

*sfia*

No. 96 June 2010



*Now Which Way?*

# *sfia*

*down to Earth*

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**membership@sofn.org.uk**

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**The Editor: Dinah Livingstone**

**10 St Martin's Close, London NW1 0HR**

**editor@sofn.org.uk**

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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.

# Now Which Way?

What is the way forward when we realise that God and all the gods are human creations?

This issue – called *Now Which Way?* – begins with an article by Dominic Kirkham on *How we Created a Creation Myth*, which is critical of Howard Jacobsen’s TV programme about the origins of monotheism. Kirkham looks at the history and genre of the biblical creation stories, calling them myths, and then at how the bible was put together – by a process of evolution. We still need myths, he says, but questions whether the old ones still work for us.

Next we have a talk given by Ken Smith at the Oxford Think Week, which involved SOF speakers and speakers from the University’s non-religious societies – atheist, humanist, secularist – as well as the town sceptics. A retired Church of England priest, Ken Smith describes himself as ‘an inescapably post-Christian atheist’ and his talk is about the way he is going. Now, he says, his praise is for this world, instead of an imaginary supernatural being. As he puts it, ‘I gladly transfer my worship and devotion to the material reality of our existence.’

Then we have Katy Jennison, also a childhood Christian, defending ‘Heron’s Beard’ (as opposed to Occam’s Razor) and describing how she has sought a way forward in contemporary Paganism, in which reverence for the Earth also plays a major part.

Well-known morning hymns such as ‘The morning, the bright and the beautiful morning,/ is up...’ start by praising the morning and then go on to say: ‘O now let us haste to our heavenly Father,/ hasten to give him the praise that is due.’ But why should we not praise morning on Earth for its own sake, rather than diverting our praise to a ‘heavenly Father’? ‘Earth herself is adorning/ This bright May morning.’ There is so much to marvel at and delight in here on Earth and in the cosmos too.

‘Praise, that’s it!’ said the poet Rilke. The curious thing is that so *little* changes in an attitude of reverent praise, whether that praise is directed towards a supernatural creator or the Earth herself. The *attitude*, the ‘lift up your hearts’, is still the same. Ken Smith would call that a religious attitude, a paradoxical ‘religious atheism.’

We still need myths, says Kirkham and adds:

‘Perhaps Gaia is one such modern creation myth.’ Yes, there is every reason to extol the beauty of the Earth and the beauty of the skies for their own sake, instead of praising a supernatural creator. But praising Gaia does not actually tell us what *else* we should do. Praising the Earth might lead us to take better care of it. Yes, good housewifery (*‘oiko-nomia’*: ‘economy’) is important, but who wants to be just a housewife? Even given ‘lifted hearts’, there is so much more we might want to do with a human life. Secondly, it is *we* who praise – we are the voice of the planet – and *we* who care. The Earth doesn’t care. Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*, written ten years before Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, calls Nature ‘red in tooth and claw’. The poet accuses her: ‘So careful of the type, she seems, /So careless of the single life.’ He goes on to say:

So careful of the type? but no.  
From scarp'd cliff and quarried stone  
She cries: A thousand types are gone:  
I care for nothing, all shall go.

Although caring for the Earth is an important ingredient in the creation of a good society, ‘Gaia’ alone does not provide enough for a Grand Narrative of human fulfilment.

Kirkham says: ‘The modern problem is that the ancient myths no longer work for us. To work myth must lead us into deeper understanding of reality.’ In the previous issue of *Sofia*, I suggested how the ‘poetic tales’ of the Kingdom of God – the reign of kindness – coming on Earth, and the Christ Epic of all humanity as one body *can* still work for us, even after their supernatural baggage has been discarded. I think that once we take for granted that God and gods are creations of the human imagination, we can move on from philosophical questions such as ‘Is God real?’ to sift our vast theological treasury and see what human wisdom it contains.

That is why this issue also contains a story by the Zapatista leader, Subcomandante Marcos, called *The Way*. The Zapatistas are mostly Mayan Indians living in the Lacandon Jungle in Mexico,

where they are struggling for indigenous rights, indeed for survival. Marcos meets the Mayan elder Old Antonio, who is ‘accompanied by the first gods, those who gave birth to the world.’ They go out together and get lost in the jungle. Marcos humorously tells how he shows off all his guerrilla expertise: ‘I described heights above sea level, topographical features, barometric pressure, degrees and minutes, landmarks etc, what we military types call “terrestrial navigation”.’ But they remain lost. Antonio lets them get more and more lost but then acts: ‘He took out his machete, and clearing a path through the jungle, he made off in another direction.’ Eventually they make their way home. The point of the story is that the way was not readymade before them: they had to *make* it and moreover, they had to make it *together*. Making mistakes was part of the process. Marcos with all his modern knowledge is accompanied by Old Antonio, who represents the wisdom of the ancient gods. As Marcos says at the end of the story: ‘I did not walk behind him [Antonio], I walked with him.’ I think we can do the same, we can walk *accompanied* by our own ‘poetic tales’ of the supernatural in order to *make* a new way.

Not long ago we local residents had a meeting with our council parks liaison officer. We discussed the problems in our little park. At the bottom of a hillock, an extremely long rosebed had been planted and, of course, some people had made their way through the middle of it rather

than going round. Our parks liaison officer said that all the rest of the bed had been respected but they were going to leave this short cut there, as it was a ‘desire path’. Everybody smiled at such a wonderful term.

Below this editorial there is a notice of the SOF annual conference, which is on *Religion and Social Justice*. Now is the time to register and it looks like an interesting event. There will be the opportunity to discuss the harm done by religion, such as its ill treatment of women – Maryam Namazie will be talking about Sharia Law. There will also be the opportunity to discuss the gospel that is ‘good news for the poor’. Good news for the poor has to be more than worshipping Gaia – being the kind of Green who would rather talk to a nut-tree than a neighbour\* – at the very least, it has to be eco-justice and we will be hearing from Kumi Naidoo about that.

So I hope this issue of *Sofia* and the SOF summer conference will give plenty of food for thought about *Now Which Way?*

*\*PS I was glad to hear that Caroline Lucas, the Green Leader and now MP for Brighton Pavilion, and our own SOF Chair of Trustees John Pearson, who stood as a Green candidate for Newcastle Central, are both keen on justice that is good news for everyone, including the poor.*



**SOF Annual Conference**  
**Leicester University**  
**27-29 July 2010**

**Speakers:**  
**Maryam Namazie**, Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain  
**Kumi Naidoo**, Executive Director of Greenpeace International  
**Julian Baggini**, Philosopher and Journalist  
 Don Cupitt will reflect on each day’s activities

*For more details and booking forms contact:*

SOF Conference  
 10 Brindle Close  
 Southampton SO16 3PJ  
[sofconf10@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:sofconf10@yahoo.co.uk)  
 02380 445275  
[www.sofn.org.uk](http://www.sofn.org.uk)

# How we Created a Creation Myth

Dominic Kirkham looks at the biblical creation myth and criticises Howard Jacobson's personal approach to it in his recent Channel 4 programme

Earlier this year, the Channel 4 series of personal takes on the Bible kicked off with Howard Jacobson reflecting on Creation, or, more precisely, the creation narrative with which the Bible begins. With the saturnine bearing of an Old Testament prophet he confessed to being wrathful – with those fundamentalists of both religion and atheism, who have forgotten how to read this ancient story. The particular object of his wrath was Richard Dawkins, whose scientific reductionism ‘moved him to fury’ and whose presence hovered in the background of on-screen quotes like the ghost of Nebuchadnezzar. Jacobson sought another, more personal, poetic approach to the Creation story, one which ‘roots us in the wonder of our own being’, steering us away from extreme literalism. But as his narrative unfolded this viewer at least was increasingly prompted to fury, not by Jacobson's thesis, but by the hash he was making of it.

A personal view can presumably excuse anything. Jacobson cast himself as a non-believing Jew, but, with a typical sardonic feint, presented himself as one who nonetheless believed in belief, freely admitting that the God people didn't believe in was often not believed in by believers either! First up was a visit to the Chief Rabbi to learn how Jews came by the idea of a Creator. Over a friendly cup of tea he (we) learnt how a better brand of revelation enabled Jews to banish the old gods and come up with the ‘extraordinary, radical idea’ of monotheism, later to be shared with Christians and Muslims. This impressive ‘family’ achievement seemed to put a spring into the step of even an atheist, so it was then off to that hot house of belief, Jerusalem, where we were led to believe that belief in Creation had enabled Jews to come up with an even more influential idea, the seven day week. All of which, though commonplace enough, is also utter tosh.

The problem for Jacobson's thesis was his apparent inability to look beyond his own Jewish identity to a broader cultural context. Once one makes this move the story changes dramatically. So, it was not that the seven day week was the

consequence of a belief in creation but the very opposite. The seven day period is the quartering of the lunar month, the origin of which goes back to Babylonian times. Celebrations of the full moon, *sapatu*, also provide the likely root of the word Sabbath, the seven day creation story being a later manipulation to confer significance on the Sabbath, whilst the astral basis of it commencing on the eve, marked by the rising of the stars, goes back at least to Neolithic times (a tradition carried on in the Christian liturgical calendar by the First Vespers).

As for the more substantial issue of the creation story itself, one has to look to the alien cultural context Jews were forced to endure in the sixth century during the Babylonian Exile.

Jacobson considered this traumatic period as a time when Jewish beliefs in God had seemingly been discredited, needing some new markers of religious

identity to rejuvenate the demoralised community, but he entirely missed its real significance.

Not only did Jews pick up the format of many key ‘biblical

stories’ which appear in Genesis from their sojourn in the East, but when they returned to Palestine their Judaism was significantly different from what went before. Not only was there a radically different organisation – now centred on synagogues and rabbis – but also belief. Judaism now took on a distinctly eschatological tone, accompanied by beliefs in the cosmic moral conflict of good and evil, the idea of a final judgment, the mediation of angels and a final apocalyptic coming of a righteous one (messiah).



Raffaello Sanzio (1483-1520) depicts Zoroaster in his fresco *The School of Athens*

All of these beliefs were foreign to and predated Judaism. They arose in Persia under the influence of Zoroastrianism, where they were accompanied by belief in one supreme solar being, who resided in the heavens but was also the creator of all. Far from being a dualistic faith, the universal nature of Ahura Mazda entitles Zoroaster's teachings to be viewed as the first real intimations of monotheism.

