sfia

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Yet You See I am Alive

Sofia

down to Earth

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

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Back cover image: Pond on Hampstead Heath

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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.

Yet You See I am Alive

editorial

Soon this cold winter will be over at last and Easter is approaching. The title of this issue of *Sofia* comes from the words of Bunyan's Great-Heart.

When Christiana is terrified of going through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, Great-Heart encourages her: 'For my part, as I have told you already, I have gone often through this Valley, and have been much harder put to it than now I am. Yet you see I am alive.'

The question for this issue of *Sofia* is whether the Christian Grand Narrative is dead if we discard its supernatural elements. Or in what way is the story still alive? In what way is Jesus Christ still present? In his article 'What Really Happened at Easter?' Eric Whittaker offers an imaginary reconstruction of Cleopas and his wife Mary on the road to Emmaus three days after Jesus' crucifixion.

Whittaker points out that Paul, who has left us the earliest New Testament writings, never mentions the Empty Tomb, Paul's meeting with Jesus 'on the Damascus road was obviously a vision, and was in any case long after the forty day period', but Paul always believed that it was on a par with Jesus' other Easter appearances 'and no one disputed this'.

His article inspired me to check Paul's account in his letter to the Corinthians (I:15:3-9) in my Greek New Testament. He gives a list of appearances of the risen Christ and the verb he repeatedly uses (4 times) to describe them is 'ωφθη *(ophthe):* meaning 'he was seen'. This is an aorist *passive* form. He uses the same word for all the appearances, including his own vision on the road to Damascus 'last of all'…

In an extract from his forthcoming book Geoffrey Crocker argues that in stories like the

SOF Annual Conference
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Speakers:
Maryam Namazie, Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain
Kumi Naidoo, Executive Director of Greenpeace International

Third Speaker to be confirmed

Don Cupitt will reflect on each day's activities

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Sea of Faith Conference
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sofconf10@yahoo.co.uk
02380 445275

Resurrection, myth has greater power than a literal interpretation. I have also printed an edited version of the talk I gave to the Oxford SOF 2009 Day Conference, arguing that the Christian Grand Narrative can be translated fruitfully and without much difficulty into non-supernatural terms. On the other hand, another speaker at the Conference, Victor Anderson, thinks we should move on from that old narrative and suggests that the tremendous story of the Universe and our own Earth, including our own evolution, is more worthy of our respect because it is literally true. He has sent a résumé of his talk to be printed in this issue too.

At the bottom of page 3 you will find an announcement of this year's annual SOF Conference, whose theme is *Religion and Social Justice*. You will find a booking form and further details on inserted fliers. Please book early for what looks as if it will be an interesting and challenging event, as well as all its social joys.

CORRECTION TO SOFIA 94

The Editor would like to apologise for the mistake in Bruce Kent's biography. Bruce Kent is not, as was stated, 'a former Catholic priest'. He is a retired Catholic priest.

Jesus was not 'seriously relaxed about the super-rich.' And in Psalm 119 the psalmist prays that his heart may not be inclined to covetousness or his eyes to vanity. This *Sofia* includes a meditation on that Psalm by David S. Lee, who says 'none of these insights into the meaning of the psalms requires belief in a supernatural God.' We have also included an extract from Psalm 119 in Miles Coverdale's translation of 1535 (the version in the old *Book of Common Prayer)*. We are delighted to show below another cartoon by Josh, done specially for *Sofia,* on the theme of Jesus' famous camel joke.

Cartoon by Josh

What really Happened at Easter?

Eric Whittaker investigates the earliest Easter Story.

We had had a very upsetting two days. We had gone in to Jerusalem for Passover and stayed over Sabbath, and now Mary[1] and I were walking the eight miles home to Emmaus, but on the Friday the most frightful thing had happened; Jesus, our friend and teacher, had been crucified. As we walked along we discussed not only that gruesome event but all the amazing teachings that he had given us over the last few years, and which had led us to believe that he was the Messiah, the anointed leader that our nation had for so long expected. Many of the things that he had said had seemed very strange, and had not seemed to make sense at the time, but he had spoken with such authority that we did not like to say too often that we could not understand. We recalled how he had repeatedly told us that he would be crucified, and that when he was lifted up on the cross that would be a glorification, not a degradation, and he would draw all men to him. And then it was as though he was with us as we walked along and he was reviving our memories of what he had said in the past. There were so many things that he had quoted from the scriptures; that the Messiah must be expected to suffer, and that the true expectation of a Messiah was not a military leader but a suffering servant. And then when we reached home and got a meal, as we were breaking the bread and pouring out the wine, it was just as though we were back with him three days before when he said 'this is my body broken for you, and this is my blood poured out for you'.

Breaking bread at Emmaus

We just had to set off back to Jerusalem to share with our friends this amazing insight that we had had. When we got back there we found that we were not the only ones who had seen the light. Everyone else had been going over things in the same way, in little groups; John had taken Jesus' mother home and they had been going over it all with James his own brother and James, the Lord's brother. Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary (who remembered more sayings than anyone) had done the same. Mary Magdalene had had a vision of angels in the tomb, and then a vision of her Rabboni in the garden. And when we all got together we all had a vision of Jesus himself. It was a thing that was very dependent on shared experience; Thomas who had gone off on his own did not see the light for another week, until he had rejoined us. We were an incredibly close-knit group. We even shared all our possessions with one another until our success in drawing in new believers made this too difficult to organise. Jesus had truly risen from the dead and we were his risen body.

*

The story of the walk to Emmaus often seems, from the place it is given in the lectionary, to be a nice little addendum to the Easter story, but in fact it seems like the earliest record we have and is therefore the best place to start in understanding it. In general the gospel stories were written 40 or 50 years later, and presumably the Emmaus story was incorporated by Luke in his gospel at that later time, but its internal evidence suggests that it must have been a little bit of contemporary oral history that Luke alone happened to get hold of. It mentions but does not depend on the idea of the empty tomb – in fact it tends to dismiss the idea. The details of what Cleopas and Mary found when they got back to Jerusalem are of course imaginary, but are a reasonable extrapolation of what we know. It seems unreasonable to suppose (as is usually done) that the disciples were

oblivious of what they had been taught until they were told it again after the resurrection.

The only further evidence of what was believed about the resurrection in the decades before the writing of the Gospels is to be found in Paul's letters. He expounds at length on the fact of the resurrection, but he never mentions the empty tomb. He introduces the idea of the church, and of the church as the body of Christ, so it is a reasonable conclusion that for Paul the risen body of Christ was the church, not an incomprehensible quasi-material body that had come out of the tomb. Further evidence is to be found in Paul's argument with the Athenians on the Areopagus, where again he does not mention the empty tomb, although that would have been a knock-down argument in the circumstances. Of course we do not have a contemporary report of this argument, but this does not matter because we are merely concerned with the fact of the empty tomb not being mentioned.

Later Dogmatic Ideas of the Easter Story

To take the discussion further we need to set out in detail the orthodox resurrection story as it was in the latter part of the first century, and as indeed it is today. On the Sunday morning the body of Jesus was not in the tomb. Later that day, and subsequently, various disciples had encounters with an embodied Jesus who was able to appear within a locked room, to disappear at will, to eat, and to breathe on them, and possibly to be touched. The latter point is somewhat obscure, because Thomas was invited to touch him but did not do so, and Mary Magdalene was forbidden to do so. It is claimed that these facts prove that the encounters were not visions[2] but that the body of Jesus was in an incomprehensible state. It was at times part of the physical world and at other times not. This situation continued for forty days, at the end of which time the body disappeared permanently from the physical world and was not seen again.

It seems evident that this orthodox version of the story cannot have been current in the first few years after the crucifixion, or Peter would have imparted it to Saul at their meeting when Saul went to Jerusalem for consultations after his meeting with Jesus on the Damascus road. That meeting on the Damascus road was obviously a vision, and was in any case long after the forty day period, but Saul (Paul) always believed that it was on a par with the appearances to the other apostles, and no-one disputed this.

What we really need is a contemporary account of Peter's sermons in the very early days, but of course we only have the accounts in Acts written decades later when the dogmatic version was already current. They do not specifically refer to the empty tomb, but they set forth very definitely the idea that the body of Jesus disappeared from the physical world so that his flesh would not see corruption, because it would be inappropriate for the body of Messiah to rot away. It seems very likely that it was this idea that led to the development of the orthodox version of the resurrection story. But it is a very Old Testament point of view. From that point of view it was equally inappropriate that Messiah should be hanged on a tree.

Paul never mentions the empty tomb.

Both these ideas of impropriety are incompatible with the Christian concept of the incarnation. The Son of God became man in order to share with the sons of men all the worst things that could happen to them, to die in agony and to rot in the grave.

Conclusion

The conclusion is that the orthodox story is not just something that one doubts because it is difficult to understand. One rejects it because it is incompatible with one's belief in the incarnation. So back to Emmaus and to Paul.

1. Luke only says that one of them was called Cleopas and does not say who the other was. But John says that Mary the wife of Cleopas was standing by the cross, and it is evident from Luke's story that they were going to their home together at Emmaus.
2. This argument is of course invalid. There is no limitation on what can be done by the object of a vision, and perceptions of it can be tactile as well as visual.

The first half of Eric Whittaker's career was in an industrial research department, and the second half as Reader in Mineralogy at Oxford University and a Fellow of St. Cross College. He is a member of St. John's Church, Kidlington.

Yet You See I am Alive

Translating Grand Narrative

Dinah Livingstone thinks about translation and the Christian Grand Narrative.

Translation

I gave this talk to the SOF Day Conference in Oxford last September . I am a translator and before I said anything about Grand Narrative, I wanted to make a couple of points about translation. Before the talk I played a song in Spanish and those who didn't speak Spanish might have been wondering what it was all about. The song was introduced by the words of Tomás Borge in prison. He and his friend Carlos Fonseca were 2 of the 3 founders of the Sandinista Front, which they set up to overthrow Nicaragua's brutal US-backed dictator Somoza. The song was about the death of Carlos, who was killed in an ambush in 1977, just two years before the triumph of the Revolution. Carlos had often been reported killed but had a reputation for popping up again. This time he was really dead. Borge relates:

> When we were in prison a National Guard officer came to us, full of glee, to tell us that Carlos Fonseca was dead. We replied: 'Carlos Fonseca is one of the dead who never die.'

