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Religion and Social Justice
CONFERENCE ISSUE



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Back cover: Archbishop Tutu with Kumi Naidoo on the 18th day of his 21-day fast in solidarity with the people of Zimbabwe in 2009.



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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.

Religion and Social Justice

The SOF Annual Conference in Leicester was on religion and social justice. Three speakers, two panel discussions and a large variety of workshops approached this enormous subject in a variety of ways. This issue of *Sofia* is very pleased to be able to publish the talks given by Kumi Naidoo, now Executive Director of Greenpeace, an activist for many years in the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa; and of Mariam Namazie, President of the Council of ex-Muslims of Britain, who spoke about the threat posed by allowing Sharia Law in Britain. She described some of the horrors of Sharia Law, as practised by Islamist states such as Iran, and explained that the civil code, which deals with women's rights in marriage and the family, is part and parcel of the criminal code that stones women to death for adultery.

Of course, the role of religion in bringing about social justice has been both negative and positive. Jesus preached the kingdom of God, a kingdom or reign of kindness – justice and peace – on Earth, which is good news for the poor and oppressed, and after them for all of us. This good news is both personal and political. The world is turned upside down. The kingdom belongs *first and foremost* to the poor. The disciples found this idea very shocking; they probably thought wealth was a proof of God's favour. They were scandalised.

Justice is *habeas corpus*. Have body. Have a body. Have your own body. Own your own body. That is what the Christian tradition has given us, a body, the body of Christ. Jesus identified with the poor. He said if you gave food to anyone who was hungry or drink to anyone who was thirsty you did it to me. He came into conflict with the ruling powers and was crucified: so he identified with the victims of history. In the story of his resurrection he was vindicated and still lives on. The early Christians, Paul in particular, thought of him as inaugurating a new humanity, called the body of Christ. Alongside the kingdom, the 'reign of kindness', this is another image of a good society, in which we are all members of one another and co-operate for the common good. Now as well as *habeas corpus*: have a body, it is *esses corpus*: be a body.

And here again there is something scandalous: that body was broken, crucified. If we look at humanity as a single body today, or if you like, if we look for Christ's body on Earth today, we have to look where it's crucified, where people are suffering, especially where they are suffering from 'the sin of the world': unjust wars, unjust terms of trade, oppression, lust for profit at any cost and so on. When suffering people struggle to overcome their lot, seek a better life, this has been called a hope of resurrection, so that the

body of Christ, humanity, may become a glorious body. That story has constantly inspired people struggling for justice, a kinder society, a more humane humanity on Earth. For example, in England it inspired the Diggers' leader Gerrard Winstanley, who called their action of digging up St George's Hill 'Christ rising again in the sons and daughters.' Likewise, the twentieth-century Nicaraguan Revolution spoke of downtrodden people struggling for a better life as Christ rising again: 'your struggle goes on and you're rising again.'

Christianity has a very powerful and resonant message of human fulfilment, both personal: each person has the right of *habeas corpus*; and social/political: each person has the right to *esses corpus*, to be part of society, to belong as a respected member to the social body, the body politic.

But what about the Church? Of course the Church has often allied itself with domineering and sometimes unjust worldly powers and at times has itself become a worldly power, even an unjust worldly power. It has committed horrendous abuses, particularly against women. But that powerful message of justice and peace has permeated and inspired our culture as a dream of possibility. Many other campaigners for justice right up to our own day have been inspired by that vision: the poorest he, and of course the poorest she, hath a life to live. That was the vision which inspired twentieth century reforms such as the National Health Service.

That is the vision – for the whole of humanity. In a globalised world it has to be a global vision. We know that many people living in third World countries suffer massive unjust poverty and other woes, one cause of which is an unjust world order. But what about the West? Of course, in some ways we are now a more compassionate society and we have made great advances and in medicine, technology and so on. Many people's lives are much more comfortable than they were in the past. But we simply cannot say that the West has now realised and embodied Christian principles. We note the many abuses of the poor and of prisoners in the richest Western country, the USA. In England we have a new coalition government with 18 millionaires in the full time cabinet of 23, whose inaugural budget has sided with the rich, and totally failed to tax the rich or the banks fairly... So we must conclude that the Christian gospel is good news and an inspiring vision of human fulfilment and a just society, but here in the West, and a great deal more so globally, we still have a long way to go and may not have left ourselves much time to do it in.

The Idea of God as our Maker

Two extracts from Don Cupitt's new book *Theology's Strange Return* brilliantly describe how it was our *idea* of God that made us humans what we are, beings capable of science and ethics.

1. In the earliest times the world appeared as a theatre in which extremely violent non-rational forces contended ceaselessly with each other. But as religious thought developed, those mythic forces gradually became mythic beings, then powers, and then true *spirits* distinct from, and with knowledge of and power over, the sites with which they were associated. The spirits became gods and in due course they became an organised, sovereign body controlled by an ancient sky-father, who himself then gradually developed towards being the One Nature-transcending God of monotheism, and when full monotheism is reached, all Nature is seen as being subject to a single regime of law. Now, understand that in this whole story we humans were certainly not merely indulging in a compensatory fantasy. No: we were gradually and in theological form developing the all-important idea that there could be, and even that there already was, a unified, law-governed, intelligible and even controllable cosmic order out there; and correspondingly that there could be an autonomous, mobile, self-possessed, rationally unified kind of self that stands back a little from Nature, knows all that is happening, and can guide and control events in order to secure the fulfilment of its purposes. If God can be such a self, perhaps by getting closer to him we can get to be like that, too...

[The earliest humans] had some social institutions and skills. But they hardly had any unified, rational reflective selfhood of their own, and they could not make any progress until they had developed more organised, unified, law-abiding conceptions of the world, society and the self. They were too hard-pressed to be able to do any of these things directly: they had to do them 'heterologously', through religion. It was religious thought that first drafted and then slowly clarified our ideas about the world, about law, about reason and about active selfhood. Religious ideas such as the idea of God have functioned as regulative ideals for us to aspire after: *we too* could become unified and capable subjects; *we too* could learn how to know the world and reshape our environment to meet our own needs.

And so it happened. Over some thousands of years God created us in his own image, as the idea of God gradually called into being the modern human self.

2. As all this happens, the emergent One God hauls us humans along with himself, so that we can still be lesser counterparts of himself. Like him we can learn to project out an orderly, intelligible world around ourselves, like God we can plan and implement a great moral purpose. The idea that when we build our natural philosophy we learn 'to think God's thoughts after him', profoundly influenced the rise of early modern physics in the seventeenth-century West between Galileo and Newton, so close to each other are the ideas of God and the self. Our science actually arose in the Cartesian belief that we can know the world as God knows it. The same principle holds in the ethical realm: we first imagined God as *covenanting* himself to his creation, pledging himself to uphold its order, and then as *covenanting* himself ethically to his chosen people; and only *then* did we become capable of developing and theorising all the *human* ethical ideas of vowing, contracting, promising, undertaking, covenanting and pledging. Indeed, God demands of us mimesis, reciprocity, copying of his ethical nature. He had himself become ethical, and now he taught us ethics.