When the Jews did return home from the East after 538 BCE they found themselves further exposed to another powerful current of new thinking, this time from the West – from the Aegean, where from the beginning of the sixth century, Greek thinkers such as Thales and Anaximander, had been speculating on the rational principles underlying the cosmos. This esoteric form of natural philosophy, based on rational explanation, became the basis of what we now know as 'science'. It was like an acid to the older Homeric world of chaotic polytheism and, in place of a capricious cosmos ruled by unpredictable immortals, it provided the seminal idea of an ordered, comprehensible, coherent universe. This sublime monism culminated in Platonism and rapidly spread with trade and Hellenism across the Middle East.

It is from these disparate elements that the new God of monotheism became possible and it also made possible a theology of Creation, a theology that was more philosophical than religious. None of this was mentioned by Jacobson, whose biblical fare was proffered unadulterated. What was also not acknowledged was that the seemingly fluent narrative of God in the Bible was a highly contrived literary device. As the literary guru Harold Bloom points out in his biblical mimesis *The Book of J*: 'Archaic Judaism is all but totally unknown to us... All I can see is that (it) has very little to do with the God of Ezra or the God of Akiba.' What we see is now visible only through the lens of the greatest fictional creation in literature: God. It was the retrospective power of this later, new idea that was formative of the Bible as we now know it. Perhaps the best metaphor for this process is a geological one: the books and traditions of the Bible accumulated like great sedimentary layers over the centuries, finally to be metamorphosed and welded into one by the power of its last and greatest idea, monotheism.

It is not without note, and surely no coincidence, that writing and the possibility of narrative arose in the same cultural milieu as monism and monotheism. At first only a means of recording and ordering produce, writing began to release its hidden potential for the recording and ordering of ideas. It is interesting that in the creation story a key word is *bivdil*, divide. God is presented as dividing the light and dark, sea and land, etc. – everything is being sorted out, just as a scribe would, introducing order where before there had been chaos. And just as the accountant scribe sorted out his records, so there was the potential for critical reflection on stored information and ideas, thus providing a stimulus to abstract thought. In his study of *The Origins of the Modern Mind*, Merlin Donald saw this as a final decisive stage in the evolution of human consciousness (though modern information technology may now be providing another stimulus to further neurological development!) The creation story not only reassured a traumatised refugee community, it fulfilled a fundamental human need, to have things ordered and comprehensible. In other words, the story reflects not so much God but the human needs which at a certain point in human development created this supreme symbol of order.

In *After God*, Don Cupitt sagely noted that the idea of an individual God is inextricably linked with the rise of 'a more individuated human selfhood'. In acting as the mirror by which we come to look at ourselves, God and human subjectivity are born together, with the individual, like Jacob, locked in constant struggle with his God. In the same way creation is not something that happened but is happening, now. It is a drama in which we are involved and which is about us, happening now, as life for ever threatens to teeter back into chaos. Interestingly, this was the understanding of Jacobson's sister as she explained the lighting of the Sabbath candles.

It is often forgotten that the first pages of the Bible – and the ideas they contain – were amongst the last to be written and their surreal glow casts an unnatural light over many of its later (earlier) pages. In fact, it seems highly ironic in terms of the present conflict between creationist and evolutionist that the Bible, far from being monolithic, is itself a product of evolution. As with any geological transformation, when one looks closely all sorts of incongruities emerge

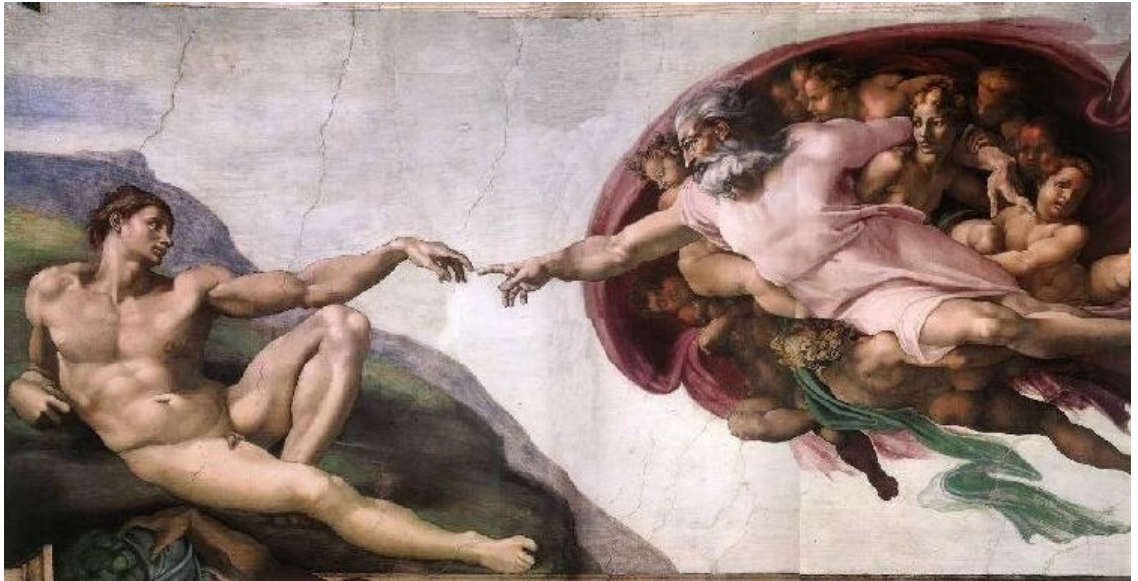
which betray a different past. So, after the sonorous opening the theme of monotheism gets entangled in more ancient beliefs: Abraham's family are found fussing over their fertility figurines (an archeologist provided some for Jacobson to finger), there is the shady El Shaddai, the fertility god 'of the breasts', and evil Moloch, to whom long after Solomon the inhabitants of Jerusalem were sacrificing their first born. It is amongst this motley of tribal beliefs of the ancient Israelites that Dawkins finds his nasty, brutish and genocidal god. These earlier beliefs remain embedded in the narrative that later redactors did not bother to remove, leaving us now with some difficult explanations.

A recent example of this problem arose with the publication in 1966 of the Jerusalem Bible. Under the

sagacious influence of biblical scholars it was decided to replace God by Yahweh in many parts of the text, much to the mystification of the public, which had never come across the word before. For enlightenment they were informed that this was the supreme revelation of the divine being to Moses in the sublime event at the burning bush. More recently, in a remote part of the Sinai desert at an ancient travellers' way station, archaeologists found bits of broken pottery inscribed with names like 'Yahweh of Teman and his Asherah' and even with crude graffiti befitting any public toilet with a gawky fellow be-sporting a large penis next to his consort – obviously some tribal fertility god. Oops! No wonder Bloom irreverently notes that, 'Yahweh constitutes one of the curious cultural comedies of Western religious tradition.'

Regardless of this, back in his home town of Manchester Howard Jacobson had decided to decamp on the in-laws, two of whom were orthodox rabbis – for further enlightenment on the clash between the findings of science and

religious beliefs. Not that it seemed a problem: one rabbi acknowledged he would always believe the teaching of his religion 'implicitly' and the other dismissed rational speculation as feeble next to strong belief. To this conversation-stopper there is no answer, other than the sort of derisive dismissal of the self-contradictions implicit in 'strong belief' that Spinoza provided: if belief entails our accepting a supreme being who is almighty and benign, how do we explain evil which he is either not good enough or strong enough to stop? A recent attempt by a chief rabbi



in Jerusalem to explain the Holocaust as a punishment for sin caused widespread outrage and disbelief.

Clearly, there are problems that the serene simplicity of the creation story does not address in terms of its later relation to science and modern knowledge. But then perhaps it was never intended to, and fundamentalists are now radically misinterpreting it. The genre of ancient myths, to which the Creation story belongs, was the expression of humans struggling to find meaning and their place in the world; the existential questions which hang in the unknown: what are we? where do we come from? where are we going? In her *Short History of Myth* Karen Armstrong writes: 'A myth is true because it is effective, not because it gives us factual information.' Myth is an art form. It tells us about ourselves, not some trans-historical reality.

It was to this sort of understanding that Jacobson felt himself drawn; the point at which we can escape the impasse between religious and

scientific fundamentalists. For Jacobson it was the poetic world of creativity, surrounded by ‘doubt, uncertainty, mystery’ that was the most important aspect of myth. Paradoxically, this is also the point to which modern scientific knowledge has brought us once more. Between the infinitely small and infinitely large, between the quantum world and black holes, there are incomprehensible worlds which we will never be able to comprehend. With our limited senses we are attuned to just one narrow band of reality, but there is reason to believe there is more, much more, of which we will never know. Science has relativised and diminished us in the world of post-modernity.

But we still need myths. Perhaps Gaia is one such modern creation myth, also the Freudian myth of the tripartite self (the id, ego and super-ego). Such thinking enables humans to find meaning. One of the more curious, and perhaps unexpected, features of our times is the way in which belief has defiantly set aside the implications of science. The assumption that somehow science would bring with it the thinking and values of modernity has not happened as expected. The men who flew planes into the twin towers all had a scientific background but they certainly didn’t have the values of modernity. Similarly, the pseudo-science of Intelligent Design manipulates modern research to underpin Creationist ideology. The paradoxical thing in all this is that, as the biblical scholar Thomas Thompson writes: ‘The Bible’s theology is not a theology of truths. It is a way of critical reflection. It is learning and discourse.’

## we still need myths

It was through critical reflection on later experience that biblical material was recast and re-edited. It is not a finished process, yet it is this central feature of the Bible that is discarded in modern controversies by the very people who claim to follow its guidance. Biblical belief has become a deracinated ideology.

The modern problem is that the ancient myths no longer work for us. To work, myth must lead us into deeper understanding of reality, perhaps forcing us to change our minds and the way we live. But the ancient myth no longer seems to do this: it conflicts with reality as we now understand

it. Instead of leading to enlightenment it has the opposite effect – it obscures reality by negating the knowledge we have. Of creation we now know that there is no necessary point of beginning, that species are not isolated but all part of the seamless web of life, that humans are not set apart but inextricably linked by their DNA to all other animals, that life is not morally good but the result of a savage struggle for survival which is unrelenting and unending, that creation of life goes on regardless of us and will do after us. The world of the ancient myths is not our world.