I want to focus on the translation of just two lines of the song:

> *Una bala en la selva de Zinica*
> *penetró en tu recio corazón de santo.*

Great-Heart

Now if we translate that literally we get 'A bullet in Zinica forest penetrated in your stubborn heart of a saint.' That sounds comically like Father Ted on Craggy Island. So I translated it: 'A bullet in Zinica Forest struck you in your great heart.' I think that sounds better, so my first point is the most literal translation isn't always the best. But 'struck you in your great heart' picks up another resonance in English: with Great-Heart in *Pilgrim's Progress.* And as it happens Great-Heart has something in common with Carlos. He often nearly died but survived. When Christiana is afraid of the Valley of the Shadow of Death he tells her: 'I have often been through this valley and have been much harder put to it than now I am. Yet you see I am alive.' If you translate words into another language and culture, the words *always* pick up new resonances. At the same time the translation must try to be *faithful.*

My second translation example is from the *Dark Night* of John of the Cross. This is a mystical love poem in which a woman slips out unseen at night to meet her man and they are blissfully united. When they make love, she feels so at one with him that she might have *become* him, she could not have told herself from him. In the Spanish the woman is called *amada:* beloved (feminine), and the man *amado:* beloved (masculine). The relationship is completely reciprocal. You can't tell who is loving and who is being loved. Both are doing both. She addresses the night:

> *O noche que juntaste:* O night that joined/united
> *amado con amada:* beloved (m) with beloved (f)
> *amada en el amado transformada:* beloved (f)
> changed into beloved (m).

This poem is famously difficult to translate because English does not have that grammatical felicity of a masculine and feminine past participle: you can't tell whether 'beloved' is male or female. It's a kind of Beecher's Brook for translators, a real challenge. Quite a few have attempted it. Perhaps the worst translation I have ever come across is that given in Don Cupitt's book *Mysticism after Modernity.* This translation is probably quoted rather than made by Cupitt, whose interest does not lie in the translation or the poem itself; as philosophers will, he just guts it to extract a philosophical point – actually a good point. Anyway here is the ghastly translation:

> O night that joined Lover with Mistress,
> the Mistress transformed into the Lover.

That translation has no power of sound or rhythm at all. And what's worse 'Mistress' sounds like a Tory politician's bit on the side. Certainly no reciprocity there: he is the active controller/payer. She can't phone him at home etc. And, incidentally, why that horrible Latinate 'transformed' when everyone knows that in stories frogs *change* into princes, *pumpkins* are *changed* into golden coaches and 'we shall not all sleep but we shall all be *changed'.* The words 'Mistress' and 'Lover' do mean sexual partners, so we can't exactly call it a mistranslation, but the resonances are all wrong. I'll come back to this poem later, but here (with some trepidation) is my own translation of that last line:

> she who was his love changed into her love, him.

Grand Narrative

So now to Grand Narrative, by which we mean a story about the whole trajectory of humanity. Post-modernists keep telling us that Grand Narrative is dead. Twenty years ago communism collapsed: the Marxist story of the coming of a just society through the dictatorship of the proletariat. In that story the proletariat is the engine of history and history itself is a kind of *deus ex machina* – a sort of god if you like – with scientific laws that make the glorious end of the story inevitable. Although the Soviet Union never really embodied that vision and was not really a communist society, its collapse discredited communism and its Grand Narrative.

The Christian Grand Narrative of the coming of a just society has also been discredited. As we do not believe in inevitable scientific laws of history as a *deus ex machina*, neither do we believe in the agency of supernatural beings to bring about the desired goal.

In the New Testament we find two or perhaps three related 'takes' or versions of the Grand Narrative of the good society: Jesus preaching the kingdom of God, which is the reign of justice and peace on Earth; and the Christ epic with its twin story of humanity as one single body, the body of Christ, *and* the story of the marriage of heaven and earth with Christ as the bridegroom. In all these stories the supernatural God *acts* and human fulfilment is brought about through his agency.

Like many of us today in Britain, I find it impossible to believe in a supernatural agency. Talk of the supernatural is a foreign language to me. Does that mean these Christian stories collapse or do they still work if we translate them into non-supernatural terms? Can these stories still inspire us without their supernatural guarantee? I think the answer is yes. I think they are still alive. That is because I think humanity invented those supernatural beings in the first place. They were always part of our human capacity to apprehend the world in *poetic terms* – they were supernaturalisations, personifications, of cosmic and earthly forces. As Blake puts it, we chose forms of worship from poetic tales.

So what I want to do is look at those three New Testament 'takes' on the Christian Grand Narrative and see what they say to us in the language of common humanity, because we do need a Grand Narrative if we are not just to drift into futility or disaster.

The Kingdom of God

First the Grand Narrative of the coming of the reign of God. In Luke's gospel (4:18) when Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee, he goes into the synagogue and quotes the prophet Isaiah:

> The Spirit of the Lord is upon me
> because he has anointed me
> to bring good news to the poor.
> He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
> and recovery of sight to the blind,
> to let the oppressed go free.

The time has come, he says, the *kairos,* the right time. The time is *now.* (Lk 4:43). In Luke, the Sermon on the Mount is the Sermon on the Plain and in fact the texts are *plainer* (6:20):

> Blessed are you who are poor,
> for yours is the kingdom of God.
> Blessed are you who are hungry now
> for you will be filled.

Jesus preaches a kingdom or 'reign' of justice and peace on Earth, which is good news for the poor and hungry. The world is turned upside down. The kingdom belongs *first and foremost* to the poor. Jesus is certainly not 'seriously relaxed about the super rich.' He condemns them: 'Woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation.' (Lk 6:24) It is very hard for the rich to enter the kingdom. Bankers with big bonuses are probably banned. So the kingdom is both personal and political – within us and among us. It is personal because the individual has to *want* a reign of justice and peace in order to belong to it. It is no use just grabbing as much as ever you can and to hell with everyone else.

The kingdom is political because it is about a good society. And in our globalised world the *polis* has to be the whole Earth – an end to poverty, hunger, misery, curable disease, an end to unjust wars. It is also political because it is about *co-operation* or, if you like, 'love your neighbour as yourself'. We can see the anti-kingdom at work, for example in the extraordinary campaigns of US health businesses and their allies to destroy what they call Obama's Nazi Health Scheme – his attempt to bring some sort of universal free health care to the USA where 45.7 million people can't afford any health insurance at all (2007 Census – even more in a later study). The kingdom is political because the anti-kingdom, the pursuit of wealth or growth at all costs and at the expense of others, not only excludes the vast mass of humanity from a decent life, but also now threatens to destroy the Earth herself.

When talking about translation I said that when we translate, the translation cannot fail to pick up resonances from the target language and culture but at the same time the translation had try to be faithful to the original. If we translate Jesus' story of the coming of the reign of God into our own culture today, we can stress, for example, our own concerns with the current environmental crisis, aggravated by hyper-consumerism and a capitalist system that pursues growth at any cost. We heard that Jesus said the Kingdom belongs first and foremost to the poor. That means that not only should the poor have the

wherewithal to live a decent life but also that we who are rich, either as individuals or as a society, should at least *moderate* our demands, or we will be excluded from the Kingdom. Or it will never come at all – our planet will die. I think that resonance is *both* necessary for our translation today, *and* faithful to the original gospel.

Jesus says that he is inaugurating the Kingdom but it is not yet complete. It is both *now* and *not yet.* At his Last Supper he says: 'I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer: for I tell you I shall not eat it again until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.' (Lk 22:15) It seems he thought the kingdom or reign was going to come soon. He says: 'When you see these things taking place you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away till all has taken place.' (Lk 21: 31) But of course people on Earth are still poor and hungry and we are still waiting for the reign of justice and peace. When Jesus went away and did not return, when that reign did not come on Earth within one generation, gradually the story of the Kingdom was transferred to heaven above. Perhaps we could call that a mistranslation.

Jesus thought a supernatural God would guarantee the coming of his Kingdom on Earth. If we do not believe in a supernatural God, we have *no* guarantee, but we can still be inspired and struggle for that vision of a fulfilled, happy humanity at home on a well cared-for Earth, a global society in which everyone has a decent life. We *can* translate it into purely human terms. The kingdom is political but it is not a political programme. We have to work it out for ourselves, embody or translate it into human institutions. It is a humanist vision, the grandest of all Grand Narratives.

The Body of Christ

Another related way of describing the fulfilment of humanity was to see it as one single body growing to maturity. Paul recalls (1 Cor 11:23) that 'the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread…broke it and said: "This is my body…" and this is what leads him to reflect on the new humanity as one body: 'For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.' (1 Cor. 12:12). Christ is the name for the social body which is the new liberated humanity. Jesus gives a version of the whole of humanity as himself in his story (beginning with *food)* of the judgment: 'I was hungry and you gave me food…As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters you did it to me.' (Mt 25:34)

In the Christ epic, which became attached to Jesus and which we find first in letters traditionally attributed to Paul – the earliest new Testament writings – Christ is both Jesus and the figurehead and namesake hero of his people, the new Adam, representative of humanity in all its potential. Perhaps

Last Supper Chartres Cathedral window

surprisingly, the Pauline letters are full of poems, particularly the three marvellous Christ poems in the letters to the Philippians (2:6) Colossians (1:15) and Ephesians (4:4). Christ's incarnation, death, descent to the lowest depths and resurrection becomes an epic of humanity's – and the whole Earth's – struggle for liberation. There is no room to quote these poems here (but reading them out loud is recommended).