So it goes on: modern secular people, laying down the law, building their worlds, doing their science and technology, and also signing their contracts and making promises, are still recognisably the children of the God in whom their ancestors believed. So God returns indirectly and reminds us of himself even within a culture that has been secular-humanist since the rise of the modern novel two centuries ago. We still have the old God's thumbprints all over us. Long, long ago, through the slow evolution of ancient theology, we made spirits, and finally God, in the image of what we obscurely knew we wanted to become; *and it worked*, as God then remade us in his own image, and gave us something of his old world-mastery. Now, long afterwards, after the Death of God, we ourselves are God's legacy, his testament.

Extract 1 is from pages 31-3 and extract 2 from pages 90-91 of *Theology's Strange Return*. Don Cupitt discussed this idea briefly in the closing panel of the SOF Annual Conference in Leicester. His latest book, *A Great New Story*, retells Christianity's classic salvation-narrative along similar lines. It is to appear in December from the Polebridge Press of Salem, OR.

Witness, Wisdom and Justice

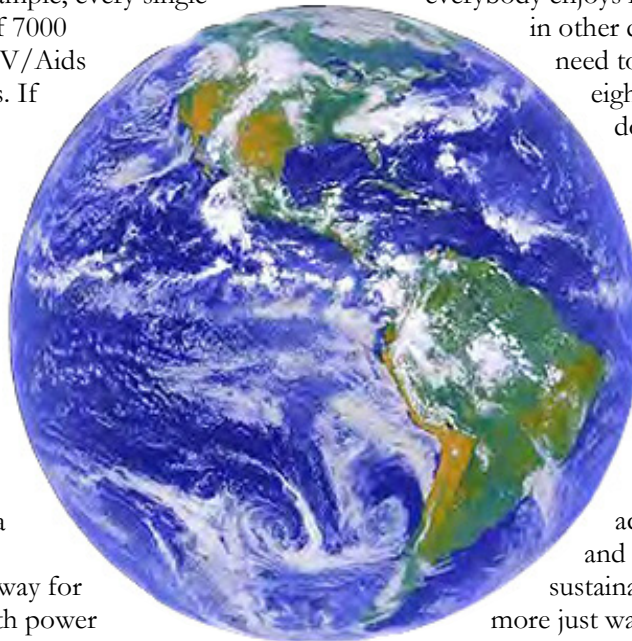
Kumi Naidoo, Executive Director of Greenpeace International, spoke about the struggle for social justice in the context of rapid climate change.

My dear brothers and sister, the moment of world history we are living in can be described as 'a perfect storm'. What we have seen over the last three years has been a convergence of a range of crises that have hit humanity repeatedly in the solar plexus, one after the other. First, three years ago, we had the fuel price crisis. And, as you all know, when we have a fuel price crisis, a food price crisis usually follows immediately. And it was just two years ago that sixty countries had food riots as a result of hikes in food price. Even though, by the way, fuel prices came down, food prices didn't come down proportionately after the fuel prices dropped. Then, we have an ongoing poverty crisis, which takes the lives of 50,000 men and children every single day – from preventable causes. It is important that we understand the poverty crisis we face. On my continent, for example, every single day this crisis takes the lives of 7000 people by malaria, 6000 by HIV/Aids and 1500 or so by tuberculosis. If you want to put this in a common global narrative on the time we live in, you could say that it's the equivalent of five September 11th every single day – in terms of loss of human life.

I want to put it to you that the poverty crisis is not simply a sad situation, a tragic situation, an unfortunate situation; the poverty crisis is a daily silent tsunami or passive genocide that has been under way for such a long time and those with power who can make the difference, both in developing and developed countries, have not exercised the leadership, courage, wisdom and morality that this calls for. We have now the climate crisis and, according to Kofi Annan's global humanitarian forum, in 2008 alone we can now document 300,000 dying directly from climate impacts. It is important, therefore, that we understand that it was only when the financial crisis hit, that the most powerful of our political leaders both in government and in business really stood up and said: 'We are in a crisis and we need to do something different'. But let's look for a moment at how they have responded to the crisis. Let's just think about the world we live in for a few minutes more.

According to United Nations' development programme, what Western Europe and North America spend on pet food annually could provide the entire African continent with three nutritional meals per day; what the European Union spends daily on subsidising every European cow to the tune of two Euros a day is more than most people on this planet have to survive on a daily basis. I have got nothing against cows or pets: the issue is this deep structural inequality that manifests itself time and time again when we look at how out of balance our world is between those richer and poorer parts. This has to be addressed with a level of moral courage that we have not seen.

The WWF – the World Wildlife Fund – points out that if we were to deliver the quality of life that everybody enjoys in, say, the United Kingdom or in other developed countries, we would need to have the equivalent of six to eight planets. The problem is, we don't have a plan B in terms of addressing this accumulation of crises, with the climate crisis driving things rapidly forward. We don't have a plan B, because, quite frankly, we don't have a planet B. This is the one planet we have: a finite reality. This situation must now challenge us into thinking about how we actually deliver to our children and grandchildren a more sustainable, a more peaceful and a more just way of living for the future. When we think about poverty, it is very important that we actually understand the contradictions in terms of how poverty manifests itself.



We don't have a planet B

As an African, I can tell you that it pains me when people talk about Africa as a basket case. When Tony Blair said that Africa was the scar on the conscience of humanity – people judge him differently: some think he is serious about making a difference, others say that he was trying to rehabilitate his Iraq war image – but irrespective of what his intention was, the reality of even those that sought and seek to support Africa and other parts of the developing world has often been done in a paternalistic way, which does not exude

solidarity and a sense of common humanity. So, when we think about Africa, I say that Africa is one of the richest continents underneath the ground and precisely because we're one of the richest continents underneath the ground, we're one of the poorest continents above the ground. It is great to see the focus now on the Gulf of Mexico oil spill – the tragedy that it is – but ask yourself, why we haven't heard as much about the Niger Delta oil spill, which has been going on for years and years and years, when both the actual quantity of the spillage and its impact have been significantly higher than what we have seen in the Gulf. Shell has not paid compensation anywhere like as high as the compensation BP is going to pay to the residents of Louisiana and so on. Obviously, BP should pay this money, but is the value of the human beings living on the Gulf of Mexico coastline any greater than the value of those that live on the Niger Delta environments?