As if to underline this point, Jacobson’s programme was followed by the News, which contained an item which epitomised the problem. A directive had been sent from the EU to Parliament about the unacceptable toleration of religious discrimination in employment, for example regarding gay people. Such practices reveal the old religious process of dividing and separating, discriminating and prohibiting, reflecting the ancient fear of things falling apart, yet by their obduracy causing it. As always, Nietzsche, so keenly attuned to our modern condition, perceptively noted what was happening in *The Birth of Tragedy*, how religions tend to die: ‘The mythic premises of a religion are systematised beneath the stern and intelligent eyes of an orthodox dogmatism, into a fixed sum of historical events; one begins nervously defending the veracity of myths, at the same time resisting their continuing life and growth.’

What is now required is a continuation of that process of critical reflection, which typified the biblical tradition itself in its formative period. The sort of thing Rabbi Lionel Blue did so well in his daily radio presentations. It was whilst reflecting on growing up in London’s East End during the war that he tells the story of his religiously observant parents, who always separated everything according to orthodox tradition. That was until the German bombs came and blew everything to pieces; since then in his own personal life, as in modern society, it has been a matter of sorting out the pieces: making a meaning out of the mess, order out of chaos. As it was in the beginning, the process is ongoing!

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



**Ken Smith writes:** *Earlier this year SOF Trustees David Paterson, Allan Hayes and I had the privilege of being invited to take part in Think Week, a programme of Talks and Discussions organised in Oxford by the University's non-religious societies – Atheist, Humanist, Secularist – with Sceptics in the Pub representing the thought outside in the city itself. For me the occasion marked an important step forward in blurring the supposed distinction between SOF's 'point of view' and those of our fellow atheists who are clearly on our side. We particularly owe David a huge debt of thanks for his persistence and vision. At the end of the week I gave a talk, which I called:*

## The Paradox of Religious Atheism

We are at least honest if to a certain extent we shrug and say that 'here, now, humanity and a good pint of real ale' is as good a way of coping with the world and any meaning we might feel the need to give it. Coupled with that is the sense among the majority of thinking human beings that the problems that threaten to overwhelm us are so massive that the last thing that should be giving us sleepless nights are the absurd ripples from the deliberations of medieval philosophers and theologians that gave us these problems in the first place.

With Mammon (or at least the international monetary system) increasingly showing itself to have feet of clay; with Gaia biting back in fury at the contempt we've shown her; with inequalities between rich and poor growing by the minute; with growing cynicism about our political leaders' ability to deliver the goods; with ideologies delivering their goods and attracting millions to their cause, the thinkers of the world should have more than enough to think about simply to improve the lot of our fellow human beings. I personally (if understandably selfishly) am glad that even while I write there are cancer experts so focused on their microscopes that the last thing they want is to be troubled by conflicting 'osophies, 'isms, and 'ologies that get in the way of clarity of thought.

So I'm glad that debating the Existence of God was deliberately written out of the agenda for *Think Week*. All of us ought to be bored to death by it anyway. We do better when we scrutinise more closely and critically those seats of power in Church and State that continue to hold so many in thrall to half-baked ideas. Any God that the so-called 'soft' atheists still allow to niggle at the edges of their consciousness would have rather more to do than simply exist. Incidentally how that word 'probably' got on to those bus posters I still lack the capacity to understand. The 'godless vicars' pilloried in the press some 20 years ago

when SOF first attracted public attention would regard atheist softies and the bus as woolly – even cowardly and hedge-sitting – in the extreme.

I began with a reading of R.S. Thomas' poem, 'Parent', which is essentially a revisiting of the Adam and Eve myth. He begins by depicting our first mother as a cave woman mating with our first father 'her yellow teeth bared for the love bite' and ends with 'the whole Earth a confusion of persons each with his own grudge rooted in the enormous loins of the first parent'. It became a meditation on the connectedness yet contingency of us all.

The idea of paradox as a title for my talk was first suggested to me by a conversation I had recently had with my eight-year-old grandson about human origins. We were talking about how our roots have to be sought in pre-historic caves and that there is/has to be a direct causal, contingent connection. And scarily, any break in the line would mean his granddad would never have been – and nor would he! He then shrewdly, if unwittingly, broadened the picture by saying: 'Hang on a minute, Ken (they do that these days, don't they?) if we're descended from that caveman, how come I have two parents, four grandparents, eight great grandparents, 16 great, great, grandparents, 32...?' Yes, our children have more to teach us than the other way round sometimes.

And there's something even more unnerving in my grandson's question. Maybe we have been so seduced by the Genesis story of the first parent that it continues to influence and even perpetuate the misconceptions that our Grand Narrative (both religious and secular) here in the West takes for granted. Maybe this is where even Plato started to get it wrong. So that East and West philosophical/theological traditions have largely developed independently of each other. Perhaps the story of Cain's murder of Abel has more to teach us than we realise.

As illustrative material I used these pictures:

### 1. A piece of Mount Etna Lava



This one because cosmic dread is at the heart – and almost certainly an important source – of religious experience. In my teaching over nearly three decades, I wanted my pupils to be awed by their own existence. Today I want our understandably parochial concerns here on Earth to be set against the background of the cosmos. Sitting as it does on my multi-faith shrine at home, this lump of rock frequently inspires me to imagine one particular carbon atom hidden in its mystery as representing our own supposedly big-banged universe; with the rest of this jagged piece of lava embodying what might be called ultimate reality. It awes me still and at the same time puts our human world in context.

### 2. Pieter Bruegel's Tower of Babel



This one because essentially (and much more insidiously than we realise) our central problem is about languages; the confusion of tongues, of persons and the aggravating fact of the barriers between even those who on the surface share a mother tongue, that only the most persistent of us will have modest success in breaching. While rejecting the biblical claim that such confusion is a divine imposition to ensure we don't overreach ourselves and claim equality with the Creator, it's painfully obvious that the persisting tribalism of our modern world is rooted in the inescapable fact that every single human being is born into (not language) but a specific language that creates a prison we only ever partially escape from.

### 3. Gian Lorenzo Bernini's Ecstasy of St. Theresa



And this one because I want to see passion and ecstasy made centre stage in all human debate and endeavour. We, for example, give so little time in education to developing a mature emotional life for our young. I also want an apology from the religious authorities – especially here in the West – for their marginalising of the body, and for the corrosive effect of sexual guilt. Also an apology from iconoclasts everywhere for their willful if ignorant destruction of so many things bright and beautiful.

Maybe the blame lies with the imperialists, the hemmers-in, the fence builders, the appropriators – perhaps beginning with the invasion of Canaan, the destruction of the fertility cults and the establishment of Yahweh as the ultimate guarantor of Truth. It may even be that the entire Western Philosophical tradition needs to be revisited and subjected to a more critical analysis.

As illustrative material I used the three items reproduced opposite. In the relaxed formality of a lecture room in Lincoln College these three images (together with two poems by R.S. Thomas) became, for an hour and a half, fruitful foci for contemplation and in a strange non-theist kind of way, worship and adoration; some of it in very attentive silence.

As an inescapably post-Christian atheist I haven't found it too difficult to transfer all the insights of orthodox trinitarian doctrine to a secular trinity of what we might call Space, Time and Stuff – despite the 'which and whence and wherefore proceedeth' perplexing me as much today as the original metaphysics did St. Athanasius and the delegates at the Council of Nicea. I gladly transfer my worship and devotion to the material reality of our existence, occasionally stopping to ponder whether (like Father, Son and Holy Spirit) they might be all of a piece – rather than three separate entities. I'm no tree-hugger but the truth is that long before philosophers and theologians got their almost puritanically ungrubby hands on them, the gods really did represent the great cosmic powers. For many less sophisticated people there was sacredness everywhere. Today it's more, not less awesome that we are star dust, rather than the creation of the One we allowed to become an abstraction.

## in the relaxed formality of a lecture room these images became fruitful foci for contemplation

I want a world full of art and music and literature. I want people to listen as well as speak. I want it to be recognised that truth is paradoxical, that the world is not primarily an object of human scrutiny, but that we are sustained moment by

moment (sometimes against our wishes) by a gift. I want – with Gerard Manley Hopkins – to give glory to the god of my creation, fully incarnate not just in Jesus but ubiquitous in the very stuff of our existence. And to wholeheartedly affirm that any kind of duality is a nonsense:

For dappled things –  
 For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;  
 For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that  
swim;  
 Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;  
 Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow,  
and plough;  
 And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.  
 All things counter, original, spare, strange;  
 Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)  
 With swift, slow; sweet, sour; a-dazzle, dim...

## I gladly transfer my worship and devotion to the material reality of our existence.

If I do make an exception to the belief fallacy it is my own belief in Kindness. Here I want to pay tribute to Dinah Livingstone for her book of poetry with that title but also for her insistence on the here and now, and the teaching of Jesus that we take human pain seriously. On reflection we find that really it's not a belief at all. It's a way of talking about the increasingly incontrovertible fact of our existence. That we are kin (one kind), all of a piece with the cosmos, with our fellow inhabitants of our own world, and maybe even with the 'little green men' that might eventually drop in from outer space with either trident missiles or doves of peace in their hands. We fail to recognise and act on it at our peril.

I closed with 'The Kingdom', another poem by R.S. Thomas, an inspiration for me over many years, as well as a goad and a guide as to how things might be made better. It should be our dream. Our world where 'industry is for mending bent bones and minds fractured by life' made possible, 'if you will purge yourself of desire.... with the simple offering of your faith'.

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Ken Smith is a former editor of *Portholes*.  
 Poems by R.S. Thomas are in his *Collected Poems* (1945-90).

# In Defence of Heron's Beard

Katy Jennison explores contemporary Paganism.

This is really an article about the importance of both/and (as distinct from either/or), why it's particularly applicable to contemporary Western Paganism, why Paganism is particularly appealing to many people today, and why it dovetails with the principles underpinning SOF. But I will start with Heron's Beard. It is called after the humanistic and transpersonal psychologist John Heron, who introduced 'Heron's Beard' as the counterpart to Occam's Razor.