The Philippians poem, that may have been an early Christian hymn, focuses on the *shape* of the drama. The movement is *down* and then *up* of Christ, one who was 'in the form of God' 'emptying himself' down to Earth, assuming humanity even in its lowest form, its most painful mortality, death on a Cross, and then this humanity *in Christ* being *highly exalted.*

In Colossians Christ is 'the head of the body, the church'. In him 'the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily and you have come to fullness in him.' (2:9). In Ephesians Christ is 'head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all… so that he might create in himself one new humanity… in one body' (Eph. 1:23; 2:15).

That collective new humanity is seen as an articulated body with Christ as its head and with different members playing the different, necessary roles: 'For if the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were a ear, where would be the sense of smell? If all were a single member, where would the body be?' (1 Cor. 12:17.) The project is the building up of the body of Christ, 'to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.' (Eph. 4:12). It is not yet complete. Paul can say:: 'I fill up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ, for the sake of his body, the Church.' (Col. 1:24). Here too we have the tension between *now* and *not yet.* The epic is the myth of a people – in this case humanity – as the body of Christ coming to *embody* the divine wisdom (1 Cor. 1:24), 'the whole fullness of God'.

Humanists can read this as bringing the God whom *we* invented, *we* set in heaven down to Earth, emptying himself back down into humanity and then that humanity aspiring back up to the ideals *we* set in God and *embodying* them. This idea of humanity as one *social* body reaching 'maturity', its full potential, is another take on the Grand Narrative of the Kingdom. 'We who are many are one body, because we all share the same bread' (1 Cor. 10:16). If we translate it into non-

supernatural terms, as in the kingdom story, we have no *guarantee,* that the happy ending will be reached.

At the moment humanity clearly does *not* all share the same bread. Some eat far too much and some starve. Once again, in our translation into our secular English language and culture of today, we can hear resonances with our own concerns. In thinking about the image of humanity as a single body, we could reflect that a body should be healthy, have enough to eat but not too much. As we know obesity is a major problem in the rich West today, particularly in the United States. We could develop that line of thought of 'too much' being as unhealthy as 'too little'. Once again, there is no problem in translating the image of a single body into a purely humanist vision. The difficulty is translating the vision into reality. With no God to ensure it, that is a purely human task.

Bridegroom and Bride

Now to the divine marriage. I said I would return to the John of the Cross poem in which the protagonist, the woman, slips out at night to meet her beloved and they are united in a blissful union. She exclaims to the night:

O night that guided,
O night more delightful than the dawn,
O night that united
beloved with beloved,
she who was his love changed into her love, him.

Carlos Fonseca and Haydée Terán at their wedding

John of the Cross was a mystic who intended his poem to express union with the divine. Mystics of many cultures have often expressed that union in erotic terms. Some mystics believe their experience is supernatural and some do not. But the curious thing is, either way, what they describe is very similar. In his poem, although John believes his experience is supernatural, he has done the translating himself, into wonderful human poetry.

That blissful union is the story of an individual spiritual journey. We saw with the Grand Narrative of the Kingdom of God that the message was both personal and political, and we find the same is true here with this story of the Divine Marriage. For where have we heard those exclamations in praise of the Night before? Where had the poet heard them before?

Surely in the *Exsultet*, the great praise poem to the Paschal candle sung at the Easter Vigil with its repeated *This is the night* and *O truly happy night: O vere beata nox:* This is the night… when the children of Israel were released from slavery in Egypt... This the night when Christ broke the chains of death and ascended conqueror from hell …' 'O truly happy night in which heaven is married to Earth and God to humanity.' Later in the Easter Vigil the water is blessed in the font, and in what is surely a fertility ritual for a marriage night, the paschal candle is repeatedly plunged into it, with a prayer that the water may 'become fruitful'.

Jesus sometimes refers to himself as 'the bridegroom' (Mt (:15; Lk 5:33). Paul calls the church Christ's bride (e.g. 2 Cor.11:2). We are back with the Christ epic, but this time instead of the image of the whole Christ as a single body, we have the image of Christ the bridegroom with his bride, the united male and female human form divine.

The Beautiful City

We find that image developed in the later Book of Revelation, where the bride becomes the beautiful city: 'I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, as a bride prepared for her husband. ...And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying: "See the dwelling of God is among humans."(21:2). God comes down to Earth He comes down into human society – the city , the *polis* – which finally comes to embody the qualities of kindness we set as ideals in God. It inspired our London poet Blake:

The fields from Islington to Marybone,
to Primrose Hill and St Johns Wood,
Were builded over with pillars of gold
And there Jerusalem's pillars stood.

Her little ones ran on the fields,
The Lamb of God among them seen,
And fair Jerusalem his Bride
among the little meadows green.

Of course London can also be the city of dreadful night. Camden Town tube station late at night is a horrible edgy place with drug dealing and the threat of violence. But walking about London you get visionary glimpses of that beautiful city, the new Jerusalem. From Parliament Hill, where kites are flying, you can look down on 'London flower of cities all' and people strolling on Hampstead Heath engage in countless conversations. London is a city of 300 languages. That is one description of a city: umpteen conversations. Love is builder of cities and on fine days on the Heath you see young couples coming out to picnic, with their bag of goodies and bottle of wine. Work is also builder of cities. On the top deck of the red bus a nurse going home tired after a late shift sits dozing and

knitting. The bus driver knows her route. In the early morning I see the little group of building workers standing outside the caf with their fags and big polystyrene cups of tea. I go to my corner shop and the shopkeeper, who just happens to speak Bengali, Urdu, Hindi, English and a bit of Arabic, laughs when I can't resist buying yet more of his wonderfully cheap plants for my small garden. He is a Muslim but at Christmas, he shoved a bottle of wine into my shopping bag as a seasonal gift.

The poetic image of the new Jerusalem is not a political programme but it can inspire the vision of a city, which must be worked out in practice. Mayor Ken Livingstone's best moments were inspired by his vision of London, the city he loves, as in his speech the day after the London 7/7 bombing:

> This was not a terrorist attack against the mighty and the powerful. It was not aimed at presidents or prime ministers. It was aimed at ordinary, working-class Londoners – black and white, Muslim and Christian, Hindu and Jew, young and old …

Then he said to the bombers:

> In the days that follow look at our airports, look at our sea ports and look at our railway stations, and even after your cowardly attack, you will see that people from the rest of Britain, people from around the world will arrive in London to become Londoners and to fulfil their dreams and achieve their potential. They choose to come to London, as so many have come before because they come to be free, they come to live the life they choose, they come to be able to be themselves.

I've focused on London, my city, but of course, our political vision must be global – act local think global. In the vision of the New Jerusalem, the marriage of heaven and Earth, we don't have to take the supernatural bits literally. It is an allegory, not difficult to translate into purely human terms, but of course much more difficult to embody in the reality of our lives on Earth.

Present!

In the Carlos Fonseca song I began with, the last line of the chorus was: *'Nicaragua entera te grita Presente!*: All Nicaragua proclaims you are Present!' In Nicaragua and indeed the whole of Latin America, they honour their heroes and martyrs by calling out their names in a ceremony – at Mass perhaps – and the people reply: *Present!,* as in a roll call. At the demonstration outside the House of Lords when the Pinochet extradition case was being tried, you could hear them calling out the name of Chile's elected socialist president Allende, who died in Pinochet's bloody coup that inaugurated his reign of torture and mass murder. They were shouting: *'Se siente, se siente. Allende está presente!:* We sense it, we sense it. Allende is present!'

I often walk through London and feel the presence of great spirits from our own radical tradition. In Old St Pancras churchyard I stand by Wollstonecraft's tomb: *Mary Wollstonecraft: Present!* In Bunhill Fields I nod to Blake: *William Blake: Present!* And to Bunyan with his Great-Heart: *John Bunyan: Present!* In St Giles Cripplegate I bow to Milton. *John Milton: Present!* And I hear his words ringing in my ear, what he would have to say to bankers bagging big bonuses despite their responsibility for a recession in which so many have lost their jobs and their homes:

> **Help us to save free conscience from the paw of hireling wolves whose gospel is their maw!**

The slogan of the Peasants' Revolt in 1381 was 'When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?' Led by Wat Tyler the peasants camped on Blackheath on their way into London. In choosing to camp on Blackheath, the 2009 Climate Camp paid its respects to Wat Tyler: *Wat Tyler: Present!*

The English radical tradition has strong Christian roots, deep in the Christian Grand Narrative. In this talk I have spoken of Jesus, who announced the Kingdom of God, and of the Christ Epic of him as the namesake hero of a new humanity as one body, sharing the same bread; as the bridegroom with his bride, the beautiful city the new Jerusalem. These three stories are a single Grand Narrative of a whole liberated, humane humanity at home on Earth. The Grand Narrative has been sneered at and dismissed because we no longer believe in its supernatural components. But talking in parables about the Kingdom or talking about humanity as a single body or a beautiful city and bride, are *already* poetic tropes, metaphor, allegory. We just have to figure that the supernatural elements – such as God – are *also* poetic tropes. Then as I have tried to show, it is not difficult to translate into purely human terms – losing the supernatural guarantee. So as in the Eucharist, I say, thankfully, *Jesus Christ: Present!*

We need a Grand Narrative for the maturity of humanity, fulfilling its potential and being sane enough to look after the Earth. We can translate the one we've got already into our own common language. Of course it must be a good translation *both* with the right resonances in our own culture with our major concerns today, *and* faithful to the gospel of human kindness flowering on Earth. Then the Grand Narrative is not dead. So I conclude with the words of Great-Heart: 'I have often been through this valley and have been much harder put to it than now I am. Yet you see I am alive. '

This is a cut and edited version of the talk Dinah Livingstone gave to the Oxford SOF Day Conference in September 2009. She is a Londoner, poet, translator and editor of *Sofia.*

Time for a New Story?

Victor Anderson recommends the Universe Story as not only grand but true.

SOF contributors have put forward many sophisticated arguments in the course of looking for some truth in 'stories' which they no longer believe are literally true. Maybe there is some *non-literal* sense in which they are true, some symbolism that works, some usefulness to these stories which can still provide a Big Picture in which our lives, choices, and actions have meaning.