***trillions* to bail out the banks – not a fraction of that to help poor countries**

It is important that, right now, we – the people who are concerned about justice and social justice – continue to tell the story of where injustice is happening, and to tell it in honest ways, even if telling those stories actually puts our lives in danger and calls upon us to make sacrifices. So when we think about the climate crisis, specifically, you might have heard that last year, in the run-up to the Copenhagen summit, religious groups, trade unions, NGOs and so on all worked together to deliver what we called a fair, ambitious and binding treaty – in short what we called a 'FAB' treaty, not a fabulous treaty but a fair, ambitious and binding treaty. Sadly, what we got was a 'FLAB' treaty, pardon my French. What we got was a treaty full of loopholes. But around Copenhagen, people started to talk about climate injustice, or about climate justice as their demand. The thinking behind that demand was this: people in poor countries have been the least responsible for the climate catastrophe that we find ourselves in, but they are the ones who are paying the first and most brutal price for it. I'm sure most of you know about the genocide in Darfur. When the genocide in Darfur is projected in the global media, it's solely seen as an ethnic conflict, but actually the biggest driver of the Darfurian conflict is water scarcity and land scarcity – with ethnicity being manipulated in that context, as we have seen in so many different conflicts around the world.

I never thought I would start a sentence the way I am going to start my next one. I strongly support the CIA and the Pentagon when they say that climate change is probably the biggest threat to safety and

security in the future. If we think that today's wars are being fought about oil, if we do not get it right and if we do not find a way in which we can share this planet in a more equitable way then, sadly, I must say that what we will end up with, is a catastrophe that will mean that many of the values we hold will be violated.

So, when we witness the world in that way, what wisdom, then, should we bring to it? I want to just quote Albert Einstein, when he once said: 'When you are addressing a big problem, don't use the same thinking, logic and framework that got you into the problem in the first place.' Responding to the financial crisis, our political leaders did not respond to the convergence of all these crises coming together. And one of the things we have to push back against is treating each of these crises as stand-alone, un-interconnected crises. For example, the inter-connections between poverty and the environment are obvious. We need to see the connection between gender equality and climate change, because if climate change is going to be a driver of war and conflict, we know that in war and conflict it is women and children who pay the biggest price. Of course, there is a connection when we think about gender equality and women's rights. You can make any number of connections. But our political leaders decided they could say to the world that they would find not millions, not billions, but *trillions* of dollars to bail out the banks, the bankers and the bonuses – the very folks who actually contributed to getting us into the mess in the first place. At the same time, they could not find a fraction of that money to help poor countries who – in the Pacific island states, in parts of Africa and so on – already have to think about moving people who are in the process of becoming climate refugees.

What wisdom do we take from the world we witness right now? A key question that we have to ask ourselves is: how do we make change happen in a way that will secure this planet for our children and the future? What does history teach us? If we look at all the major injustices that humanity has faced over time, whether it was slavery, whether it was apartheid, whether it was a woman's right to choose, whether it was the civil rights movement in the United States, all only began to be addressed when decent men and women said: 'Enough is enough and no more' and were willing to step up to the plate and say, as Nelson Mandela said as he went to court: 'The struggle to end racial discrimination is a cause I am prepared to live for and, if needs be, it's a cause I am prepared to die for.' And if you think about all the struggles, colonialism included, it took Rosa Parkes, the African-American woman who helped liberate those that lived in slavery in the United States, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Junior and a range of other people

who were willing to put their lives on the line. Importantly, at the time when they were willing to put their lives on the line, they were called terrorists, communists and a whole range of other derogatory words. Today, it's very interesting that, in South Africa for example, you'll struggle to find a single white South African in South Africa who actually supported apartheid! I mean you just can't find anybody; I don't know how that system survived!

We have to ask ourselves: how does change happen? And if I look at the struggle against apartheid, I can say that one of the critical success factors of that struggle was that people of faith and people who were secular were able to come together and find common ground. I would say that as a 15-year-old high school student, I was expelled from school for engaging in a protest against apartheid education; I should confess that we didn't really understand much as 15-year-olds, but we knew enough. When we drove in a bus to school from our townships to the centre of town, we passed white neighbourhoods where we would see really nice schools with grass on the ground and that kind of stuff – things that you never had in the townships. And so we had enough. (On a lighter note, the slogan at the front of the march in 1980, the first protest I participated in, was: 'We want equality.' By the time the slogan got to the back of the march, the young folks at the back of the march were shouting: 'We want a colour TV!') But be that as it may, with the limited knowledge that we had, we got involved and I remember how I felt at that stage: a young 15-year-old, angry and somewhat militant. Then we were expelled from school for engaging in that protest. There was a public meeting, called by some of our leaders, to launch a campaign to get us reinstated in school. There was a priest called Rev Paddy Carney, and the law the government had just passed was a law saying that if you burnt the South African flag you would get five to fifteen years in prison. Paddy Carney gave the speech, which is one that I hold dear in my heart, because it was the speech that shifted me away from thinking that the struggle was between white and black, and got me to think that it was between injustice and justice. He said, very eloquently: 'What is a flag? A flag is nothing more than a representation of the government.' Then he said: 'What is a human being? A human being is nothing more than a representation on God on Earth.' And then he said: 'If this government violates the representations of God on Earth every single day in a thousand different ways, what right does it have to expect anybody to honour the apartheid regime's flag?'

But what I saw in my activism days in South Africa was that the faith community provided us with courage, with moral leadership, with confidence actually to stand up against one of the most brutal

regimes. I want to suggest to you right now that we have the opportunity to stand up and be counted. I think that the faith community is already engaging in the struggles of poverty, as they have been doing for a long time, but they have only embraced the issue of climate change quite intensively over the last decade. I could take you religion, by religion, by religion, but for lack of time, all I would say is that whether it's Buddhism, or Islam, or different parts of Christianity, things are happening in the faith community. There is a simple reason for that. In all our scriptures – whether it's our holy books from Islam, Christianity, Judaism, or Hinduism – you can find very clear guidance, in the context of taking care of what God has created, that we should be treating all form of human life – all forms of life, not only us as humans – with much more dignity and respect.



Nelson Mandela walks free from prison

The reason I was so keen to come to this meeting was to sharpen my own thinking. But I also wanted to say that I do not believe that Greenpeace, WWF, Friends of the Earth and all the more secular-oriented environmental organisations can succeed on their own. They have been twenty years ahead in terms of warning us, but the politicians have not heeded those warnings. Neither has the corporate sector. One of the reasons they have not felt the need to heed is because, I think, the voices of the faith community were not strongly heard in those debates, even though it has now started happening. I think that we have to ensure that people like myself, who are in the secular part of social justice movements, have to open up more space for our brothers and sisters in the faith communities. Not only to participate, but to be part of the leadership, moving forward.