Occam's Razor, as everyone reading this will know, is the principle that the simplest explanation is generally the correct one. Thus, a particularly vivid dream in which, for instance, the dreamer encounters a divine being, or has a mystical experience, can be explained (or 'explained away') by the fact that the dreamer unwisely indulged in cheese-on-toast shortly before bedtime. Heron's Beard, by contrast, says that the experience may be *both* a cheese-on-toast phenomenon *and also* a genuine mystical experience. After all, if a mystical experience is to be delivered to a flesh-and-blood human, it can only take place within the human's nervous system, brain cells, and so on, and one of the easiest ways to act upon these is via the digestive system. And mystical experiences, like other sorts of magic, will always find the easiest way of manifesting themselves, which is why magicians must always remember to be very, very careful what they ask for.

Heron's Beard might, perhaps, be expanded to counter the exasperating phenomenon which must be familiar to all *Sofia* readers, the assumption that every follower of any sort of religion or spiritual path is an unthinking believer in the literal truth of all sorts of irrational, anti-scientific and dysfunctional doctrines and deities. Parts of the media foster this misleading simplification, presenting the wilder extremes of belief as if they were the norm. Inevitably this divides people into polarised, oppositional camps, and entrenches each side in its antagonism to the imagined other.

We so easily fall into this either/or, right/wrong, us/them trap that there must, surely, be some kind of evolutionary advantage in believing that 'we' are right and therefore 'they' must be wrong, even in the teeth of the evidence. Indeed, in a life-or-death situation survival may depend on being able to decide instantly whether a person or animal or piece of technology is

dangerous or not, OK or not-OK. That kind of certainty can be a life-saver, or at least a reassurance of security; however, we seem to have become addicted to it, and look for it even when it is impossible or downright counter-productive. Most real-life decisions are more nuanced: there may be no 'right' answer.

Nonetheless, the other great survival characteristic of humans is adaptability. We notice that the sea level is rising, or that the animals we hunted seem to be disappearing, so we move to new environments, and learn to build with different materials or to eat different foods. There is a 'checks and balances' feel to this: on the one hand, we're good at stability and security; on the other, we're good at creativity and change. It seems very likely that the two go together: a solid sense of security is at least an important condition, and perhaps an absolute prerequisite, for the ability to pursue and embrace new developments and ways of thinking.

A profound new development, in the past fifty years or so, is the extent to which we have become willing to abandon whatever religion we were brought up in, and deliberately to choose another, or none at all. We could construe this disparagingly as just another example of our consumerist, choice-driven economy. On the other hand, it might be an indication that we are, collectively, finally reaching a sort of spiritual adulthood, where we no longer take on trust everything that our parents or teachers taught us, and instead begin to think for ourselves.

**It becomes a matter of choosing, or creating, a path going in the direction I'm travelling.**

The current flowering of contemporary Paganism in the UK is part of this trend, which gathered momentum when the repeal of the Witchcraft Act in 1951 allowed Gerald Gardner to publicise for the first time a version of witchcraft or Wicca. Interest in Wicca led to increased interest in a range of other Pagan spiritualities, including Druidry. (Anyone keen to understand the history of contemporary Paganism in the UK should read Ronald Hutton's scholarly

accounts of its development, see Bibliography.) These caught the public imagination for a number of reasons: two of these were the widespread disillusion with established authority, including the authority of institutionalised religion, following the Second World War; and the rejection of an exclusively male godhead and priesthood, prompted by the same dissatisfactions which inspired the Women's Movement in the 1970s. From the 1960s to the 1980s, from flower power to the New Age, for the post-war generations everything was up for grabs.

Initially, however, almost all the Pagan paths which came to public notice in the 1960s and 1970s presented themselves as the continuation of ancient traditions which had long been preserved in secret. (What is it about humans which predisposes us to give religions high marks for having been founded centuries or millennia ago, and no marks at all for having been invented last year or even last century?) Some people were happy with this, and for refugees from the perceived oppressions of male monotheism there was a particular attraction in the 'Great Goddess' archetype, and a sense that a female deity was a welcome restoration of balance.

As time went on, however, many of the freethinking, anti-authoritarian, counter-cultural people who were drawn to Pagan spiritualities found that they were equally disinclined towards the unquestioning acceptance of any Pagan authorities or leaders. With a few exceptions, most of the claims of ancient wisdom secretly passed down from antiquity were debunked. Various people, both here and in North America, began to devise their own spiritual paths, drawn from several sources: many included a cycle of eight seasonal festivals, and some principles and ritual practices from Wicca or Druidry, along with ceremonies from Starhawk or Aleister Crowley, celebrations of particular local festivals or sacred sites, and new practices which were peculiar to just one individual or group. Celtic, Greek, Roman, and Egyptian deities were invoked and their myths embraced. In another part of the forest, Northern European (Norse) Gods were on the ascendant; elsewhere, shamanism and shamanic practices attracted new followers. Some of these developments rapidly became 'traditions' in their own right ('after the third time, it's traditional') and some were meticulously reconstructionist. There continues to be an important place for groups with a lineage of several generations and an established set of practices, but as the field has

expanded, and particularly as the burgeoning of the internet has given people access to any number of different variations on the theme, it has become normal to explore widely before settling upon, or if necessary syncretising, a spiritual path with which one feels, simply, at home.

This sense of feeling at home in a particular spiritual system is crucial, because it is not predicated on the truth of one religion and the falsehood of all the others. I have a clear memory from my schooldays of thinking how much more attractive the Greek pantheon appeared than the Judaeo-Christian one, and regretting that (as I assumed) it was the Christian one that was 'true' and not the Greek one. Looking back, I had fallen into the trap of thinking of 'truth' as a synonym of 'fact'. An enormous obstruction to clear



Druids prepare to celebrate the autumn equinox on Primrose Hill in London.

thinking fell away when I understood 'religion' as a term for a system of integrating my life experience (including my experience of the transpersonal or the spiritual), rather than as a set of facts. As a child I remember my father telling me 'the mountain of Truth has many sides'. My choices were no longer between deciding that all religion was rubbish and, alternatively, deciding that one particular religion was the (only) true one and therefore disciplining myself to believe it as factual; instead, it becomes a matter of choosing, or creating, a path going in the direction I'm travelling. If others are on different paths, it's simply that they're going a different way up the mountain.

Notice that I have not mentioned 'belief' as a component of contemporary Paganism. Like all religions Paganism includes adherents of a variety of temperaments, and there are some Pagans who are temperamentally disposed to see their deities as real transcendent entities. Many more of us see them as human-generated archetypes, or as personifications of

immanent divinity, or as symbols, or as psychological constructs, or as a way of giving a human shape to a transformative spiritual experience, or, indeed, as all of the above. In all these cases, 'belief' is inappropriate. Karen Armstrong has pointed out that until relatively recently, and for most religions still today, the key components of religious faith were practice and commitment, not belief, and certainly not belief in its modern sense of willed acceptance of an implausible proposition. Yet this appears to be the only characteristic which people now expect of a religion. I remember seeing, not many years ago, a message from an enquirer to a Wiccan internet site, which read 'I'd like to become a Wiccan. What do I have to believe?' This seems distressingly typical of the popular perception of religion both here and in the US.

For most of the Pagans I know, Paganism works not as a belief system but more like a stick-and-ball molecular model: real molecules don't actually look like the model, but the model helps the researcher to visualise what might be going on within and between the molecules being studied. Similarly, our rituals and ceremonies invoke and manipulate symbols or representations of human characteristics. The purpose of our practice (or at any rate, the ideal) is continuous personal development, constant transformation, and ultimately planet-wide change. Importantly, this is a journey, not a destination: a means of enquiry, rather than a set of answers.

John Heron characterises the people on this sort of quest as 'co-creators ... of planetary transformation, manifest in terms of social justice and human rights, personal and interpersonal development, aesthetic creation and celebration, economic sustainability, ecological balance and cosmic attunement.' In other words, if you engage in a spiritual practice, expect it to change you, but not only that: expect it to change your priorities, expect it to change the way you engage with the rest of the world, and expect it to involve you in political or ecological or social action. (This can apply, of course, to any spiritual practice, not just a Pagan one.)

For Pagans, this means that the vehicle for personal transformation is not belief, nor indeed the harnessing of divine assistance through prayer or supplication, but the power of ritual practice and enacted myth and story to awaken the creative imagination. 'Myth' is another ambiguous concept: Karen Armstrong, again, makes it very clear that myths, properly construed, are not fictitious histories or childish tales, but expositions, in story form, of timeless psychological truths, and I am using the term in this sense. The author Margaret Atwood notes that 'we identify with and remember stories, learning more easily from them than we do from more abstract presentations'; whether

the events in the story ever happened in real life is irrelevant. The familiar good/bad duality is a common theme in drama and literature, our modern alternatives to myth: Jeanette Winterson, in a recent review, writes of 'the Jungian Shadow that we often deny but that must eventually be met and integrated for psychic wholeness, resolving the dualism of our natures'. Role-playing characters from a myth or a story, and taking roles in a shared ritual, are ways of awakening aspects of one's personality which may not normally, in everyday life, be recognised or exercised. And this can be *both* creative play-acting *and* a profound spiritual experience.

Of course we make it all up: how could it be otherwise? We all create the religion which works for us. Seasonal cycles can mirror the cycles of a human life; ritual tools can symbolise aspects of human personality; invoking a deity can manifest that deity in my own actions. How else, after all, could any deity, any divine immanence, be manifest in this living, breathing, loving, dying, painful and ecstatic material world? The danger of assuming that one's deity exists in some other dimension is that responsibility, praise and blame can be projected out towards that deity and away from ourselves. It may not be easy, instead, to grow up and to realise that we're on our own.

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Katy Jennison has a first degree in English and a PhD in biophysics. She represents the Oxford Pagan Circle and the Oxford Council of Faiths.

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#### References:

- For an introduction to the specific Pagan paths, see the BBC website, [www.bbc.co.uk/religions/paganism](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religions/paganism) and the website of the (UK) Pagan Federation, [www.paganfed.org](http://www.paganfed.org)
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# The Way

Zapatista leader Subcomandante Marcos tells this story about finding the way through the jungle.

