful poetic trappings of winter solstice and the sun’s rebirth, see amid the winter snow and deck the halls with boughs of holly.

Yet here was a distinct note of iconoclastic glee. In England Puritans smashed churches and statues, some with gorgeous colours, just as the Taliban have smashed statues in Afghanistan. To abolish feast days, such as Christmas, to sit in silence suppressing ancient liturgies and symbols, sweet scents, poetry, music, song (and of course, dancing) are part of that same Puritan impulse. (Granted, silence can be an important *part* of worship.) I can’t help feeling hugely relieved that these Puritan impulses did not prevail from the beginning of the Church (though they do keep popping up.) Then we might have had no Gothic cathedrals, no paintings or statues (of course, no gargoyles), no plainsong or polyphony, no Bach Magnificat, no Renaissance religious art either. I am so glad they have not conquered and the world grown grey with their breath. Consider the flowers of the field. I imagine that if there had been a creator God

and he had been a Puritan, he would have created every flower in the world beige, or in tasteful bourgeois estate agents’ parlance, ‘neutral décor’. Oh God! No. Now bring us a figgy pudding!

P.S. One reason for the defeat of the great English Revolution, which asserted ‘the poorest he hath a life to live’, the first of its kind in Europe, was that people got so fed up with Puritan dreariness and bullying that many welcomed the king back because, despite his dangerous pretensions, at least he was jollier.



Facts Matter

While we defend the necessity and power of story and myth to tell us true things in their own way, this does *not* mean that facts don’t matter at all. Here is a recent expression of this slippery philosophy: *Maybe the entire modern obsession with ... historical verification is an illusion. Personally I find myself wanting to blur the distinction between fact and fiction entirely. Perhaps even leave so called facts entirely out of the equation.*

Surely that is a postmodernist cop-out and even more untrustworthy when it is mixed up with a fuzzy ‘wisdom of the East’, that ‘everything is an illusion’.

Shortly after the first Gulf War the postmodernist philosopher Baudrillard published an article in the *Guardian* (later, a book) called *The Gulf War Did not Take Place* (an allusion to Jean Giraudoux’ play *The Trojan War Will Not Take Place*). His point was that it was merely a media spectacle, a ‘simulacrum’. He wriggled cleverly round this idea. True, the Gulf War did not take place in Paris or London but it *did* take place in the Persian Gulf region and concluded with the notorious ‘turkey shoot’ of retreating Iraqi forces. Thousands died and some veterans are still suffering from ‘Gulf War Syndrome’ today.

What happens *matters*. It *matters* when people are killed, whether people are tortured. Any responsible journalist must try to find out what really happened. Any proper court of law must investigate *evidence* and try to establish guilt or innocence. It *matters* if a father and uncle kill a teenage girl for choosing a boyfriend they disapprove of.

The things that happen to us in our daily lives *matter*. It *matters* if a mother is too poor to feed her child. If you become pregnant it *matters* whether you miscarry or give birth to a live baby. Both the happy and the sad things that happen, the good and the bad things we do, *matter*. To deny this is to deny human dignity altogether. Of course when things happened long ago it becomes more difficult, sometimes impossible, to establish what occurred. But it is worth a try and even more vitally important is to take seriously the *reality* of the lives of people living on Earth today.



And Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.