This brings me to my third wisdom: what history teaches us. How do we get our politicians to listen to us? We write to them; when there are elections, we vote. But sadly, in many countries round the world, when people go to vote in elections today, they are not going to vote for the best candidate, they are going to vote for the least bad candidate. People are not enthused about formal electoral democracy today, and so we march peacefully, if we get permission to march in certain societies. We hold rock concerts. We hold prayer meetings. We hold bake sales. We do house-to-house lobbying to educate people, but here's the reality: throughout world history, there are very few instances where those that held power gave it away voluntarily. It is only, history teaches us, when people are willing to engage in civil disobedience, when they are willing to break the law peacefully, if necessary, that change actually happens. It might not have happened, for example, if Mahatma Gandhi hadn't led the salt march, with waves of people marching peacefully in India, only to get beaten by the British authorities. But that image went around the world and outraged global public opinion, even at that time, minus email, Twitter, Facebook and all the other new gadgetries that we have to deal with these days.

appealing to our brothers and sisters in the United States to wake up and smell the coffee

So, I will tell you what a CEO of one of the biggest companies in the world just said to me two months ago, because he is someone who gets it. I shouldn't embarrass him and I also shouldn't alert the security police services in different parts of the world by telling who he is. But he has agreed to get arrested with me in an act of civil obedience to get the message across. The significance of that is that we have to think out of the box. We have to think about new allies. I am very serious when I say that the Pentagon and the CIA, or elements therein, actually get climate change much better than the Congress of the United States does. And even though I know I will take criticism – and I have taken criticism in the eight months that I have been at Greenpeace – I am committed to dialogue with those with whom we have not spoken before, because the scale of the problems that we face is much, much too large for anyone of us to kid ourselves that government is going to do it alone, that business is going to do it alone, or that civil society is going to do it alone.

I have this vision that we have to get organised, and that we have to be able to put pressure on those

most powerful governments that are holding back progress. I will just tell you about a quick conversation I had with Al Gore two months ago. I was trying to figure out how we can actually shift the agenda in the United States, because the United States is 4% of the world's population, they put about 25% of the harmful global greenhouse gas emissions into the atmosphere, and they are the ones who are dragging their feet the most in terms of committing to ambitious targets. So I was asking Al Gore what we can do from the outside to support the dynamic, to get good legislation in the United States. And he said, 'You know, Kumi, I know you are at Greenpeace now, so I am not saying Greenpeace should do it, but one of the things that could work, that could have value, is if we could have religious communities going to US embassies and holding candlelight vigils overnight, appealing to our brothers and sisters in the United States to wake up and smell the coffee and get with the programme. That would be helpful right now and important.' Greenpeace can organise it and have a thousand people round embassies. But why would the people of the United States feel moved just by Greenpeace doing it? It's very different when religious leaders step forward and make their appeal.

Now I am going to talk a little bit personally. I just wanted to share one personal thing with you about my own relationship with religion and spirituality. I was very privileged to grow up in a poor working-class township, which nevertheless had a multi-religious culture. We had people of Christian, Muslim and Hindu faith and, of course, when you had that kind of combination in apartheid South Africa at that time, you always had quite aggressive attempts at converting folks, particularly from Hinduism and Islam into different parts of Christianity. And when I was about 11 years old, I remember a teacher, who was rather enthusiastic about this kind of evangelical type of proselytising, saying in class: 'My God doesn't ask for chickens', because you know how in Hinduism you slaughter chickens at certain rituals. He said, 'My God doesn't ask for chickens, my God doesn't ask for sheep, my God doesn't ask for cows. You should all convert to Christianity.' And I went home and I said – because I loved this teacher, he was one of my favourite teachers and I was being brought up as a Hindu – I went over and said to my mum, quite traumatised: 'Ma, my favourite teacher says Christianity is the best religion and we are being brought up as Hindus.' And my mum said to me: 'All religions are the same. The only thing you need to know about religion, if you want advice from me, is just think about these two things: see God in the eyes of every human being that you meet. If you can see God in the eyes of every human being that you meet, you don't need to bother whether you are a Christian or a Hindu or a Muslim or whatever. And always look

at the weaknesses in yourself and look at the strengths in others.' Sadly, my mum committed suicide four years after that, when I was 15 years old. But the wisdom she shared with me is something that has made me a bit of a unique and odd person within secular movements. I've only joined Greenpeace recently, but in all the movements that I've been involved in, I have always been a voice saying we must work with our brothers and sister in the religious community. And it doesn't matter that we don't agree on everything.

I will give you a quick anecdote. You might remember the 'Make Poverty History' campaign from 2005? The global part of that is the Global Call to Action Against Poverty, and I was the founding chair of the global part of the campaign. We were having a meeting a year after the 'Make Poverty History' campaign in 2006 in Beirut, Lebanon, where suddenly there was a huge conflict between the religious folks and the women's movement. In 2005, it was OK to be silent on a woman's right to choose in terms of reproductive rights, in terms of abortion; in 2006, the dynamic changed and they wanted language in the global manifesto that was more explicit and articulated reproductive rights. Now, most of the folks from the faith groups at this meeting personally supported a woman's right to choose. But if they stayed in that meeting and agreed a clear language supporting reproductive rights, they would still have to go back to their respective religious organisations – and there they would hear that explicit language would mean they had to withdraw from the group. Interestingly, most of the representatives at the meeting were women from the faith groups, but they were usually going back to report to some male leadership. So the whole conference – 400 people, all from different parts of the world, from all continents – had to decide how to keep folks together. With a few others I came up with an idea: 'Five people from the women's groups and five people from the religious groups go into that room and don't come out until they have worked out a way to keep all of us together.' The women's movement wanted reproductive rights, the Global Call to Action supported reproductive rights; the faith groups wanted no reference of it. They emerged one hour later and said they agreed and that they had found a way forward. They came up with language that said the Global Call to Action Against Poverty supports reproductive health. It was less than what the feminists wanted, more than what the faith groups wanted, but they could live with it.



Archbishop Tutu dancing

The bottom line is: if we are going to advance social justice, we have to focus more and more on the much larger number of things that unite us, and learn to disagree on the smaller number of things that disunite us. Let's be clear, even in terms of very firm articles of faith and behaviour, these things are not set in stone. They are actually changing over time. Archbishop Desmond Tutu is somebody I love and respect and I have been privileged to work with – I don't know whether you heard the news, just last week he announced his retirement from public life. I'll bet anyone in this audience: don't take that seriously. It was very moving for me when, just before I started at Greenpeace, I had to lead a campaign and go on a hunger strike to put pressure on my government in South Africa to change its policy with regard to Zimbabwe. Archbishop Desmond Tutu stood with me throughout that hunger strike. He fasted once a week with us. Archbishop Desmond Tutu also went on public television in South Africa finally and said: 'I would prefer if young people and older people did not have sex outside a firm committed relationship, but should you choose to, please wear a condom.' Now, that's not something you would have thought the Archbishop of Cape Town – the leader of the Anglican Church in South Africa – would actually go on television and do; you wouldn't have thought about that 20 year ago, but circumstances do sometimes call for realism.

When I started at Greenpeace I was discussing: What is your vision? What are you going to change? I said one of the things we are going to do is work more closely with the religious folks. And people asked: 'Why?' I said: 'Well actually, they've got the best sense of humour of any groups that I've worked with.' I say this half jokingly, but you would be surprised at how earnest folks in secular civil society are about what we do. There are extreme levels of earnestness. It takes a guy like Archbishop Desmond Tutu... There was once a march, when Nelson Mandela was still in prison, to call for his release – it was a very famous march, led by our religious leadership and some academics. Archbishop Tutu was in the front of the march, with all of them wearing their religious garb and so on, and then he linked hands, he discovered, with a white South African English professor, a guy who taught English Literature, called Michael Savage. So television and all are on this march and Tutu realises that he's got his arms round Mike Savage and says: 'Hey Mike, good to see you and glad you're on this march.' Mike is marching with his academic gown on, and then Bishop

Tutu says on television, radio and so on, 'Yes, Mike, we savages, we must stick together.'