And speaking of great gods, now Old Antonio appears, accompanied by the first gods, those who gave birth to the world. Always smoking, walking, talking from time to time, Old Antonio sits down with me tonight, as he sat down with me one night ten years ago. With Old Antonio, all the great-hearted, brown-blooded men and women sit down with me too. They sit with me and finally, they find a voice to talk about their struggle. To tell us about it, they say, not to impose on us, not to force us, not to absorb us. To tell us about the struggle and that night ten years ago, when the rain

and cold darkness were like a wall and roof. The night when Old Antonio walked with me through the mud, machete in hand.

Did I say Old Antonio walked with me? Well, if I did, I lied. He did not walk with me. I walked behind him.

That was not how we began our walk that night. First, we got lost. Old Antonio had invited me to hunt deer and we did, but we did not catch any. When we realised that, we were already in the middle of the jungle, under the rain, surrounded by night.

'We are lost,' I said uselessly.

'Well, yes,' said Old Antonio, who did not seem very worried about it, because at once he used one hand to shelter his match-flame and,



Old Antonio

with the other, lit his cigarette.

'We must find the way back,' I heard myself saying, and added, 'I've got a compass,' as if I were saying, 'I've got transport should you want a lift.'

'Well, yes,' said Old Antonio again, handing me the initiative and indicating his willingness to follow me.

I accepted the challenge and declared myself ready to show off the guerrilla expertise I had gained from two years in the mountain. I retired under a tree and took out map, altimeter and compass. Speaking in a loud voice, but really boasting to Old Antonio, I described

heights above sea level, topographical features, barometric pressure, degrees and minutes, landmarks etc, what we military types call 'terrestrial navigation'. Old Antonio said nothing. He stayed beside me, not moving. I suppose he was listening because he did not stop smoking. After a bit more technical and scientific showing off, I stood up, and compass in hand, pointed decisively towards a corner of the night and began walking in that direction:

'It's that way.'

I hoped Old Antonio would repeat his 'Well, yes', but Old Antonio said nothing. He picked up his rifle, his bag and his machete and set out behind me. We walked a good while, without getting anywhere we recognised. I felt ashamed at

the failure of my modern technology and did not want to turn round and see Old Antonio following me in silence. After a time, we came to a hill of sheer stone, like a smooth wall barring our way. The last fragments of my pride shattered when I said out loud: 'What now?'

Up till then Old Antonio had not spoken. First he coughed a little and spat out a few shreds of tobacco. Then I heard him say behind me: 'When you don't know what is in front of you, it helps a lot to look back.'

I took him literally and turned round, not to see the direction from which we had come, but to glance with a mixture of shame, pleading and distress at Old Antonio. Old Antonio said nothing. He looked at me and understood. He took out his machete, and clearing a path through the jungle, he made off in another direction.

## **'When you don't know what is in front of you, it helps a lot to look back.'**

'Is it this way?' I asked feebly.

'Well, yes,' said Old Antonio, cutting back lianas and damp pieces of the night. Within a few minutes we were back on the main path and lightning flashes revealed the silhouette of Old Antonio's village. Wet and tired, I arrived at Old Antonio's hut. Doña Juanita set about making us coffee and we drew near the fire. Old Antonio took off his wet shirt and put it to dry beside the lamp. Then he sat down on the floor, in a corner, and offered me a little stool. I resisted at first, partly because I did not want to move away from the fire, and partly because I still felt ashamed of my useless boasting with map, compass and altimeter. Eventually, I sat down. We both began to smoke. I broke the silence and asked him how he had found the way back.

'I didn't find it,' answered Old Antonio. 'It wasn't there. I didn't find it. I made it. You have to make it for yourself. By walking. You thought the road was already there somewhere and your gadgets were going to tell us where it was. But no. And then you thought I knew where the road was and you followed me. But no. I didn't know where the road was. We had to make the road together. And that is what we did. That's how we got where we wanted to be. We made the road. It wasn't there.'

'But, why did you say that when you don't

know what is in front of you, you have to look back? Wasn't it to find the way back?' I asked.

'Well, no,' replied Old Antonio. 'Not to find the way. It was to see where you were before, and what had happened and what you wanted.'

'How do you mean?' I asked, less awkwardly now.

'Well, yes. By turning to look back you realise where you are. Or you can see the wrong way you have taken. If you look back, you realise that what you wanted was to go home and what happened was that you said we had to find the way back. And there's the problem. You tried to find a road that did not exist. We had to make it.' Old Antonio smiled with satisfaction.

'But, why do you say we made the road? It was you who made it. I just walked behind you,' I said, a little uncomfortably.

'Well, no,' said Antonio, still smiling. 'I didn't make it on my own. You made it too because you were walking in front for a while.'

'Oh! but that way was wrong,' I interrupted.

'Well, yes. It helped because it showed us that it was the wrong way, and so then we did not keep on that way, or rather make that way, because it took us where we didn't want to go. So then we were able to make another way, which took us where we wanted,' said Old Antonio.

I stared at him for a moment and ventured: 'So, you didn't know, either, that the way you were making was going to get us here?'

'Well, no. You only get there by walking. By working, struggling. It's the same thing. That is what the great gods said, the first gods, who gave birth to the world.'

Old Antonio stood up.

'And they said many other things, for example, that sometimes you have to struggle in order to be able to work and sometimes you have to work in order to be able to struggle,' said Old Antonio, who as you can see, wielded the dialectic with the same skill as the machete.

Thus I walked behind Old Antonio, that night ten years ago. Did I say I walked behind Old Antonio? Well I lied. I did not walk behind him, I walked with him.

*7<sup>th</sup> July 1996*

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Subcomandante Marcos is the leader of the Zapatistas, who are mainly Mayan Indians living in the Lacandon Jungle in Mexico, and fighting for indigenous rights. This story is reprinted from *Zapatista Stories* by Subcomandante Marcos, translated by Dinah Livingstone (Katabasis 2001).



From:

# An Open Letter to All Catholic Bishops

by Swiss theologian Hans Küng

## Venerable Bishops

Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, and I were the youngest theologians at the Second Vatican Council from 1962 to 1965. Now we are the oldest and the only ones still fully active... On the occasion of the fifth anniversary of the election of Pope Benedict XVI, I am making this appeal to you in an open letter. In doing so, I am motivated by my profound concern for our church, which now finds itself in the worst credibility crisis since the Reformation. Please excuse the form of an open letter; unfortunately, I have no other way of reaching you... [Küng then lists many ecumenical and pastoral opportunities missed by the Pope and continues: ]

And now, on top of these many crises comes a scandal crying out to heaven – the revelation of the

clerical abuse of thousands of children and adolescents, first in the United States, then in Ireland and now in Germany and other countries. And to make matters worse, the handling of these cases has given rise to an unprecedented leadership crisis and a collapse of trust in church leadership.

There is no denying the fact that the worldwide system of covering up cases of sexual crimes committed by clerics was engineered by the Roman Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith under Cardinal Ratzinger (1981-2005). During the reign of Pope John Paul II, that congregation had already taken charge of all such cases under oath of strictest silence. Ratzinger himself, on May 18th 2001, sent a solemn document to all the bishops dealing with severe crimes (*epistula de delictis gravioribus*), in which cases of abuse were sealed under the *secretum pontificium*, the violation of which could entail grave ecclesiastical penalties. With good reason, therefore, many people have expected a personal *mea culpa* on the part of the former prefect and current pope. Instead, the pope passed up the opportunity afforded by Holy Week: On Easter Sunday, he had his innocence proclaimed *urbi et orbi* by the dean of the College of Cardinals.

Extract from Hans Küng's Open Letter, the full text of which was printed in the *Irish Times* on April 16 2010.



*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

Joe Hill

I have just read the very good article in the March edition of *Sofia*. References in it to 'Yet You See I am Alive' and to 'Carlos Fonseca is one of the dead who never die' remind me of a passage that I read recently in Dorothee Sölle's *Choosing Life*, in which the author describes a famous song belonging to the North American labour movement, which deals with the workers' leader and song-writer Joe Hill who was convicted of murder (one is led to believe, wrongly) and executed in 1919. The first verse goes:

I dreamed I saw Joe Hill last night  
Alive as you and me.  
Says I, 'But Joe, you're ten years dead!'  
'I never died,' says he.  
'I never died,' says he.

And the third verse:

'The copper bosses killed you, Joe.  
They shot you, Joe,' says I.  
'Takes more than guns to kill a man,'  
says Joe, 'I didn't die,'  
says Joe, 'I didn't die.'

There are several more verses in similar vein.

By the way, Dorothee Sölle's book *The Silent Cry* is an excellent book on mysticism.

Grenville Gilbert  
[grenvillegilbert@tiscali.co.uk](mailto:grenvillegilbert@tiscali.co.uk)

I agree this is a terrific song, which I have often heard the singer and activist Eric Levy sing in London, and we all join in the chorus. I have it on cassette tape and if I manage to digitalise it, I'll ask our webmaster to upload it onto the SOF site together with your letter. – Ed.

*Sofia* 95

Forgive me for taking up space which some might say would be better given over to new ideas. However, as I read *Sofia* 95 there seemed to be something very timely I had to say.

From time to time the criticism arises of the Network that we are losing the plot – the 'plot' being exploring and promoting religion as a human creation. Surely nobody could say this of *Sofia*, and this latest edition is no exception. Article after article explores, in an even-handed way, the religious message. To add further authority to this quest we are treated to a splendid piece by Dinah Livingstone examining the art of translation and so the very art of understanding.

I feel that *Sofia*, and through it Sofists, have never been at a higher level of exploration. I for one am ever keen to promote it!

John Pearson  
Chair, SOF Trustees  
Newcastle-upon-Tyne

Thank you for a most interesting issue of *Sofia*. Though I am still a more-or-less orthodox Christian, I found myself in almost total agreement with everything in Dinah's article. After all, wasn't it St Teresa of Avila who said 'Christ has now no hands but ours'?

It was good to be reminded in another article of Teilhard de Chardin. I have always found his thinking attractive and I think he has something to say to us today. Then there was the review of Terry Eagleton's new book. I have photocopied it to send to my daughter. (Terry Eagleton was her tutor when she was at Oxford.)