This has been a fruitful line of exploration, especially where the story in question has been the Christian story. And yet it seems to me that an even more fruitful place to search might be into stories that we actually do believe are true, in a literal sense.

One such story which provides a Big Picture context, in many respects bigger than the story which runs from Genesis to Revelations, has been called 'the Universe Story', or simply 'The New Story'. This is the story of the whole development starting from the Big Bang, through the formation of matter, stars, the Earth, the evolution of life, and human history. The term *The Universe Story* was used as the title of a book by Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme, both very much influenced by the thinking of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Teilhard de Chardin was a devout (though in many ways heretical) Roman Catholic, and so it could be said that 'the New Story' is in fact an offshoot of an old story, the story of Catholic Christianity.

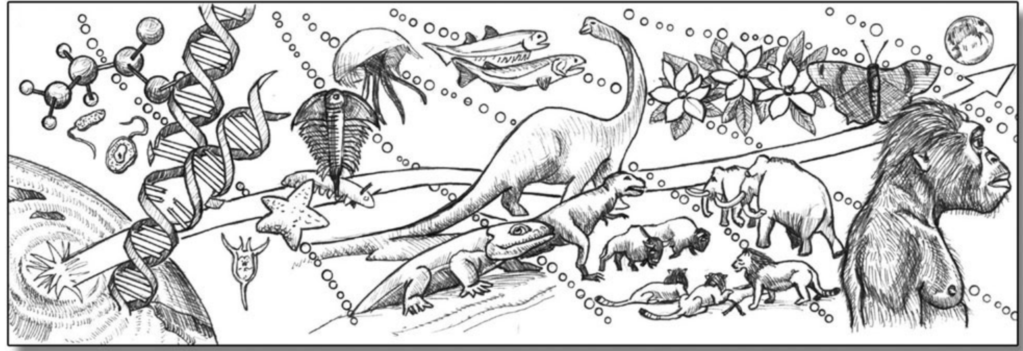
What Teilhard de Chardin did, however, was to set out – most famously in his book *The Phenomenon of Man* – a vision based on science as well as religion, drawing on cosmology and palaeontology, the study of prehistoric life. In the 70 years since the book was first written, that story has been updated and reworked in the light of new discoveries. Different versions of the story have been produced, most of them taking out the Catholicism but keeping his basic picture of long-run evolution.

a great deal of evidence in favour of the New Story being literally true

Writers who have put forward different versions of this story include, along with Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme, Elisabet Sahtouris, Peter Russell, and Ursula King, and we can put in a similar category the theories of Ken Wilber and even GWF Hegel. In all of them there is the basic idea that things have moved in a particular general direction, and that the evolution of consciousness to greater degrees of awareness and depth is a key part of that general direction of development.

Of course there have been setbacks, most notably in the mass extinction crises which have taken place at various points in evolution, but each time life has picked itself up again and resumed this progress of consciousness.

The New Story has the advantage over other stories that, unlike most creation myths and religious accounts of how things came to be, there is a great deal of evidence in favour of it being literally true. And because of that, this story has proved acceptable to



people from a very wide range of cultural backgrounds.

Like other creation stories, it has the advantage of setting our lives in the context of a Big Picture, and it heightens the significance of the present moment through reminding us of what is at stake now. It shows that the loss of human consciousness through ecological devastation and/or nuclear war would represent a setback measured in terms of geological time, not just the timescales of human history.

The New Story therefore has a great deal in its favour. However, I think it is now time to ask the question: why hasn't it caught on? I ask this not because I want to abandon the whole idea of making the true story the basis for the narratives we tell about our lives, but because I want to see these difficulties addressed. This is only a brief article, so I will simply outline the difficulties:

1. The story is a very complicated one. In order to understand cosmology, we need to understand quantum theory. In order to understand evolution, we need to understand genetics. This makes the whole thing very difficult to grasp.

2. The story keeps on changing. Scientists are now increasingly often saying that the Universe Story is not the whole story: our universe is just a bubble within a larger Multiverse, consisting of a multiplicity of universes, each with their own different laws of nature and sets of dimensions. Ours is just one of them. Similarly, many new fossil and archaeological finds make it necessary to adjust and update the Story, again and again.

3. Perhaps the story is just too big. Maybe we should talk about the Earth Story rather than the Universe Story. That would feel more relevant, and not as complicated.

4. There is a tendency by people to reinterpret and understand the New Story in terms of the stories they already know, so for example, evolution comes to be reinterpreted as being about Intelligent Design.

5. The Story is not – yet – encoded in ritual, song, and the other sorts of practices which religions have developed to enable people to identify emotionally with their doctrines and stories. The Universe Story remains, for the most part, in science and history textbooks. There have, however, been 'universe walks' held, in which each centimetre represents a particular period of time, and by walking out a route marked with the major events, we can get a sense of how things have developed, and particularly how they have speeded up as we have got nearer the present.

6. Another problem, of course, is the rise of scepticism about all Big Pictures and grand narratives. This has been articulated particularly by Postmodernist philosophers. The problems with the other narratives – such as Christianity, Marxism, and Liberal/ Enlightenment 'Progress' – have rubbed off on the New Story, and are almost bound to do so on any new stories, making it difficult for any at all to be established.

7. In view of all these difficulties, it is tempting to fall back on the old stories we already know and perhaps love. But wouldn't it be good, one day, to adopt as our story a narrative we actually believe, in a straightforward and literal sense, is *true?*

This article is based on the talk given by Victor Anderson to the Oxford SOF Day Conference in September 2009. Victor Anderson is a freelance researcher/consultant on environmental issues.
The Universe Story was written by Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry and published by Penguin in 1994. *The Phenomenon of Man* by Teilhard de Chardin was published in English by Collins in 1959.

The Power of Myth: Resurrection

Geoff Crocker argues that with stories like the Resurrection, myth has greater power than literalism.

It is paradoxical that literal beliefs answer the 'so what?' question far less meaningfully than mythical interpretations. Christians believe in the virgin birth of Christ. With all due respect to those who hold it dear, this belief fails to answer the 'so what?' question at all. It might suggest the idea of the unworthiness of human sex and reproduction, which is a rather morbid interpretation and bolsters already negative and damaged views of sexuality. When once asked by a senior Russian communist industrialist to explain the why? of the virgin birth I struggled and failed, realising myself that there hardly was any meaningful meaning. The belief is in any case shrouded in mystery – was divine semen implanted or a formed foetus etc? It really makes little sense. On the other hand, the same hardy communist was most moved by the story of the resurrection of Christ and immediately saw its significance.

A leaping March hare was seen as a symbol of the risen Christ.

This is typical of Russian Orthodoxy whose strands may still have permeated his awareness despite its severe repression under the communist regime. For Russian Orthodoxy, resurrection is more important than crucifixion, whereas for Protestant Christians it's almost the other way round, since they place such extraordinary theological emphasis on the death of Christ. On one occasion the American evangelist Billy Graham invited a Russian Orthodox priest to accompany him on this preaching schedule and to offer comment. The Russian priest complimented Graham on his talks, which he had clearly found more enlightened than he had expected, but made this point that a Russian Orthodox Christian would put much more emphasis on the resurrection than on the crucifixion. One of Tolstoy's great novels is entitled *Resurrection* and the Russian word for Sunday *voskresyeniya* also means resurrection. But the question is what is being believed here?

Western evangelical Christians insist that a literal resurrection of a physical body is an essential litmus test of Christian belief. If you don't believe this you are not a Christian. But why? And what's the point? Believing in a bodily resurrection seems rather pointless given that there is no body whose absence then has to be explained by a subsequent 'ascension' and since the only outcome is to believe in the spiritual aspects of this resurrection – the Christian believes that the Spirit came to replace Christ on earth but this Spirit is invisible and non-incarnate. Indeed insisting on a bodily resurrection and deriding the concept of spiritual resurrection as 'gnostic' seems pointless when the bodily resurrection was itself such a short lived and temporary phenomenon.

We can get to a very similar outcome by another route. To some it will be heresy to claim that belief in the physical resurrection of Christ has less implication than embracing the myth of resurrection. The onus is then on them to say

what the implication of believing in the literal bodily resurrection is. Is it victory over death? The 'O death where is thy sting? O grave where is thy victory?' of 1 Corinthians 15? But death remains, often in agonising ways, and any victory over it is relegated to an afterlife, which becomes a necessary adjunct to derive meaning from the literal interpretation of resurrection. In any case the claimed literal resurrection of Christ, as of Lazarus, was not in an afterlife but back to contemporary life.

On the other hand the myth of resurrection has huge interpretative potential. Christ himself makes use of this myth interpretation when he says in John chapter 12 verse 24, 'Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone. But if it dies, it produces a lot of grain'. This offers a wide range of enlightening, meaningful and applicable interpretations, which is more than can be said for the literal interpretation of resurrection. For example, hope can ever arise out of despair, fresh joy from depths of sorrow. Failed initiatives can generate new and maybe different sprouting. It is worth forgoing consumption now to invest to build for tomorrow. A new dawn sees the sun resurrected daily, spring resurrects dormant plant life. And we as human beings can find the resurrections in this life which regenerate. Loved ones who have passed away would not want mourning to suppress our lives for ever thereafter but would rejoice to see our joy resurrected so that in this sense at least death is not victorious.

Here is one major example where myth has greater power than literalism. We can reasonably and justifiably claim that the very extensive use of parables by Christ in his discourse makes myth more central to Christianity than literal beliefs, some of which, like literal belief in the Trinity, have caused more havoc than peace, more confusion than enlightenment and more heat than light.

The article is an extract from Geoff Crocker's book *Enlightened Philosophy,* forthcoming from O Books in 2010.

Geoff Crocker studied economics and philosophy in the UK. He has worked extensively internationally advising multinational clients in industrial strategy and speaking at conferences on issues of faith and values. He is currently reading an MA in philosophy at Bristol University .

The bird chorus printed on the right, sung to thank the 'noble goddess' Dame Kind, comes at the end of Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls,* when each bird gets its mate (called its 'make' in the song 5 lines from end) in Spring. Spelling slightly modified.