When I speak to young people, I say that activism for justice is not a chore, it is a calling, an opportunity to build friendships, to give meaning to your life and to know that one day when you die, when somebody asks you just before you die, 'Have you tried to make a difference?' you should be able to say, 'Yes, I did.'

So, in conclusion, I want to end with one more anecdote, which is a little bit sad, but it's intended to be inspirational. When I was 22 years old, I was fleeing South Africa into exile and my best friend at that time, a guy called Lenny Naidoo, asked me a question. He said, 'What is the biggest contribution to the cause of justice?' I said, 'That is a very easy question – giving your life.' And he said 'You mean participating in a demonstration, getting shot and killed and becoming a martyr?' I said, 'I guess so, something like that.' He replied, 'That's the wrong answer. It's not giving your life, but giving the rest of your life.' I was 22 years old at the time, my friend Lenny was way ahead of his time, I mean he got climate change, he got environmentalism; he was quite special. So we fled into exile in different directions. Less than two years later, my friend Lenny and three young women from my home city were brutally murdered by the apartheid regime. There were so many bullets in their bodies that their parents couldn't recognise them at the mortuary. I had to think deep and hard about what he was trying to say in that message, with that distinction between giving your life and giving the rest of life. What he was saying is that the struggle for justice, the struggle for gender equality, for sustainability, to eradicate poverty, these struggles are marathons, and they are not sprints. For those who have the luxury to be able to participate in these struggles for a more fair and just world, the biggest contribution we can make is maintaining a lifetime of commitment, engagement and perseverance – until these struggles have been won, and until these injustices have been eradicated from the face of the Earth.

But here's the problem. In essence, what he was saying was the struggle is a marathon, not a sprint. But the problem is, we don't have time any more for a marathon. The science is telling us that if we don't get emissions to peak by 2015, latest 2020, we have catastrophic runaway climate change that threatens the future of human life, not just plant and animal life; we as a species are threatened. When he received the Nobel Peace Prize, Al Gore evoked an African proverb when he said: 'If you want to go far, go together. If you want to go quickly, go alone.' My dear brothers and sisters, we do not have a choice. We all, whether we are from faith organisations, from secular

civil society, from progressive business, from governments, we have now to realise that the choice before us is to be able to move far and quickly at the same time. If we fail to do that, future generations will judge all of us as people who had the voice, the ability to make a difference. They will judge us extremely harshly.

Kumi Naidoo is Executive Director of Greenpeace. This is an edited version of the talk he gave at the SOF Annual conference in Leicester. Recorded and transcribed by Oliver Essame.

Lunching by the Sea of Galilee

'Swimming strictly prohibited'
proclaims the board in three languages.
Walking on the water's not mentioned,
but there's something beyond the natural here.
The lunch is heavenly and the waiter
celebrates his tip by discus-hurling
a slab of bread over the broadwalk rail.
'For the fish!' Slim green shivers
gather to bite and fight and – plop –
the bread is gone.

This is peace. A surprising breeze,
swallows swooping low, an avocet
circling ever wider, the Tiberias
rowing club teaching thin, young arms
to pull and feather, and this sea
stretching away to a hazy shore –
and hills which hide the real world
of lookout posts, border guards, ominous
reports of weapons of mass evil.

A certain person came this way,
advising the fishermen,
and slept in their boat,
preaching peace and – as they said –
casting his bread upon the waters.
But there were sharks here then, quick
to seize anyone rising to take the bait –
guardian sharks ensuring two thousand
years without peace,
constantly breeding, constantly evolving.
They are still here, somewhere,
hidden in the haze.

David Perman

David Perman runs the Rockingham Press in Ware, which publishes poetry and local history. His latest collection is *A Wasp on the Stair* (2003). He is a member of SOF.

No Sharia Law in Britain

Maryam Namazie of the Council of ex-Muslims of Britain spoke against Sharia Law.

Sharia law is an important issue for people living in Britain, as well as across the world. To highlight it, I want to start with a case that I have been working on these past few weeks. It's the case of Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani. She's a mother of two who is facing death by stoning in Iran for 'adultery.' Under Sharia law, the penalty for adultery is death by stoning. Women are buried up to their chests, men up to their waists and the law even specifies the size of the stone to be used in the stoning. Sakineh was due to be executed by stoning a few weeks ago. When there was no legal recourse remaining, her 22-year-old son, Sajjad, wrote an open letter, together with his 17-year-old sister, saying their mother was going to be stoned to death at any time and calling on the people of the world to intervene and step in to try to save her life. And that is exactly what people have done everywhere: nearly half a million people have signed petitions on her behalf and International Sakineh Day on 24th July saw rallies and protests in over 30 cities across the world. On 28th August, we are now organising 100 cities against stoning.

As a result of the public outcry, the Islamic regime in Iran has now said that they never intended to stone her. The Embassy here in London said it as a public relations move. They often do this, saying they are not intending to kill someone and then go ahead and do it in the dark and within prison walls. We are concerned that even if she is not stoned to death, she will be executed and, obviously, in my opinion execution is wrong under all circumstances, and stoning in particular is especially barbaric and brutal. But it is important to keep the pressure on, and the pressure is working – the fact that she is still alive

means that it works. The fact that her son went to see her a few days ago and she said that for the first time she had hope as a result of all the people who had come out in her defence shows that it makes a difference and it has an impact. I am here to ask you also to step in and intervene on her behalf; I'm sure many of you have already done that. Her lawyer is in hiding now, he has been interrogated, his wife and his brother-in-law have been arrested. Her son has been called for interrogation a number of times to ask why and how this international campaign has taken the scope that it has, how her picture got out to the public and so on and so forth.



Maryam Namazie

Now, when we are talking about Sharia law in Britain, I am often told to not speak of stoning and amputations; Iran amputated the limbs of five people just last week.

I am told not to talk about those who are being hung by cranes in city centres for 'acts incompatible with chastity' or the fact that being gay is an executable offence in Iran. In fact, there are 130 offences punishable by death under Sharia law, including apostasy, blasphemy, heresy and so on.

In my opinion, when speaking of Sharia law it is important to speak of stonings and amputations as that is what the criminal code of Sharia law is. Islamists and proponents of Sharia law like the Archbishop of Canterbury try to separate the two in order to give it a more palatable appearance for Western public opinion. The reality, however, is that Sharia's criminal code is an extension of its civil code. It is the same code of law. Of course, death by stoning is not the same as denying a woman the right to divorce and child custody, but the

misogyny behind a law that stones a woman to death is the same one that denies her rights in the family.