Joan Sheridan Smith  
Ipswich

Just to say thanks for the article *Yet You See I am Alive* in the March *Sofia*. I found it inspiring, thought-provoking and helpful. As a SOF member and a Jungian, I am always pleased – more than pleased! – to see imaginative burrowings through the interstices of the literal into deeper and more human levels of understanding.

Readers might like to have a quick scan of our website: [www.champernownetrust.org.uk](http://www.champernownetrust.org.uk) especially the information about the summer course.

*Michael Vizard*  
*Michaelvizard@aol.com*

The Champernowne Trust for Psychotherapy and the Arts is a mental health and education charity founded in 1969 by the late Irene Champernowne.

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I liked the presentation of my article, and was pleased that my ideas accord with those in other articles. Dinah's lecture on the Grand Narrative was superb.

*David S. Lee,*  
*2 Old Vicarage Close,*  
*Llanishen,*  
*Cardiff CF14 5UZ*

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## Free Spare Copies

I am writing in case anyone is interested in acquiring back numbers of the Magazine. I have a complete run from the first number up to and including number 58 with only issue number 49 missing. These I wish to dispose of as soon as possible. I do not want any payment, obviously, though I would appreciate postage costs, which will be less than £10, I imagine. I feel reluctance to throw such things away which in my younger years I might have appreciated receiving.

*Jeremy J Bunting,*  
*j.bunting@care4free.net*

If you would like to take advantage of this offer, please contact Jeremy Bunting directly or the Editor will pass on messages to him. – Ed.

*From:*

## A Song Among the Stones

the water lilies pearling the lochs  
ruffled in the tugging of the wind

the sunlight comes wild and strong  
bunches of blown gusts like daffodils

this northernness novembered in a moment  
driven slate-grey in a suddenness of storm

yet this is the place they came to find  
an island thin to the divine

on the edge of the world  
a beauty brittle as a bird's egg

larks spinning songs out of sheer sky  
orchids blowing in hidden glens

and sometimes, just sometimes  
the glory of God in the morning

*Kenneth Steven*

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This poem comes from Kenneth Steven's sequence on the Pappar, *A Song among the Stones*. The Pappar, sixth-century hermits and Celtic Christian monks, sought the divine in the furthest flung landfalls of the Hebrides. It may be they reached Iceland itself.

Kenneth Steven is a poet and writer living in Scotland. There is more information about him on his website [www.kennethsteven.co.uk](http://www.kennethsteven.co.uk)



# SOF Sift

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

*From Clem Cook, London*

Born and bred in Australia, I was brought up in a fundamentalist home with a clergyman father who didn't know the difference between the literal and the metaphorical in any consistent way, in his overwrought, overlong, boring, inarticulate but heartfelt sermons. With compassionate characters, my parents did a lot of charitable and social good, inspired by the bizarrely logical supernatural system they were able to create with texts out of context.

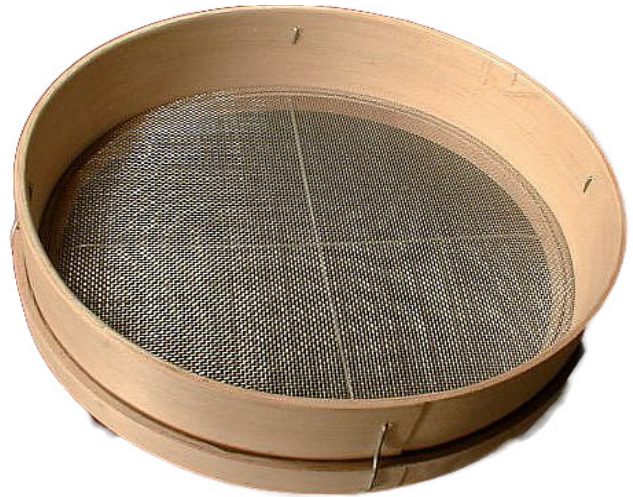
My parents avidly waited for and were preparing themselves and the world for Christ's second coming. Think Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges are not the Only Fruit*, and the autobiographical chapters of David Boulton's *The Trouble with God*; same story, just different names and places. Growing up in that environment made one more than usually self-conscious and easily embarrassed outside 'the sect', and even within it.

A theology degree, plus more study at King's College London, gave me some intellectual rigour, different perspectives and helped systematise my knowledge. *Myth of God Incarnate* authors as lecturers/tutors, Don Cupitt's *Sea of Faith* documentaries, JL Mackie's *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments for and against the Existence of God* were all part of a kaleidoscope of influences on me.

A few years as a clergyman convinced me that I had few answers, was not called to be a social worker and was a thoroughgoing materialist. I told the curious that I was in theory an agnostic but an atheist in practice. The evidence for a traditional God was ambiguous at best and plain contradictory at worst. The purpose of life was to keep busy with absorbing activities so that one was distracted from thinking about the end of all things and the futility of it all.

An LBS MBA and a job in the City helped the distraction enormously. It also added the economic model to understanding life. There is little more pleasurable than a good macro-economic article in the *Financial Times* or the *Economist* on a winter's Saturday night!

Quietly introspective but not introverted, I am clubbable and need community. But in the late 1980s and the 1990s, that community was never church-related or religious. My antagonism to the church and religion, the depression and real fatigue that I felt whenever I thought of a wasted early life in a sub-



culture of dogma, gradually disappeared. Like bereavement, one gets over it.

I've developed a more benign acceptance of religious belief and practice in society. I now see religion as either an evolutionary accident or survival impulse, and still of use socially and psychologically. I have no great burden to persuade churchgoers to see things my way if their faith makes them dance. I practise a religious attitude to life; it is precious and evokes awe and wonder in me. But I don't need supernatural concepts to see 'god' as value, 'god' as life. I go to church rarely and miss it not. Many humanists in my social circles were (and are) too militantly atheistic for my comfort, but then I discovered SOF humanists. I occasionally came across references to SOF in the 1990s, but it was the book *Time and Tide: Sea of Faith beyond the Millennium* that led me to google 'Sea of Faith', join it late 2002, and start regularly attending its gatherings and events from 2003 on. The fellowship these meetings provide is a very comfortable community for me. SOF's demographic profile is a little older than my non-SOF communities but similar educationally.

SOF's literature has been a good friend and is an essential part of my SOF experience: prose and poetry, books, pamphlets, magazines, newsletters 'testimony' compilations, website, and the SOF internet forum. (There are only 60 or so members, a dozen regularly contributing, and the lurking rest of us occasionally interjecting. Where are the rest of you?). This corpus (my bible now?) affirms some ideas, informs others, challenges yet more, changes some, argues and dialogues with me, and lets me know I am not alone. In a sense and in hindsight, this self-selecting self-help group has become my new church for the last eight years. It can be a sometimes lonely and boring journey approaching and struggling against that long good night, the close of day and the dying of the light. I'm grateful for the company.

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Clem Cook is a member of the North London SOF group. Apologies to Barbara Burfoot whose name was misspelt in the last SOF Sift column.

# RED LETTER DAYS

A page which recalls the birthday or death day of people who have made a notable contribution to humanity. Mary Lloyd begins with an artist and a scientist.

22<sup>nd</sup> June: Gwen John



Self Portrait 1912

Gwen John, born 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1876 in Haverfordwest, lost her adored mother, an amateur painter, at the age of eight. She and her little brother, Augustus, both escaped the severe lack of affection of their father's household to study art at the Slade in London. After student days, Gwen settled in France and never returned to Wales. Her passionate nature

led to an obsessive ten-year affair with Rodin, intense but brief involvements with both men and women – and several spiritual crises. From these, she developed a deep serenity, reflected in her painting. At 46, just before Rodin made the final break, she wrote: 'As to whether I have anything worth expressing ... I may never have anything to express, except this desire for a more interior life.'

In Meudon from 1910, she lived alone with her cats, represented in several playful sketches. Painstaking solitary figure studies, depicted in subtle blues, greys and mauves, form the substance of her work. Several portraits of the nuns who had befriended her followed her conversion to Catholicism in 1913, and she described herself as 'God's Little Painter'.

The power and radiance of her work was recognised early by her famous brother, who wrote: 'To me the little paintings are painfully charged with feeling ... rare blossoms from the most delicate of trees. In 50 years' time, I will be known as the brother of Gwen John.'

Sixty years after her death in 1939, posterity has – finally – confirmed his opinion.

25<sup>th</sup> July: Rosalind Franklin

Born 25<sup>th</sup> July 1920 to an affluent Notting Hill Jewish family, Franklin overcame paternal opposition to her passion for science, and gained a 'titular' (women's) degree from Newham College, Cambridge in 1941. Aged twenty, she wrote to her father: 'I agree that faith is essential to success... but I do not accept your definition of faith, i.e. belief in life after death. (My) belief is that by doing our best we shall come nearer to success in our aims – the improvement of the lot of mankind... faith in this world is perfectly possible without faith in another world.'



Granted a 1945 Cambridge PhD, she was appointed as Research Assistant at Kings College, London in 1951. There, her nervous colleague, Maurice Wilkins, regarded her as a mere technician and it was he who, in 1953, gave Franklin's vital X-ray photo to his Cambridge mate James Watson. Eight years later, on New Year's Eve 1961, Francis Crick acknowledged in a private letter that hers 'was the data we actually used'. The 1962 Nobel Prize went to Crick-Watson-Wilkins. Franklin had died of ovarian cancer in 1958. Watson's references to her as 'Rosy' in *The Double Helix* (1968) were only partially ameliorated by Crick's later admission: 'We always used to adopt – let's say – a *patronising* attitude towards her.' But Rosalind Franklin was essentially 'a *de facto* collaborator,' says Dr. Lynne Osman Elkin of California State University. 'I think it should be called the Watson-Crick-Franklin structure.'

Readers are invited to send in nominations for this column. For the next issue please send those with birth or death days between 1 September and 30 November, with a short biography (max. 250 words and, if possible, jpg picture) by post or email to the Editor.

# R

## adio Rockall



### Movie Club Report

Our Movie Club screened a film back in March. On the way in a friend said, 'This is obviously your kind of film'. It portrayed the life of a 19th century, academic, family-loving, English gentleman who was distraught by the death of his eldest daughter. This is not *obviously* my kind of film. In fact that is obviously *not* my kind of film.