Birdsong

Now welcome summer, with thy sunne softe,
That hast this wintres weather overshake,
And driven away the longe nightes blacke.

Saint Valentine, that art full high on lofte,
Thus singen smalle fowles for thy sake:
Now welcome summer, with thy sunne softe
That hast this wintres weather overshake.

Well have they cause for to gladden ofte,
Sith each of him recovered hath his make,
Full blissful may they singe when they wake:
Now welcome summer, with thy sunne softe,
That hast this wintres weather overshake
And driven away the longe nightes blacke.

Final bird chorus from *The Parliament of Fowls* by Geoffrey Chaucer.

The God of the Psalms

David S. Lee says that although the Psalmist supposes there is a God 'out there', essentially he is addressing something in his own mind.

Introduction

Contemplating the Psalms in the daily readings in the liturgy of the Anglican Church has deepened my understanding of contemporary theism. They stand in their own right as source documents of theology. Primarily they are dialogues between the Psalmist and God and between the Psalmist and his hearers about God. These dialogues have influenced the thinking, the spirituality, and the culture of Christians down the ages.

The God of Language

Primeval man had no sense of personal identity, as language developed the words in his mind seemed to come to him from outside, he came to see them as the words of God.[1] So the notion of God was imbedded in human consciousness from the beginning. Evidences of this innate belief abound in the Bible. For example in the importance given to the place of dreams that over and over again are thought of as the words of God:

'That night the Lord appeared to Solomon there in a dream…' (1 Kings 3:5)

Again it is clear that human beings cannot go for long without returning, with longing, to the God that they remember:

'I will remember what the Lord hath done, and call to mind thy wonders of old time. I will think of all thy works, and my talking shall be of thy doings.' (Ps 77: 10,11)

Psalmist David with musicians: Vespasian Psalter 8th century

When the Psalmist speaks to God he has in his mind an image of God and it is this image he addresses. He supposes that there is a God 'out there' who knows him and who listens to him, but essentially he is addressing something in his own mind.

'O Lord my God, in thee have I put my trust: save me from all them that persecute me, and deliver me.' (Ps 7 :1)

The God of History

As civilisations developed man's identity centred on his memory of his past. The Psalmist's meditation on the history of the Hebrew tribes is an example of this:

'Then Israel came into Egypt: and Jacob dwelt in the land of Ham. And the Lord increased his people exceedingly, and made them stronger than their enemies.' (Ps 105: 23,24)

Throughout the Psalms God is present in the vivid memory of their history. This points to an abiding truth. Our image of God is determined by our historical memory. We are what our God has made us. For example the national identity of Wales today cannot be understood apart from the place of faith in the historical experience of the nation, especially of the 18th and 19th centuries.

The God of Law

Psalm 119 has a special place in the Book of Psalms. It is the longest Psalm and is written in sections, each one bearing a letter in the Hebrew alphabet, and is an extended meditation on God's Law. The psalm does not use any other idea or

image of God; he is simply the Lord – the Giver of Law. The praise and attention given to God is the same as the praise and attention given to the law.

'Blessed art thou O Lord: O teach me thy statutes' (v12)
'For thy testimonies are my delight: and they are my counsellors' (v24)

As we read the psalm it becomes clear that God is the personification of the Law. In the psalm God has no other property, God is what he does and what he does is primarily to pronounce his law.

none of these insights into the meaning of the psalms requires belief in a supernatural God

The Psalms of Jesus

As a pious Jew Jesus had an intimate knowledge of the Psalms and used them regularly in the worship of the synagogue. As he hung on the cross he uttered words from Psalm 22 (v1):

'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' (Mt 27: 46)

Moreover it is clear that his teachings reflect his knowledge of the Psalms and their spiritual meanings. Consider, for example, the parable of the treasure in the field:

'The kingdom of Heaven is like treasure which a man found buried in a field. He buried it again, and in joy went and sold everything, and bought the field.' (Mt 13: 44)

This is surely a reflection of a verse in Psalm 119:

'I am as glad of thy word as one that findeth great spoils.' (Ps 119: 162)

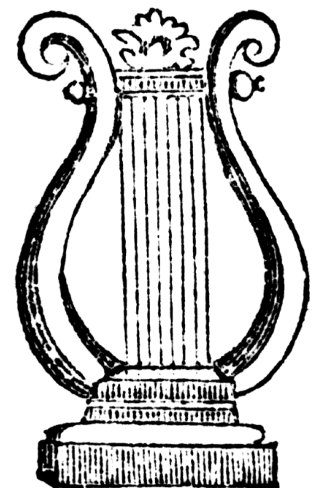
The New Covenant

We think of God the Father as the personification of the virtues and values in the human mind. Jesus in his life and witness is the exemplification and realisation of these virtues and values, within the context of the life of one who lived in first century Palestine 'under Pontius Pilate'.

The intimate fellowship Jesus has with his Father is realised in his daily meditation and recitation of the Word of God in the Bible and especially, I think, in the use of the Psalms. He does not take every image of God in the Old Testament, neither does he recognise every moral injunction. He carefully chooses and recreates an image of God –'My Father in Heaven' – and the moral law – 'Love your neighbour as yourself' – and offers these as a New Covenant between God and the human race.[2]

'This cup is the new covenant in my blood' (Lk 22: 20)

The idea of the covenant is, of course, prominent in the Psalms:



'The Lord revealeth his secret counsel unto them that fear him, and will shew them his covenant.' (Ps 25: 13)

'He sent redemption unto his people, he commanded his covenant for ever, holy is his name and to be held in awe' (Ps 111: 9)

The Liturgy

The provision for the recitation of Psalms in the liturgy day by day is deliberate. They must not be regarded as just another Bible Reading but rather as a spiritual exercise enabling us to enter into the mind of Christ. The psalms enable the worshipper to understand and develop the thoughts of Christ himself and indeed to be joined with Christ in his eternal 'conversation' with the Father in which he forges the New Covenant from the many disparate images of God in the Old Testament. Just as St Paul says: *'Yet we possess the mind of Christ'* (1Cor 2: 16). This is an ongoing and never ending process, for we have the duty to relate our thoughts about God to the challenges of our contemporary situation.

Conclusion

The theological non-realist will notice that none of these insights into the meaning of the psalms requires belief in a supernatural God. The God of the Psalms is a human invention, one which has been in the human consciousness from the beginning, but which is open to development and refinement in every age.[3] This fact ought not cause us to neglect or discard our study of theology. Rather we should celebrate the idea of God as a creative dimension in human thought.

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1. The best explanation of this idea is to be found in Don Cupitt, *What is a Story?* SCM Press 1991.

2. This idea is expressed rather well by Hans Küng in his *Memoirs II: Disputed Truth,* p. 302: 'However, Jesus doesn't appeal to a new God but to the God of Israel – albeit understood in a new way, not simply as God of pious observers of the law, the "righteous", but as father of the lost, weak, poor, oppressed, "sinners". He addresses God in a quite unusual way as his and our "Father" '.

3. The idea that God is best found within the human mind is, of course, quite traditional and orthodox. The Archbishop of Canterbury uses it frequently. For example in his sermon at Westminster Abbey on Armistice Day 2009: 'His commitment is to the God who is discovered in the heart of your own endurance and pain – not a solution, not a Father Christmas or a fairy godmother, but simply the one who holds your deepest self and makes it possible for you to look out on the world without loathing and despair.'

The Venerable David S. Lee was the Archdeacon of Llandaff until his retirement in 1997.

Numinous

The glass weeps in this window
near Waterloo Station
and cold hisses on rails
that loop away to Surbiton

or elsewhere. Nowhere so ugly as
in rain, bedraggled bushes of town,
buildings leaking and looking
their age, skies that are down-

cast. But there is something numinous too,
shiningly implicatory
in the out-there of roofs and streets.
Like the mad whisper of history

it floats out and up from shapes
even of shops: edging along walls like a cat
its creeping luminosity of
how and why and what.

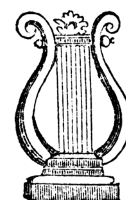
William Oxley

This poem is from William Oxley's new collection *Sunlight in a Champagne Glass,* reviewed on page 24. Oxley has published many books of poetry. A former poet-in-residence for Torbay (Devon), in 2008 he received the Torbay ArtsBase award for literature.

FAO: Bankers, Expensive MPs...

Teach me, O Lord, the way of thy statutes:
and I shall keep it unto the end.
Give me understanding and I shall keep thy law:
yea, I shall keep it with my whole heart.
Make me to go in the path of thy commandments:
for therein is my desire.
Incline my heart unto thy testimonies:
and not to covetousness.
O turn away mine eyes, lest they behold vanity:
and quicken thou me in thy way.
O stablish thy word in thy servant:
that I may fear thee.
Take away the rebuke that I am afraid of:
for thy judgments are good.
Behold, my delight is in thy commandments:
O quicken thou me in thy righteousness.

Psalm 119: 33-40
translated by Miles Coverdale (1535)



Miles Coverdale became Bishop of Exeter in 1551.

Sofia welcomes comment and debate.
Please send your letters to:
Sofia Editor: Dinah Livingstone,
10 St Martin's Close
London NW1 0HR
editor@sofn.org.uk

letters

Sofia 94

Congratulations on *Sofia* 94: an outstanding issue!

Hershey Julien
Palo Alto, Caifornia

I guess half the *Sofia* readership has drawn your attention to the article on progress in *The Economist's* Christmas edition, but just in case not, the article concludes with: 'Moral progress (Miss Neiman writes) is neither guaranteed nor is it hopeless. Instead, it is up to us.'

This is in striking agreement with the close of your Christmas editorial: 'There is no supernatural agency to bring about peace on Earth. It is down to us.'

Best wishes for 2010.