Whilst it is predominantly the civil code being implemented in Britain, in countries under Islamic laws, Sharia law's civil code is one the pillars of women's oppression as it is fast becoming here. Under Sharia's civil code, a woman's testimony is worth half that of a man's; women do not have unilateral right to divorce whereas men do; girls and wives get half the inheritance of men and boys. A woman is not even allowed to sign her own marriage contract, a male guardian has to sign it on her behalf. These are the civil aspects of Sharia law.

Sharia's criminal code is an extension of its civil code. It is the same code of law ...

How offensive that these would be deemed the 'more palatable aspects' of the law. No hands are being cut off, as human rights campaigner Gita Sahgal has said, so it doesn't seem to matter. In fact, it is nothing short of scandalous that these laws should be applied to a large number of our citizens in this country or for that matter anywhere else.

Sharia councils and Muslim Arbitration Tribunals decide on the majority of rulings in this country – Sharia councils according to their own statistics have already dealt with over 7000 cases denying women the right to divorce, the right to child custody and more. One Law for All has recently published a report called 'Sharia Law in Britain: A Threat to One Law for All and Equal Rights,' which finds that Sharia courts are discriminatory and should be banned because they contradict UK law, public policy and human rights.

I will give you some examples of how that happens in the area of child custody. Under British law – well, I know there is no such thing as British law, but under English law or Welsh law, or ... the welfare of the child is paramount. Under Sharia law, custody of the child goes to the father at a pre-set age, irrespective of the welfare of the child. So, even if the mother has fled a violent

situation, even if the father is deemed to be abusive, nonetheless the child will go to the father at a pre-set age, and this has been happening in Britain. So we have cases where Sharia councils (which are not even acting as arbitration tribunals – they are charities) have set up courts and denied women the right to child custody and given the child to the father at a pre-set age. And we've got cases, for example, of people who have come to us and said: 'We've gone to a British court and we've got a fatwa against us from the Sharia council, saying that we have to be boycotted because we have dared to go to a British court rather than to the Sharia council.' So there are threats and intimidation around these sorts of courts and councils as well, and people's rights are being denied as a result.

I think the main argument in support of these councils is that people go there 'voluntarily' and our response is that it's not voluntary for many people because of the pressure and threats and intimidations involved. I mentioned the case where someone received an expulsion order for daring to go to a British court instead of a Sharia Council. But there are a number of studies, which we also mention in our report, where, for example, there is evidence of threats and intimidations. There is one study in which the author sat in on ten cases in the Sharia council.

... the misogyny behind a law that stones a woman to death is the same one that denies her rights in the family...

Four of the women actually had injunctions against their husbands for threatening behaviour. So the husband was not even meant to be in the same room with his wife or former wife; he was using the council as a way of renegotiating child custody issues, divorce settlement issues and so on. In a sense, women living in Britain have the same lack of rights as women living under Islamic laws, in large part because of Islamism's influence here and elsewhere. The threats and intimidations that people face are very real.

The other argument that's often given in support of these councils is: 'Well, if women are not happy with them, they can always go to a British court,' but again it's not that simple, given the pressures that are involved. There are a lot of people whose rights are violated, who are dissatisfied with the results of the councils, but who dare not go to a British court. What we are actually doing by allowing these courts to endure and expand is to leave larger and larger numbers of people at the mercy of these courts.

I want to make two final points. One of the arguments in support of these sorts of courts is that people have a right to their religion; in my opinion it is a mistake to think that this has anything to do with people's right to religion. This is the right of Islamism to repress and restrict citizens in this country and across the world; it is a demand of the political Islamic movement, not a demand of Muslims. Now, if you have come to any of our rallies, we've had Muslim women come and speak and say: 'None of us had to go to Sharia councils 30 years ago. It wasn't a thing we had to do; now we have to do it.' And you have someone like the Muslim woman councillor from Tower Hamlets, Shiria Khatun, who gets death threats for not being veiled, saying: there is more pressure to be veiled in Tower Hamlets than in Bangladesh. What we need to understand is that this is very much the result of the rise of the Islamic movement: why there are more burqas on the streets of London, why there are more Sharia courts. Saying that this is people's right to religion is leaving large numbers of our citizens, not just British citizens, but world citizens, at the mercy of a brutal, misogynist, inhuman, mediaeval movement that will stone people to death in the twenty-first century, if given the chance, and will deny women rights in the family in Britain, if



Woman stoned to death for adultery

given the chance. And is doing that. And I think it is important to stand up and be heard and push back this movement. Not just because it is important to push back Islamism, but because it's important to defend people's rights, equal rights, women's rights, human rights. These things that have been fought for are not Western concepts but universal concepts that are the demand of people living in a small village in Iraq or Afghanistan as well as those living in a metropolitan city in Britain or Iran.

Finally, I would like to say that rights, equality, respect: these are things that have been raised by progressive social movements vis-à-vis human beings, not religions, beliefs and reactionary political movements. I think the more we give rights to these political movements, to religion and belief to do whatever it wants, irrespective of the consequences on people's lives, we restrict the space for real live human beings, we deny people rights and we deny them the freedoms that they deserve. So, I think the battle to oppose Sharia law in this country is a battle across the world; it is a battle in defence of secularism, in defence of universal values and in defence of a life that is really worthy of the twenty-first century.

Maryam Namazie is the President of the Council of ex-Muslims of Britain.

For more information on One Law for All and to sign the petition, volunteer or purchase the report, visit its website: <http://www.onelawforall.org.uk/>
You can also read the full report on Sharia Law in Britain here: <http://www.onelawforall.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/New-Report-Sharia-Law-in-Britain.pdf>.

This is an edited version of her talk given to the SOF Conference in Leicester. Talk recorded and transcribed by Oliver Essame.

The Abuse of Perfection as an Exercise in Power

Dominic Kirkham considers the cover-up of clerical child abuse and other misuses of power in the Church.

Every now and then a scandal comes along which grips the public attention and rocks society to its core. Recently we've had quite a few of them: Stephen Lawrence and institutional racism, MP's expenses, Baby P and the Social Services, clerical paedophilia ... So it goes on. The common feature of all these scandals is not only about the behaviour of the individuals involved in them – though these usually get the headlines – but the institutional implications. Here we have the structures which provide the very framework of social stability and order – the police, Parliament, the Social Services, the Church – being exposed as seemingly deeply corrupt. This is disturbing.

In fact, it is so disturbing that denial and the attempt to deflect guilt or responsibility is understandable. Answers are needed and provided: regret that this has happened is announced, lessons have been learnt, individuals punished, procedures have been put in place and it will not happen again. Or so the mantra goes – until the next time!

the culprits are mostly older men with a lifetime of well-respected service in the church ... not obvious monsters or criminals

Yet the rapidity with which 'the next time' comes around indicates the 'quick fix' is not so easily applied. This itself is indicative of much deeper, societal problems which by their very prevalence are more intractable. The problems are not just about individuals or groups of individuals or even the institutions in which they work, but the values and culture which embraces all of us. It's easy to find a scapegoat – 'shoot Dreyfus' or sack Derek Conway – less easy to address the root cause. For scandals tend to mirror the sort of society we are, our patterns of behaviour, our collective failure of responsibility and changes which we may need to make to our lifestyles and

values.