However, the film was *Creation*, the gentleman in question was Charles Darwin, and the sub-plot was the forty years gestation of his great work, *On The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, so that is more likely what said friend meant. *Creation* was based on the notes in 'Annie's box', inherited, opened and published by Randal Keynes, Charles Darwin's great, great grandson. Annie's death from a 'bilious fever', probably tuberculosis, cast a long shadow over Darwin's work and his family life but his ideas were well developed by the time Annie died. She had been an inquisitive child who had innocently encouraged his work but her death reinforced his growing view of a world where there was no point, plan or purpose to life. Life simply emerged and changed in a 'natural' way.

Annie's death delivered the more immediate challenge of exacerbating the rift with Charles's wife, Emma. She remained a devout Anglican believer at a time when the six-day myth of creation in Genesis 1 was read literally, not allegorically as the early church had read it, nor as a device to reinforce the Sabbath as the priests who wrote it probably intended for the Israelites in exile to 'keep the faith'.

The younger Darwin would have known the passage about man being made in God's image, on day 6, and having dominion over the animals made earlier in the week. Like many boys the young Charles was quite cruel and as a youthful student hunting and shooting took precedence over his studies, even at Cambridge. However, he passed his examinations and then exchanged his gun for the mightier pen, dropping cruelty for creation.

Darwin would also have known the earlier myth of Genesis 2 where God makes Adam first from the dust

of the ground then makes animals as potential companions for Adam which he names. Darwin would doubtless have mused on these passages as he realised the close affinity of man with all the creatures, in spite of carefully hiding the human connection in *Origin*. He saved that for later.

Early scenes show Darwin's voyage as naturalist on HMS Beagle. It includes the return of three children from Tierra del Fuego cheaply purchased from the natives on an earlier voyage. They had been named York Minster, Fuegia Basket and Jeremy Button, tamed with English manners and returned as missionaries. They failed wonderfully but it caused Darwin to wonder on the scope of human development. As part of his research, Darwin observed a lonely orangutan in a zoo. It, too, had been captured, then caged, clothed and called Julie. In the film, Charles often tells Annie her favourite story: Julie's sad life and death.

Charming scenes show Charles, with his children, quietly observing animals on the beach or in the woods. A fox leaps on a rabbit and one child cries, 'Daddy it's not fair'. He agrees but adds that even Mr Fox must eat. The film poignantly portrays the rift between Charles and Emma by the manner of Emma's piano playing, by their gradually more stilted conversation and by the delicate scenes of their separation in bed.

The film peaks with Charles completing his book and bringing it to Emma for judgement: either it is to be consigned to the fire by her hand or it goes for publication – but not before she has read it. Emma settles to read the daunting manuscript. Then we see the bonfire smoke but Emma emerges from the house with a parcel addressed to John Murray, Publishers. The final scene shows Charles slowly walking back to his house not with Emma but with Annie. We are left with the vision of Annie as the vital inspiration of one of the world's top ten books containing one of the top five greatest ideas of all time. We're all animals now.

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*Creation*, starring Jennifer Connelly and real-life husband Paul Bettany, was released on DVD ON 18 January 2010.

# Equality is Better for Everyone

Denis Gildea reviews

## *The Spirit Level*

by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett

Penguin revised pbk edition (London 2010). 346 pages. £9.99.

Five years ago Richard Layard published *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science* (reviewed in *Sofia* 73, September 2005), which showed clearly that our pursuit of wealth beyond a modest level did not make us happy. He also researched what kind of things increased or diminished the happiness of individuals, mainly by asking them in polls. But even after our faith in the infallibility of market forces, and the objective of maximising profits, incomes and consumption was badly shaken in October 2008, we have still not transferred our objective to The Greatest Happiness.

Now, in a similar direction, we have a really solid work based on masses of published statistics, leading to the conclusion, in one sentence: 'The evidence shows that reducing inequality of incomes is the best way of improving the quality of the social environment, and so the real quality of life for all of us, including the better-off.'

The authors collected data for health and social problems in 23 rich countries, and related them to the degree of inequality in each country, measured as the top fifth of incomes divided by the bottom fifth. The points covered were:

- Level of Trust
- Mental Illness, including addiction to drink and drugs
- Life expectancy and infant mortality
- Obesity
- Children's educational performance
- Teenage births
- Homicides
- Imprisonment rates
- Social mobility

The middle part of this book contains the statistical research. If you find seeing so many graphs a bit daunting, don't be put off. They are all basically the same graph, with different figures, and they yield some fascinating comparisons. But you can skip them and just read the text. The main thing that stands out is that USA is the worst for inequality and pretty well all the problems, and is followed next by UK and Portugal. The winners are usually Scandinavia and Japan. It confirms my previous impression that UK was not too bad for inequality before about 1980. This

is the most solid reading, but since the method is repeated, you can go a bit faster or do some skipping if you want to.

Part 3, 'A Better Society', is diverse and fascinating, relating this new measure to some other ideas and ideals we may already have, and eventually coming to what we can do about it. It deals with the point that correlation is not the same as causality. It

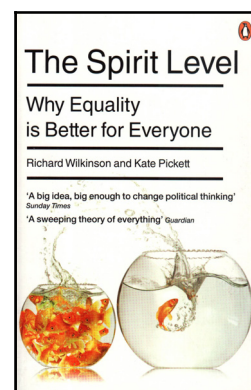
compares us to the apes and to stone-age men, who were better than we are at equality and sharing, and goes into the psychology. Social status stratification and competition are the opposite of friendship and giving. Corporate power and the developing world are dealt with. Co-ownership with participation is recommended as an alternative to the stock exchange system. The quickest move to equality took place in the 1940s, with rationing and an enthusiastic people working together. The idealism continued for some thirty years, and included the formation of the European Community and the development of some conscience about the Third World, until around 1980, when we had the big reversal to the sanctity of market forces, and maximising profit, income and status. The measure of the success of government economic policy is Economic Growth, but the rich countries must abandon this for reasons of sustainability and climate change. Moving towards equality is very nearly a panacea for all our common problems. The book finds many signs that show some progress.

Writing during the election campaign, I note that the word 'fairness' is creeping in, but there is not yet any mention of Equality, and no party seems to want to tax the rich with a properly progressive income tax, as we had in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. I am filled with enthusiasm about this book, and hope many of us will read it, and then visit [www.equalitytrust.org.uk](http://www.equalitytrust.org.uk) and give the movement some support.

One point that fascinated me was what the authors meant by the main title *The Spirit Level*. I looked in the index, and could not find spirit, or spirituality, or morality, or faith (though plenty about trust); and only two mentions of happiness. Who better than members of SOF to make some connections?

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Denis Gildea is a retired civil servant and a long-standing member of SOF Network.



## David Paterson reviews *Prosperity without Growth*

by Tim Jackson

Earthscan (London 2009) Hbk. 264 pages. £12.99.

Happiness does not depend on affluence, and economic growth is not essential for stability. Blindingly obvious or fundamentally unacceptable? This book is written to challenge the assumptions of economists, politicians and the press, who appear to fall into the second category. For those in the first category the book is a joy to read: well written and researched, informative, intelligent, persuasive and witty. Will it change the way we think and plan human activities. Will it save our planet?

Looking back in my parish magazines (St. Peter's Loughborough) in 1977, I find the conclusions expressed by Tim Jackson's book debated there at some length. Why weren't we listened to then? One of the problems was terminology. The language of worth, wealth, and affluence had been hijacked to refer almost exclusively to what could be measured in money terms. Tim gets over this with a less compromised term: 'shared prosperity'. Prosperity is about things going well for us: in accordance with our hopes and expectations. In poorer countries, economic growth clearly **is** still necessary for prosperity, and the statistics confirm this; but in the developed countries life expectancy, access to education, feelings of contentment, and any other index of 'going well with us' do not continue to rise as the economy grows still further. The book quotes striking statistics. No surprise to some; but confirming it scientifically will make a lot of difference to sceptics and to interests vested in the status quo.

Tim sympathetically expounds the conventional view that economic growth is essential for human well-being, and tests its validity. If material commodities are indeed vital for social functioning, enough is never enough. That's a recipe for growing anxiety. Production generates wages to spend on commodities, providing profit and enabling greater production. At the same time greater labour efficiency (bringing larger profits) either drives yet more production or leads to unemployment, and so to a loss in wages, either to save (as capital) or to spend on the goods produced. The whole system works because it grows. It is unstable when it stops growing, so must grow for ever! On a finite planet! To the

detriment of altruism and social concern, the institutions of consumer society favour the relentless pursuit of individualism and novelty – necessary to keep the system from collapsing.

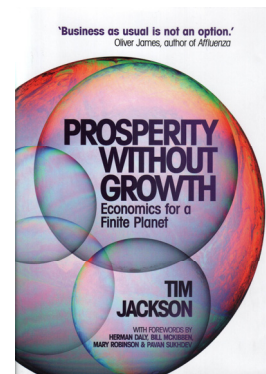
For sustainable stability, a whole raft of policies is needed, says Tim, to strengthen communities and build social capital – public spaces, green jobs, less geographical labour mobility, lifelong learning... Tighter regulation of advertising, stronger trading standards, a reversal of the practice of built-in obsolescence, opportunities for people to flourish by using their capabilities for the common good; in short, recognition that resources are limited and we must plan to make better use of them. To quote Barack Obama, 'We will be called upon to take part in a shared sacrifice and shared prosperity.'

We must establish sustainable targets and emission budgets; reform the tax system; make room for the poorer countries to grow and flourish; invest in infrastructures which promote economic activity with low footprint; tackle inequality; dismantle the culture of consumerism.

Tim does not explore how the restriction of advertising might affect communication networks which at present depend on it. The spiralling effect of wars and the arms trade is not considered, and neither is the global monetary system, based on debt and speculation. I think there are further assumptions which must ultimately be challenged.

I was struck by the parallels between two of humanity's greatest creations – god and money. We have worshipped them, built power bases (religion and economics), which we have regarded as supernatural, and used them to excuse ourselves from responsibility for our actions (religious wars, 'market forces'). They are both excellent creations: vital tools, but ugly masters.

I looked up Tim's 2007 Conference talk *Where on Earth will it End?* (*Sofia* 85 September 2007): 'Tim Jackson argues that consumerism is a false "theodicy", a doomed attempt to come to terms with the existence of suffering and evil in our lives. To counter it we need to understand it and build alternatives'. We must help our politicians to listen.