Martin Bienvenu
Guernsey

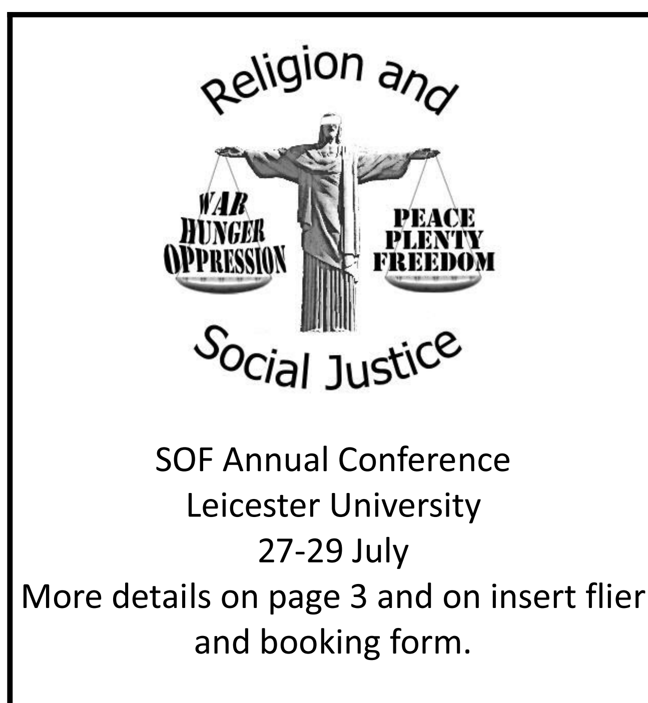
SOF Annual Conference 2010

I want to thank you for the marvellous range of factual and authoritative articles which you brought to us in the Christmas edition of *Sofia.* The chance to learn from Mike Phipps' and Gabriel Carlyle's first-hand experience of the ways in which the continuing US/UK intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan prevents any real progress towards peace was invaluable – if painful. Your editorial comment, 'the least we can do is to keep ourselves informed' was a telling reprimand to my own practice of relying on radio and papers for news, no longer able to bear the TV images of suffering.

Although in some ways the sombre tone was a necessary reminder that our hopes for peace seem to recede year by year, the sober but positive commitment of all the contributors to real and constructive possibilities of change – whether in Palestine, Afghanistan or in the first real steps towards nuclear disarmament – underlined the need for us to accept the real challenge of the Christmas message: that 'if God makes his dwelling among us, then this is where his kingdom is established,' (Stephen Mitchell). Or, in the words of the editor's message: it's 'down to us' to bring about peace on Earth.

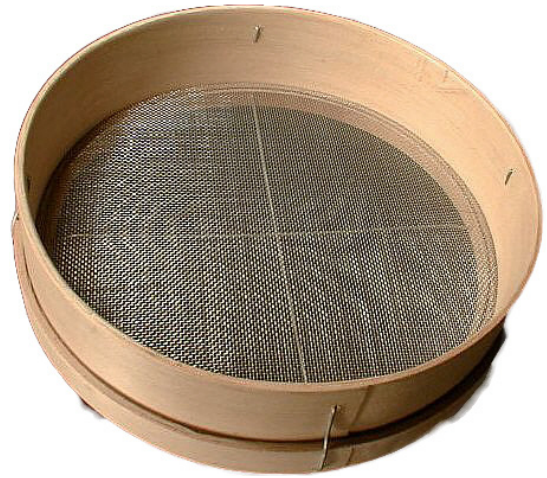
I hope that this summer's conference, which will explore international as well as national perspectives of the relationships between religion and social justice, may inspire more of us to find ways – wherever we are – of working actively towards making our hopes and visions for peace a little closer to reality.

Mary Lloyd
SoF Trustee, Conference Chair 2010



SOF Annual Conference
Leicester University
27-29 July
More details on page 3 and on insert flier and booking form.

SOF Sift



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

From Barbara Burford, Alton, Hants

Thomas Paine saved my life

I was 17 when Thomas Paine saved my life. As suburban children in 1950s' Surrey my brothers and I attended an Anglican Sunday School in the 'tin tab' next to the parish church. My brothers only remember endless reiterations of the story of Jacob and Esau but it was different for me. I took it seriously. The parish was Low Church evangelical. We were taught that fallen humanity was all destined for hell fire unless they believed the right sort of things about Jesus. Unless they were 'saved'. It didn't not matter how you lived, how good, kind or generous you were. Nothing you could do would save you from hell. This view was not and is not extreme. It is straightforward main stream Alpha course Christianity to this day.

This idea had a profound effect on me even as a young child. I tried not to read books about non-Christians because I might start to care about these characters, who were destined for an eternity of torment. The major impact of this idea didn't reveal itself until I was in my late teens studying religious knowledge for A-Level when it became an obsession that took over my life. It sounds melodramatic now but I know that I sat on the trolley bus on the way to school, hearing the screams, smelling the smoke, scanning the faces of my fellow passengers wondering if I should warn them of their danger. It may be a coincidence but it was then that I developed ulcerative colitis, a chronic illness I still have. My school work began to suffer.

Then my agnostic father gave me his copy of Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason.* Thomas Paine wrote the first part of *The Age of Reason* in 1794 when he was in prison in Paris under sentence of death and had 'neither Bible nor Testament to refer to'. The fall of Robespierre saved his life. Paine was not an atheist. He wrote this book 'lest, in the general wreck of superstition…we lose sight of morality, of humanity, and of the theology that is true.' He objected to the Bible and Christianity because he believed that they insulted God, the creator of the Universe.

The ideas he expressed were commonplace among scholars and gentlemen at the time but Paine intended to make them accessible to anyone who could read and had sixpence to spare. His friend and patron, Benjamin Franklin, was among those who tried to dissuade him.

I don't know what those who object to Richard Dawkins writing about theological issues would make of Paine's presumption – a stay (corset) maker and excise man who was only able to pursue a career as a journalist in America. Paine knew nothing of archaeology or modern biblical scholarship. He wrote: 'The evidence that I shall produce in this case is from the books themselves; and I will confine myself to this evidence alone. … I will therefore meet (the advocates of the Bible) on their own ground and oppose them with their own weapon, the Bible.' I think this was why Paine was so effective in releasing me from the prison to which my religious indoctrination had consigned me.

He set me free to go out into the world and explore any part of it I chose. Three years later I joined the newly formed British Humanist Association that has been my home ever since.

I have remained wary of Christians and Christianity. Do these people believe in and worship a God who will condemn the vast majority of humankind to a cosmic concentration camp? If they do, how can they be trusted? I know that not all Christians believe this but many still do.

I have always been interested in religion and religious ideas of all kinds. When a flyer about the SOF magazine fell out of the Guardian I took out a subscription and joined the Network a year later. It is, as Don Cupitt described, it 'the freest religious organisation in the world – a place where any and every idea can be safely explored'. Thomas Paine would have been quite at home with us.

There is much more I would like to write about Thomas Paine and perhaps the editor will let me do so sometime in the future. Meanwhile if you would like to know more, you can contact the Thomas Paine Society at 43 Eugene Gardens, Nottingham NG2 3LF.

Barbara Burford is a SOF Trustee and Minutes Secretary.

Radio Rockall

The Penguin and the Phoenix

From the Conservationist

You may recall that Penguin Books were prosecuted for obscenity, fifty years ago, under the Obscene Publications Act of 1959, after publishing Lady Chatterley's Lover by D. H. Lawrence. The work had to be demonstrated to be of sound 'literary merit' and that it did not 'deprave and corrupt'. The defence included E.M. Forster, Richard Hoggart and Dr John Robinson, then Bishop of Woolwich. Penguin Books were eventually acquitted; they survived and rose again, as have Lawrence, Lady Chatterley, and other lovers. In 1961 Penguin dedicated their second edition to the jury of three women and nine men who returned the verdict of 'Not Guilty'.

Just a year ago, one of Tennessee Williams' lesser-known one-act plays, *I Rise in Flame, Cried the Phoenix,* was performed in our village hall followed, after the interval, by a play of standard village fare: the vapid one-act farce.

In his wonderfully rich play, Williams imaginatively portrays D. H. Lawrence's last day as he slowly dies from tuberculosis. From his wheelchair, in his French villa, Lawrence longs to engage again in the joys of his life as he struggles with the dying of the light. He spars verbally with his wife, Frieda, even striking her, while he flirts with one of his female fans. He despises the 'bourgeois conceptions of morality and prudery', as he bemoans the banning of his books and the burning of his paintings but he regrets nothing. He dreams of visiting again his ranch, The Lobo, in New Mexico to 'watch a rainstorm coming ten miles off' and 'riding across the glittering desert', yet still welcomes the modest gift of a jar of marmalade as 'the month of August put in a bottle.'

Towards the end he passionately defends his art as he had tried to portray Life in all its wonder, darkness and terror. He found that it wasn't enough to embrace the world with love. Words were not enough so he took to colour and painted fiercely but to the same disapproval as his books received. When his time comes he demands to be left alone like a lonely old animal, 'with the rocks and the water', only 'sunlight-starlight' on him. He finally collapses alone at the window with the dying sun but he knows that, in the end, the sun will rise again and there will be light – 'great, blinding, universal light.' The phoenix was Lawrence's favourite symbol.

With only three characters much is demanded of each actor. At our first reading of the play round a table, I listened to others. What a contrast with the previous scripts we had read. We all wondered whether we dared stage it and what our village audience would make of the ideas, the language and the action. We switched roles and I read Lawrence. When we made the decision to go ahead and the director finally cast me as Lawrence, I knew that I faced the challenge of learning many long speeches as well as the sparring dialogue. I grew the beard and practised a cough. We even had a new lighting system and were able to convey the setting of the sun through the window.

Eventually I had the excitement of playing the part for three nights. I felt the remarkable vigour of this dying man, whom I knew only from his novels but, sadly, it was a barren experience in other ways. The villagers treated the play as if it had no 'literary merit' despite its author; I wondered if they had never seen a Tennessee Williams play or film. And despite its subject; I wondered if they had never heard of Lawrence or read one of his novels, not to mention its great themes of life, creativity, death and resurrection; I wondered what they watched on television.