Perish the thought, but when was the last time we massaged the works mileage sheet or fiddled a home insurance claim? And in a modern liberal society is not one person's perversion another's private right? Is there not, for example, widespread support for the view that parental punishment of children is nothing to do with the abuse of minors? All these issues, and others, are surrounded by large grey areas of blurred the morality. One thing we may agree on – if rather hypocritically – is that we expect better from those in public office than in ordinary life: even our footballers we would prefer to be paragons and virgins!

It is perhaps this disposition which makes the clerical abuse scandals within the Catholic Church so shocking. Not only have we here an institution which is, purportedly, very clear about its values but much given to directing others how they should behave. Its clerical practitioners also have a view of the world which sets them and the religious way of perfection decidedly above their secular contemporaries. In many ways its privileged position stems from its own elevated aspirations and the general sense of responding to a 'higher' calling, with which many concur. Paradoxically, it is the common affirmation of this situation – at least in some societies or communities – that makes the problem harder to address, with the temptation rather to cover it up for fear of causing even greater scandal.

In the case of recent clerical abuse scandals one thing that is noticeable is that the perpetrators or culprits are mostly older men with a lifetime of well-respected service in the church. They are not obvious monsters or criminals. Rather, they are the products of a system and, unpalatable though this may seem, their lives are so closely enmeshed in the institutional church as to epitomise some of its features. I have known many men, who grew up in families where to have a son enter the church and become a priest was the highest aspiration. So much so that a boy would, typically, be singled out and sent to a Junior Seminary to

live a life of isolation and formation.

The putative 'sacred calling' may have often been difficult to disentangle from juvenile aspiration and collective affirmation, but the level of expectation to persevere through 'trials' was matched only by the stigma of failure to achieve the desired goal of ordination. Then, having been isolated from society for a lifetime of relentless intellectual formation and emotional frustration, these men would be returned to 'the world' in positions of unchallengeable authority with the expectation of being exemplary leaders.

When critical voices were raised about such a formation they could easily be dismissed as the siren call of secular subversion. When the German theologian, Dr Eugene Drewermann, suggested not so long ago that the seminary formation seemed guaranteed to stunt emotional growth, producing clones with an infantile dependence on authority, he was of course censored. If at some point along the way of their future careers something cracked, one can hardly be surprised.

And crack it often did! As when Bishop Casey owned up to having a lover and child, or a priest left to get married, these things often seemed to take parishioners by surprise. Research by the American sociologist Richard Sipe revealed just how extensive and numerous were the illicit relationships amongst the clergy. And then there was the more secretive world of guilty abuse, which is only now coming fully to light. But these were always seen as cases of individual failings. For such deviance on the way to perfection the Church had its traditional answer: confession, absolution and try again. So, the priest who would spend his weekly day off with a prostitute could always call in to a presbytery on his way home for a quick confession and then it was back on the road again, like a car after a puncture repair. As one phrase has it, 'Stuff happens'!

It is not uncommon to hear some ask, 'If these priests had lost their faith, then why did they not leave the Church?' Such a question shows a total misunderstanding of the problem. The whole faith picture was one of being in transit to perfection with challenges en route, failures to be overcome. Some may not always succeed, others did. For example, when Angelo Roncalli became the surprise choice for pope, one further surprise was the publication of his personal diary. The *Journal of a Soul* became an overnight best seller, chronicling with moving



devotion how one individual persevered along the path of perfection from the humblest origins to the highest office and threshold of sanctity. Yes it could be done.

But having made it to the top John XXIII realised something more important. That such a system was unsustainable in the modern world. Fundamental change was needed in a changing world – an *approfondimento* and an *aggiornamento*: a reassessment of tradition. Such profound change would be the work of an unprecedented pastoral council of the whole church, Vatican Council II. Essential to its working would be openness and accountability, collaboration and collegiality, so that issues could be brought to light and openly discussed without fear or recrimination. In other words it called for a radical change from the previous regime of secretiveness and unaccountability. It was likened to a new Pentecost, bursting open closed doors and windows onto the world.

But it failed. Or rather, it was frustrated and prevented from carrying out its promise by a traditionalist reaction, horrified at the possible consequences, in particular, the challenge to the central power and authority of the clerical elite focused on the papacy. The story of the strangulation of reform is of a power struggle filled with subtle cunning and deception. I mention this drama now because it sets the essential context of

the present scandals of clerical abuse, which have been characterised by unaccountable evasiveness and the suppression of evidence characteristic of the *ancien regime*: a missed opportunity for genuine preventative action.

The leader of the authoritarian reaction became John-Paul II and the fact that he was Polish is also of importance. For those who now remember the communist era, one of the bastions of resistance to its ideology was the Polish church. Here was an alternative institution with its own ideology of perfection, total control and unflinching authority. Its clerical elite could match the communist apparatchiks step for step, but only if they stood in solidarity (the title of the trade union movement was not accidental) behind an unquestioned leader. In this we glimpse the controlling model of the church in the mind of Karol Wojtyla (later John Paul II) which had served so well whilst under siege in Poland. It was a model he would re-export to the Church in the West, now perceived to be under threat from liberalism and secularism.

‘the ontological and moral superiority of celibate males’

A study of the interventions made at the Vatican Council (cf. Jan Grootaers in *Vatican II and John Paul II*) is revealing. It shows that he did not much like the idea of a pilgrim Church in need of constant reformation, as this implied deficiencies and would undermine the teaching authority of the hierarchy. Nor did he much like the idea of the Church as ‘the people of God’, as it failed to reflect the Church’s nature as a ‘perfect society’. For him it obscured the vital distinction between clergy and laity based on the ontological and moral superiority of celibate males. In short, renewal was more about repackaging the past rather than the radical overhaul envisaged by his predecessor. This would lead to constant tensions: for example, over the understanding of ministries, of the role of women, of relations with other churches, of acknowledgement of the right to freedom of thought within the church and in relations with secular society. After all, a ‘perfect society’ has little to learn from an inherently defective and sinful world.

In John Paul’s ‘perfectionist model’ of the Church any deficiencies were entirely the result of

deviant (‘sinful’) individuals. So, the phase of repenting for past failures of the Church – over anti-Semitism, the Inquisition, the Galileo affair, etc. – was not quite what it first appeared to be. There was no failure on the part of the institutional Church – breathtaking as this may seem to be – but only an acknowledgement that certain individuals had been deficient in morals or understanding.

The significance of the scandal of clerical sexual abuse was not just its moral repugnance but that it brought into question the whole status of ‘the perfect society’ and the culture unaccountability and secrecy in which it operated. The scale and spread of this abusive behaviour – only now becoming fully apparent – indicated that this was about more than just deviant individuals. It was expressive of an institutional malaise. Because it was incompatible with the traditionalist principles of perfection, knowledge of it was suppressed rather than confronted. The enforcer of such procedures – as with all the other traditionalist positions – was, of course, Joseph Ratzinger. The whirlwind of outrage he now reaps as pope is not the result of some secular conspiracy but the consequences of his own theological sensibilities and the policies he chose.