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David Paterson is a SOF Trustee and runs the Oxford SOF group.



## Anthony Freeman reflects on *This Life on Earth*

edited by Dinah Livingstone

SOF (Newcastle-upon-Tyne 2009) Pbk. 166 pages. £9.50.

The contributions to this collection – 23 in prose and 16 poems – are personal, in some cases intimate, and largely autobiographical reflections on ‘this life on Earth’. In many cases the authors are known to the reviewer and have shared similar experiences, some of these together at SOF conferences in the 1990s. So a detached critical review of the book is neither possible nor appropriate: instead I shall offer, in the spirit of the whole enterprise, an account of my personal response as I read the pieces and reflected on them.

First of all, I was struck by how much of an age we were, the writers and their reader (with some representatives of the immediately previous generation, but no-one significantly younger). It set me to wondering how far my sense of being in tune with what I read was a result of having been brought up in the same immediate post-war period, and how much to do with being within ten years of life’s allotted span here on Earth. Would a 60-year-old in twenty years time, or a 40-year-old reading the book today, feel a similar resonance? And which would be more likely to?

My second reaction was to the way a single word or phrase could trigger a whole raft of memories from my own past. Penny Mawdsley’s mention of Bodfari (the village in North Wales where she now lives) brought alive in sharp detail a long-forgotten family holiday there. As a stropky teenager I refused to visit the Swallow Falls at Betws-y-coed, because there would be a charge, and it was immoral to make people pay to see a wonder of nature. Or Tony Windross’s reference to ‘the indefatigable Ronald Pearse, to whom many of us are hugely indebted’ – Amen and amen to that!

Other passages simply put into words exactly my own thoughts and feelings, such as this from fellow-priest David Paterson: “‘God’ is totally unnecessary as an explanation of the world, but a wonderful aid to understanding our place in it. ‘Do you believe in God?’ – ‘With all my heart and mind and strength.’ ‘Do you think God exists?’ – ‘No, I don’t think the question even makes sense.’” Praise the Lord that, like me, David has found a welcoming priest and appreciative

congregation now that his days of stipendiary ministry are over.

The poetry section I shall pass over, because my taste in verse (I use the word advisedly) falls far short of the poems selected by the book’s editor (herself a poet) and this is, after all, a personal reflection.

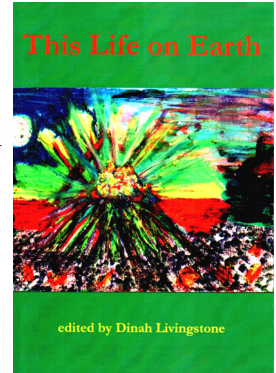
Unfashionable they may be, but boyhood favourites driven forward by strong rhythm and narrative, like Chesterton’s *Lepanto* and Macaulay’s *Horatius*, still get my vote. I couldn’t help noting that for suitable poetic submissions Dinah had to go beyond the boundary of the SOF Network. This gave me a slightly disconcerting sense of comfort (if that is not a contradiction) that my preference in this regard might be another characteristic shared by fellow SOFers.

Several contributors picked up on the ecological aspect of ‘this life on Earth’. These discussions challenged me to ask about the most appropriate perspective for those who ‘explore religious faith as a human creation’ to view the planet and its future: and the only answer I could make sense of was the human perspective. That immediately eliminates any concern for the long-term course of world – from ball of fire to block of ice in however-many-billion years – which is beyond our care or comprehension. Only the short-term fate of the environment concerns us, and note that it concerns only us. Ecology, sustainability, global warming – the whole shooting match – is a purely human problem and we need to be honest about this.

This is not to say we should not climb aboard the environmental bandwagon, but we do need to acknowledge that it is *our* environment, and we seek to protect it for our own sake and for no-one else’s. No other species worries about the future. No other plant or animal cares about bio-diversity, or even about the future of its own kind, beyond the instinctive reproduction of the next generation. We alone do care – and our language of a creator God shows how passionately we care – for ‘this life on Earth’; but let’s not tarnish our perfectly legitimate self-concern with the altruistic myth of doing it ‘for the planet’.

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Anthony Freeman is honorary assistant priest at Creden parish church and a former editor of this magazine.



## Cicely Herbert visits the Jewish Museum in London.

After the Second World War ended, like most English children of the time, I was spared of any knowledge of the horrors of the Nazi holocaust. When a German woman, with two young children, came to be matron at my boarding school, I am ashamed to record that we all assumed that they were 'the enemy.' It was many years before I understood that they must have been a Jewish family, refugees from one of the greatest crimes against humanity in all history. Today, more than 60 years since the war ended, it is more important than ever that young people should learn the history of the attempted extermination of an entire generation of ordinary human beings.

I have now made two visits to the redesigned and extended Jewish Museum in Camden Town, London, and there is still much to discover. Visitors may be surprised to learn that Jewish people are recorded as having lived in England at the time of the Norman Conquest. Apparently the king encouraged merchants and bankers to come here in order to 'stimulate the economy.' The earliest exhibit one encounters at the museum is a 'Mikveh', a medieval ritual bath recently uncovered during excavations in the City of London, and one can imagine an earlier version of our city businessmen enjoying the spa.

One gallery is devoted to the exploration of a range of traditional festivals, weddings, funerals, Hanukah (the festival of lights), Passover and Bar Mitzvahs. Here one gains a sense of the closeness of family ties, and of the respect accorded to the adults by the younger members of the community. As the excellent catalogue notes, 'Objects play an important role in the performance of rituals' that, 'together with special costumes, foods, customs and recitation make the ritual memorable and promote a sense of shared experience and of belonging.'

Among the collections of artefacts and artworks on display are many beautifully illustrated Hebrew manuscripts and prayer books, and also prints and paintings by Gillray and by Rowlandson whose disturbing cartoons often go far beyond humour in the portrayal of the Jewish people.

A recent and particularly interesting acquisition is

an enormous, seventeenth-century Italian carved synagogue ark, built from walnut and generously gilded with carved panels depicting Jewish emblems. It was found in a servant's bedroom in Chillingham Castle, in the wilds of Northumberland, where for many years it had served as his wardrobe. This capacious closet is in sharp contrast to the leather travelling trunk belonging to the refugee Kohnstamm family, in which, during the 1930s, they packed the few belongings they were able to take with them to England.

My father-in-law, whom I never knew, arrived in England around the turn of the last century, at the time of the Great Migration, when many people escaping persecution arrived in Britain from eastern Europe. For me, one of the most moving images is the photograph of newly arrived immigrant boys, who face the camera with solemn, bewildered faces, a picture

which nevertheless seems to convey their courage and the hope for a better future that they must have felt. The East End of London, and in particular the Spitalfields area, known as 'Little Jerusalem,' became, for many years, the heart of the Jewish community in Britain.

Charity work has always played an important part in Jewish life and by the time the 'Aliens Act' was passed in 1905, restricting further immigration, there were innumerable charities operating in London and over forty philanthropic

institutions were set up to raise funds for charity. That tradition continues today. My partner, a clarinetist of some distinction, plays for the London International Orchestra, which works to raise funds for good causes, generously supported by a philanthropist who prefers to remain anonymous.

It is impossible to do justice to all aspects of the collections in this superb museum, and I have hardly touched on many of the areas to be explored there. The central section of the museum, and the one that should be seen by everyone, especially by all young people, is the Holocaust Gallery. Here one learns the life story of one man, Leon Greenman, who was born in Whitechapel in 1910, and who by the start of the second world war, was living in Holland with his wife and baby son Barney. On display are a lock of baby's hair, a home-made toy truck, and a tiny pair of leather shoes, which had been repaired by Leon using 'layers of rubber from a tyre.' The shoes survived. Barney and his mother, transported to Auschwitz, did not.



# Waving, Not Drowning

*First Scan of Jenny Pearson, 19/7/1984*

I see you  
I really do!  
Rolling around  
Turning.  
Like an astronaut  
Caught almost on a juddering film.  
First head is to the fore  
Then back perhaps  
Now feet.

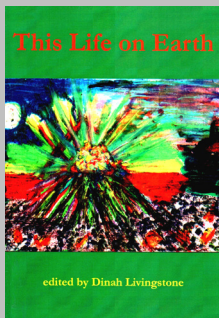
You flicker,  
An outline on the screen  
So near and yet so far.

Your arm jerks...  
Are you waving to the world?

*John Pearson*

‘The present life of man, O king, seems to me, in comparison with that time which is unknown to us, like to the swift flight of a sparrow through the room wherein you sit at supper in winter, with your commanders and ministers, and a good fire in the midst, whilst the storms of rain and snow prevail abroad; the sparrow, I say, flying in at one door, and immediately out at another, whilst he is within, is safe from the wintry storm; but after a short space of fair weather, he immediately vanishes out of your sight, into the dark winter from which he had emerged. So this life of man appears for a short space, but of what went before, or what is to follow, we are utterly ignorant.’

*The Venerable Bede*



## This Life on Earth

edited by

Dinah Livingstone

### **SOF's latest publication**

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' or 'SOF'.

## The Visitor

A small intruder came last night,  
in from winter's cold; wild transient,  
makes himself invisible awhile, soundless  
among the plates and cupboard tops.

In panic he meets me on the stairs,  
this blue-green titmouse, dainty bill agape;  
gripping the lamp flex, leaning out,  
a raffish boatman at the shrouds.

Softly, I draw the curtain back, let down  
the window sash, and make a soft *tsk! tsk!*  
to show there's no great danger in his way.  
He reads me, sees, seems to smell the dark

and in two moves, flicks his weightless,  
feathered self, first to the outer folds; then,  
like Bede's lone sparrow, trades warmth,  
light and company, for endless night.

*Mike Bannister*

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Mike Bannister's most recent collection is *Pocahontas in Ludgate* (Arrowhead Press, Darlington 2007). He runs the Café Poets in Halesworth, Suffolk.

A photograph of a dense forest. The scene is filled with tall, slender tree trunks and a thick canopy of green leaves. In the foreground, there are several large, green ferns and other leafy plants. The lighting is somewhat dim, suggesting a shaded forest environment. The text is overlaid in the upper portion of the image.

It makes you wonder  
how you keep from going under.  
It's like a jungle sometimes.