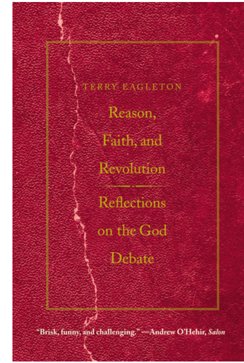
A few friends were kind in their comments but most could not manage such a good, nourishing meal; nor did they see the irony of condemning a play about a condemned novelist … apart from Stanley Johnson, father of Boris, who visited our little village on the Friday night. He said to me afterwards, 'It was good to see something with a bit of grit in it – not that other piffle!' I shall remember his words for a long time. Having just returned from his latest expedition to save the legendary albatross, perhaps he was also doing his bit to protect the Penguin and the Phoenix.

Michael Morton reviews

Faith, Reason and Revolution : Reflections on the God Debate

by Terry Eagleton

Yale University Press (London & New Haven (USA). Pbk 2010.
200 pages. £10.99. ISBN: 9780300164534.



reviews

Terry Eagleton has grown in stature over the years. From the late 1960s as the editor of *Slant,* a left-wing Catholic magazine brought out in the heady days after Vatican II, he became a renowned literary theorist, Oxford Professor of English and expert on Marxism. He has written over forty books and always writes wisely and well. On his life's work, he comments wryly that 'one of the best reasons for being a Christian, as well as a Socialist, is that you don't like having to work, and reject the fearful idolatry of it so rife in countries like the United States. True civilisations do not hold predawn power breakfasts.'

His latest book is an edited version of the 2008 Terry Lectures, given at Yale University on the subject of the links and disjunctions between science and religion. He professes to know only a little about each, but takes as his adversaries the so-called 'New Atheists', principally Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens (whom he irreverently joins together as 'Ditchkins') and their disdainful dismissal of religion as the roots of all human evil, or most of it.

Writing for the defence, Terry returns surprisingly to his Catholic roots. His argument is that salvation is a political affair and all about the *anawim* (the poor and needy in Hebrew). He concedes that left-wing, radical Christians are a rarity. Faith is not an intellectual assent to propositions; it is always faith-as-trust. Most atheists miss this point. Not only do they have a naive understanding of God and theology, they inveigh against religion without understanding that they are the least qualified to do so. (After all, why go into it deeply when there are better things to do?)

Yet Terry's Socialism and critical background will not let Christianity off the hook. Clerical abuse of children – especially in Ireland where it was far, far worse than here – the demeaning of women, the move of the Church towards the bourgeoisie are all deeply disturbing. Christianity has betrayed itself badly. On the other hand, it is often more down to Earth than the fantasies of the Enlightenment. It has the power to transform parts of human society without the hubris of Progress. Ditchkins and their allies cannot see that the Enlightenment was a mixed blessing. Neither are they willing to concede what Christian faith has indeed achieved, for that would mean putting tiresome qualifications on their dislike of it.

As the book and lectures progress, the reader is led into profound areas of religious belief. That it is not the opposite of reason, only of credulity or fanaticism. The relationship between belief and knowledge is complex: belief can be rational but untrue, but then quantum physics can be 'true' but irrational (or at least deeply counter-intuitive). And then, most people believe in luck, but no-one knows what it is. Faith, as Terry constantly reiterates, articulates a commitment that precedes a description of the way things are. Suddenly a polemic against the New Atheists becomes a profound and stimulating reflection on the nature of religious faith. And this is the heart of the book, the pearl in the oyster.

However, speaking of corny metaphors, sometimes there are things which jar the easy flow of the debate. Terry appears to join his enemies in exaggeration when it comes to organised religions faults. In his view, nuns (he means religious sisters) who ill-treated children were all 'psycho-pathologically sadistic'. He is also the master of the confusing simile. I puzzled for a while over his point that 'it is rather like saying that thanks to the electric toaster we can forget about Chekhov.' And yet some of his gnomic utterances bear thinking about. That 'there has been no human culture to date in which virtue has been predominant' is a notion that qualifies many beliefs – religious or secular.

This is a well-written and valuable work. Terry Eagleton is reaching a rich maturity and he has much to offer during the course of his debate. That it achieves no resolution is no matter. We could profitably take a line from economics and concede that if we put all the world's theologians in a line, they still would not come to a conclusion.

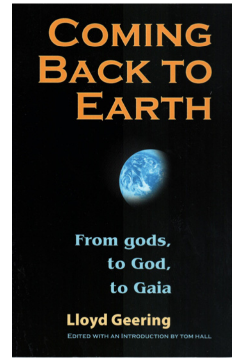
Michael Morton is the parish priest of St Winefride's Catholic Church in Sandbach, Cheshire. He is a SOF Trustee and editor of *Portholes.*

The hardback of this book was published in 2009 and the paperback is due out this month, March 2010.

Victor Anderson reviews *Coming Back to Earth*

by Lloyd Geering

Polebridge Press (Salem, Oregon 2009). 218 pages.
$12.24 from Amazon.com. ISBN: 978-1-59815-016-2.



reviews

Is this a cutting-edge work of radical theology? It depends on what you are used to, I suppose. In the context of the mainstream Christian churches, much of this book looks like heresy. But to many of us outside, it reads like an extended statement of the bloody obvious.

The mainstream churches are still sufficiently large to make it possible for someone to live their whole mental and spiritual life within the sets of ideas which they provide. Even today, there is enough going on within the ecclesiastical bubble, and certainly enough history to draw on, to keep even the most intellectually hyperactive person fully occupied.

For one of that bubble's inhabitants, this new book by Lloyd Geering is likely to appear challenging, maybe irritating, perhaps exciting; an informative window looking out to some of what lies beyond mainstream Christianity. Some readers might even develop a desire to climb out of that window, but others are going to be shocked and offended by what they see.

Lloyd Geering's theology is very strongly influenced by ecology. In wording which is fairly typical of his message, he says: '… since caring for the Earth can now be seen as our supreme duty, then our traditional responsibility to God and our newly-found responsibility to the Earth have become virtually the same.' And: 'Because we are so dependent on the physical universe as a whole and on this planet Earth in particular, the natural world itself must be the first focus of our faith.'

He sees this approach as the present-day application of the principles of liberal and radical theology which have led some people beyond literal interpretations of the Bible and out into understandings based on scholarship about sources, historical context, mythic reinterpretation, Jungian and existentialist perspectives, and all the rest of it. All of that is seen by Geering as leading today to the need for the prioritisation within religion and spirituality of the ecological crisis, for an understanding of theology shaped by that crisis, and for an interpretation of the history of religion in which differing attitudes to the natural material world are centre-stage.

This book is an eloquent statement of that point of view, and I hope it will find readers who need its message. But my difficulty is that the approach to theology which Geering's argument is based on, although it was shocking and exciting at the time of *Honest to God*, shocks only the most shockable today.

The excitement has gradually drained away from it. Similarly, the ecological message of the book would have been new and interesting at one time, perhaps 30 years ago, but doesn't still feel like that now.
Perhaps I am not typical of the readers the author of this book had in mind, but I want these debates to move on a little. I would like to know – given all the rejection of literalism – what remains of value in the Christian story, and why it might be seen as better than some other story. I would like to know why Lloyd Geering, and others of similar views, don't go further and just wholeheartedly become pagans or pantheists, because that is where much of his argument appears to point.

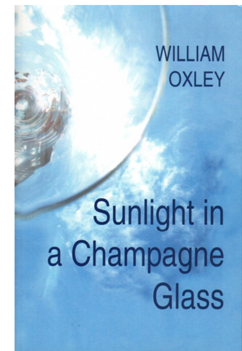
No doubt there are good reasons for being neither a pagan nor a pantheist, and the Christian tradition can supply some of those reasons, but unless these questions are addressed properly (the book dismisses pantheism in less than a page), Lloyd Geering's eco-theology speaks only to one audience, those with some connection with the churches, and not to its other potential audience, those who start from the other end of the argument, beginning from ecology and asking the sorts of questions about spirituality which often follow from taking ecology seriously.

For example, what does Lloyd Geering think of Starhawk, a leading American pagan author and thinker about green spirituality? It would be interesting to read his thoughts on engaging with her books, such as *The Earth Path* and *The Spiral Dance*. Similarly, if we can reinterpret Easter and use it to celebrate the resurrection of nature every spring, why not go the whole way and celebrate instead the eight festivals of the neopagan seasonal calendar?

Without an intelligent engagement with what, on a fairly large scale, now lies in the field of green spirituality outside and beyond Christianity, books like this feel like just part of the 'long, withdrawing roar' of the Christian faith in Matthew Arnold's famous poem. The roar was interesting for a time, but now there should be more to say.

Victor Anderson works as an economist for an environmental campaigning organisation.

‘A Spiritual Poetry for our Time’?



Kathleen McPhilemy reviews
Sunlight in a Champagne Glass
by William Oxley
Rockingham Press (Ware 2009). 112 pages. £7.99 ISBN: 9781904851295
Giraffe under a Grey Sky
By Danielle Hope
Rockingham Press (Ware 2009) . 64 pages. £7.99 ISBN 9781904851349.

The word ‘spiritual’, on the blurb of William Oxley’s new collection, *Sunlight in a Champagne Glass*, initially made me uneasy. However, as I read through this collection and Danielle Hope’s *Giraffe Under a Grey Sky*, I began to feel that ‘spiritual’ might describe both books.

Perhaps Oxley’s descriptions of the Devonshire landscape where he lives most successfully link reflection to observation. In an implicit manifesto for his kind of spirituality, he ends one poem: ‘Noticing may not be believing, but it’s a start’. The poem’s strength of detail – ‘papery yachts/that cross the horizon like pop-up ducks’ is offset by the rather vague ‘secret life of which all are a part’. The perennial problem for any poet attempting to articulate spiritual insight is that the ineffable becomes inane or banal. I sometimes wished that Oxley had allowed the perception to speak for itself and resisted explanation.

The moment of epiphany is more successfully presented in ‘Nude Man Running’, despite some odd grammar in the last line of the first stanza. Nevertheless, the poet’s struggle for truth shines through all his poems. Being a full-time poet can be difficult to justify, as Oxley recognises in the poem ‘So you write poetry?’ The slightly superior tone is reflected in the last stanza:

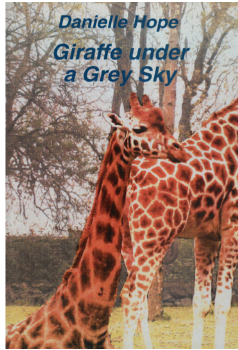
> ‘In fact, it’s a waste of time
> and that’s harmful
> for time’s money and time’s life
> and neither should be wasted,’ he concluded
> turning on the television.

While agreeing that we need time to notice and to reflect on what we notice whether pursuing spirituality or poetry, I dislike the notion that poetry and spirituality are the privilege of the ‘poetical classes’. The poet addresses this issue in ‘The Man from Somerset’ when he meets a genuine worker, a shoe-packer and ex-miner with a strong local burr. There is an exchange of conversation but not a meeting of minds; when the poet discloses his occupation it brings ‘a quick end to [their] talk’, but leaves him feeling that the encounter ‘somehow mattered’.

There are some moving poems about the poet’s father. I particularly liked ‘Memory, Snowflakes’ and also ‘The Unwinding Room’, from a sequence of poems about rooms. This sequence is rich with noticing though again there is sometimes too much striving after meaningfulness. This substantial collection from a prolific poet has some very good poems but they risk being overwhelmed by numbers.

Danielle Hope is also a poet who notices, combining observation with humanity and an eye for social injustice. She does not need to explain what she sees; sensual details bring us heightened awareness and understanding. ‘Lincoln’s Inn Fields’ contrasts spring and an imposing location, ‘Evening sun and cherry blossom pattern pavements/ inside and outside Law Court doors’, with the shabby poverty of the homeless. The poet describes sound, ‘plastic bags rustling’, and smells, ‘hot spiced soup mingled with after-rain-damp and tired human sweat’. The openness of her sensibility allows Danielle Hope to move between the social and the personal, urban and natural without forfeiting our trust. She sometimes falters when attempting humour, whether political satire or the surreally comical. ‘For Aneurin Bevan’, which deplores what is happening in the NHS, begins as a parody of Wordsworth’s sonnet ‘Milton! Thou shouldst be living at this hour’ but Hope’s sonnet disintegrates, not even managing to get to line 14. The form reinforces the content but is not entirely convincing. The title poem, about a surreal giraffe, is a touch whimsical. However, I was increasingly impressed by the Mrs Uomo poems. Mrs Uomo allows the poet to explore the strangeness of the world, where the Hadron Collider coexists with fruit shortcake and the individual struggles against bureaucracy to retain her dreams. The poems are so crammed with physical and tactile detail that Mrs Uomo becomes real:

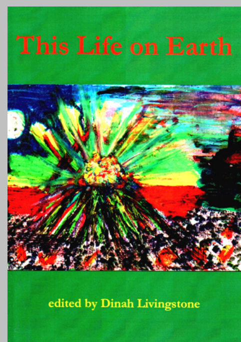
> The sky is like the inside
> of Mrs Uomo’s blue eggshell mixing bowl
> veined with the thin white cracks
> of aeroplane trails already fading.



The last poem in the sequence where Mrs Uomo discovers Monopoly and is corrupted by capitalism reflects Hope's political framework within which more personal poems find their place.

Finally , 'The Heart' acknowledges the scientific and the material but declares that it is not enough. The whole poem is printed below. If the concept of a 'spiritual poetry for our time' has any meaning, start here.

Kathleen McPhilemy teaches English at Oxford FE College. Her latest poetry collection is *The Lion in the Forest* (Katabasis, London 2004).



This Life on Earth

edited by

Dinah Livingstone

SOF's latest publication contains 23 personal and/ or reflective prose pieces, all by members or associates of SOF Network, and 16 poems. *This Life on Earth* is many curious and particular autobiographies, a warning and a celebration.

*

The book was launched at the 2009 SOF Conference in Leicester and has now gone into a second edition. You can order a copy from bookshops or from:

SOF Network,
3 Belle Grove Place,
Spital Tongues,
Newcastle upon Tyne NE2 4LH

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

The Heart

Anatomically the heart
lies left below the breast bone
beats from dark to light

and light to dark again.
Soft through the nights
like rain on a tent canopy
that flaps stubbornly
with the turning weathervane.

But there are times
when the heart marches
like an opera chorus
rousing overtures and arias
to deluge the whole platform.

Mathematically the heart
has two chambers
one blue and one red

but it sends out longing
that is not like that.
More like a river
that traverses valleys
and sometimes rapids

sometimes the backs
of city streets, coal stacks,
sometimes nurturing cormorant
and kingfisher, songbirds
knotted reeds and secret trout.

Danielle Hope

Cicely Herbert visits *the Rev. Richard Coles, formerly of the Communards*

Some years ago, I attended a talk at our local library given by the Marxist historian, Eric Hobsbawm. He made what I took to be an encouraging observation, which was that the British never go to any extremes, and that after roughly every 50 years or so, there is a change direction as we begin to move away from whatever the current behaviour and political thinking has been. I am almost certainly over-simplifying this, but it seems to me a comforting thought, that, angered and disillusioned as we are by the mess we've made in Iraq and Afghanistan, we could, as a nation, now be tiring of our deeply materialistic way of life, and may perhaps start to move towards a more spiritual dimension, realising on the way that we are all humans who belong to one Earth. There's a long way to go, but the signs are there, with unexpected people now exploring some form of religion.

One man who has made a major change to his life is the Rev. Richard Coles, whom I first met in the 1980s when my daughter played violin in the 'Communards,' a highly political, left-wing pop group, fronted by two openly gay men – musician and composer Richard and the Scottish singer Jimmy Somerville. Intrigued by the path taken by Richard (a journey in a different direction from that taken by many members of SOF), I went to meet him at the church of St Paul's in Knightsbridge. Completed in 1843, this Gothic-style building has an impressively ornate interior with richly coloured stained glass windows, and it stands in one of the wealthiest parts of London, where builders' skips regularly contain treasures – gold-plated taps, marble basins and refrigerators so they big they could house a family.

In an area of conspicuous consumption, where money is 'a state of nature,' it is not impossible to imagine a city financier requesting an adjustment to the time of a church service, in order to fit in a visit around his busy schedule. (Visions of camels struggling to pass through the eye of a needle spring to mind.) There must be as great a need here, as anywhere, for spiritual guidance.

In the course of a two hour conversation held in the small office at the back of the church, Richard, who, as a boy sang in his local Anglican Church choir, told me that, from an early age, he

Richard Coles on *Have I Got News for You?* in 2009

had realised human love is conditional: 'If you are a good boy and come in to lunch, we will love you.' He recalls lying awake on Christmas Eve in order to catch his father out in the act of filling his stocking. (I, on the other hand, so completely believed in Father Christmas that when I heard his sleigh landing on the roof of our house, I had to feign sleep in case he caught me peeping.)

Not being a journalist, I tend to chat rather than interview, and I foolishly failed to pick up the lead Richard gave me when he quoted *The Windhover* by Gerard Manley Hopkins, a poem I have long known by heart. Hopkins came from a family that knew and loved the arts, especially music and painting. In a life-changing move, as a young man he left the Anglican church and became a Jesuit. I can very well see why the poet's work might be important to Richard, and later reflection led me to think about the inter-connectedness of all people. This theme is explored in a piece Richard wrote for the *Observer* newspaper last year, in which he considered the juxtaposition of homeless people in his parish who were sleeping rough, and the European leaders, assembled in London for the G20 summit, cocooned in a centrally heated grand hotel a few yards away.

I said goodbye to Richard believing that, however imperfect we humans may be, and even if we do not have a religious faith, it is through the example of Christ, Gandhi and other great spiritual leaders, that we may yet find a way to live peacefully and generously with one another. I stepped out into the temptations of the Knightsbridge emporia, knowing that with ministers like Richard Coles in place, there will always be plenty of food for thought, occasions for celebration and that life in the parish of St Paul's will never be dull.

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

The Dark Night

On a dark night,
yearning and on fire with love
– oh blessed chance! –
I slipped out unnoticed,
my house being now at rest.

In darkness and in safety,
by the secret stairway in disguise
– oh blessed chance! –
in darkness, stealthily,
my house being now at rest.

On that happy night,
in secret, for no one saw me
and I looked at nothing,
with no other light or guide
than the one burning in my heart.

It was that which led me
more surely than the light of noon
to where he waited for me –
for I knew him well –
somewhere unvisited by anyone.

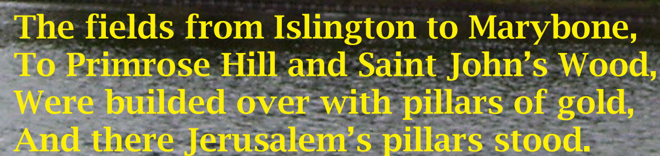
O night that guided,
O night more delightful than the dawn,
O night that united
beloved with beloved,
she who was his love changed into her love, him.

On my flowering breast,
which was kept wholly for him alone,
there he lay asleep
and I caressed him
and the fanning of the cedars gave us air –

the breeze from battlements on high –
when I stroked his hair,
with his quiet hand
he gave my neck a wound
that made all my senses faint away.

I stayed there and forgot myself,
I leant my face upon my beloved,
everything stopped, I left myself,
all my care had faded
among the lilies forgotten.

Poem by John of the Cross (1542-1591), Spanish poet, mystic and reforming Carmelite friar
translated by Dinah Livingstone.



The fields from Islington to Marybone,
To Primrose Hill and Saint John's Wood,
Were builded over with pillars of gold,
And there Jerusalem's pillars stood.

Her little ones ran on the fields,
The Lamb of God among them seen,
And fair Jerusalem his Bride
Among the little meadows green.

Pancras and Kentish Town repose
Among her golden pillars high,
Among her golden arches which
Shine upone the starry sky.

The Jew's Harp House and the Green Man,
The ponds where boys to bathe delight,
The fields of cows by Willan's farm,
Shine in Jerusalem's pleasant sight.