There is both an enigma and irony about the papacy of John Paul II. The enigma is that he was convinced that whatever changes needed to be made to the Church could be made within the traditionalist framework whilst following in the footsteps of John XXIII, who was convinced that they couldn’t. The irony is that whilst the Polish Church played such a crucial part in the collapse of Communism Karol Wojtyla’s way of thinking mirrored exactly that of Gorbachev in the old Soviet Union whose fatal illusion was that reform (*glasnost* was remarkably similar in many ways to *aggiornamento*) could be promoted through the Communist Party, just as the Polish pope thought the same of the Vatican Curia. Those who gave such uncritical acclaim to that papacy now also bear some responsibility for the consequences.

There is an old saying that every parish priest is pope in his own parish, meaning that the behaviour at the top tends to replicate itself down the line: no one judges the Pope (another medieval saying) and certainly no parishioners question the PP – or at least that’s what they would like! The model of absolute ecclesial power centred on one man, the pope, achieved its apogee under the predecessor of John XXIII, Pope Pius XII. It was this model that

Pope John sought to change and which John Paul sought to re-impose. In now seeking to canonise Pius the present pope, Benedict XVI, is none too subtly trying to ensure that henceforth this model will be unassailable.

But there is a consequence. In the challenging and controversial portrait of Pius XII, *Hitler's Pope*, the author John Cornwell noted that his story reflected 'a fatal combination of high spiritual aspirations in conflict with soaring ambition for power and control.' Cornwell would say that Pius XII, in his desire to protect his position of power and church property in the face of Nazism, was blinded to the plight of the weakness of the Jews.

It is a story reflected in every abusive relationship: the blindness or indifference of power to the consequences of its exercise. This, as Cornwell notes, is as much tragic as monstrous. Of this equivocation I was reminded some years ago when discussing with a confrere of Fr Brendan Smyth the consequences of his actions. To many he was the monster whose trail of abuse brought down not only his abbot but the Irish government. I was therefore somewhat taken aback by the statement that, despite all this, 'in many ways he was a very moral man'. But to all outward appearances he was – just blinded by his failings.

The responsibility of Pius XII for Jewish lives may be controversial. What is not controversial is the larger thesis that dawned upon Cornwell as he studied the events surrounding the pontiff's life. This thesis was that, 'the more elevated the Pontiff, the smaller and less significant the

faithful.' The more authoritative the pope became, the less enfranchised the laity, and even the bishops, became. All power emanated from the centre paralysing action at the peripheries.

This seems to be part of the corrupting nature of power and a commonplace of dictatorships, which in the end causes their self destruction: colossi with feet of clay. At the Reformation this very nearly happened to the Church. Now, in the

face of growing evidence of clerical abuse, bishops, congregations of bishops and even cardinals were seen to be paralysed by the overbearing power of the pontiff. It is therefore disingenuous of the promoter of this state of affairs, the current pope, now to seek to blame bishops and local hierarchies for their failure.

Similarly, it is fatuous to pretend that solutions are to be found in the locality by papal visitations and reorganisation, when the problem lies at the administrative power centre, in its values and presuppositions. The lesson to be learnt does indeed seem to be that the more elevated the pontiff, the more corrupted the peripheries. So effective reform has to start at the top.

This has taken us on a long journey from the abusive closet. But it is an integral picture; one that because of its implications many would prefer not to dwell on. It is indeed easier to find scapegoats. But the scandal does in fact provide opportunities for those who are prepared to confront it. The main opportunity it affords is an occasion to look again at the whole structure of the Church and its operation, in the manner that John XXIII envisaged: to go back to the roots of Christianity and see what exactly is essential and



'Christ Washing Peter's Feet' by Ford Maddox Brown

what is excrecence.

In particular, one may want to look at the whole ecclesiastical caste system, which has grown up amongst clerics and religious orders. Is this really what Christ had in mind when he stooped to wash the feet of his disciples in service and bade them not to lord it over others and have no one call them Father? Is the exclusion of laity and women from significant roles within the Church truly expressive of a Christianity which teaches there is to be no more distinction between slave or free, male and female, Jew and Gentile, but all are to be one inclusive humanity? Is the notion that celibacy is an adequate or necessary way to manage sexual desire defensible in a world which has long since rejected the untenable medieval dualism of spirit and flesh? And, more to the point, are clerical celibates to be any more impartial in their judgment of such affairs than are MPs over their own expenses?

If the Church has a future representing Christianity it needs, in secular parlance, to get its act together. It could begin by rejecting those traditions which are fossilised in past worlds, reappraising its theological sensibilities, engaging in genuine dialogue with 'all people of good will', leading to a collective act of reconciliation and papal foot-washing of the abused. But will it happen? Rather, put it the other way: If it doesn't the Church will have no credibility and no future. To dismiss the whole matter as 'petty gossip', as Vatican apologists do, may well be 'a Marie Antoinette moment' of fatal miscalculation!

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



ONLY TOO OFTEN THE VOICE OF THE COMMON MAN IS AIRBRUSHED OUT OF HISTORY

Cartoon by Josh

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

Perhaps of interest – there is a CD of Paul Robeson's controversial concert in Moscow in June 1949, which includes two versions of Joe Hill. I'm not sure of the law of copyright in respect of such recordings.

David Lambourn

David.Lambourn@blueyonder.co.uk

Thank you! We played Paul Robeson singing 'Joe Hill' at the final session of the SOF Annual conference in Leicester. We did not upload it onto the SOF website as we were also unsure of the copyright. However, Paul Robeson CDs are available from amazon.co.uk – Ed.

Resurrection and Resuscitation

Popular views of the Resurrection often envisage it as simply a resuscitation, the miraculous re-animation of a corpse. It may be that the gospel writers (but not St Paul) imply this, but they nowhere describe a corpse coming back to life: the experiences of the risen Christ are visionary experiences.

There is evidence that Jesus himself set no store by the idea of resurrection as resuscitation. In Luke 16 he tells the parable of Dives and Lazarus. In Hades Dives begs Abraham to send Lazarus, now in Abraham's bosom, back to life to warn Dives' brothers so that they will not end up suffering torment. Abraham says, 'They have Moses and the prophets. Let them hear them. If they do not, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'

What does this imply? That we already have enough to prompt us towards the way of goodness, generosity, justice. We have Moses and the prophets. No supernatural conjuring trick will do more than this.

The Jesus Seminar considers this parable not to be part of the authentic sayings of Jesus. I am not so sure. A parable that goes against some of the main intentions of the gospel writers is surely all the more likely to be genuine. Its rejection of resurrection as resuscitation and dismissing it as lacking in spiritual significance or power is startling. I am surprised that in his little book on the Resurrection Geza Vermes makes no mention of it. Or is my interpretation of this parable wildly eccentric?

Frank Walker
Haslingfield, Cambridge

Kindness

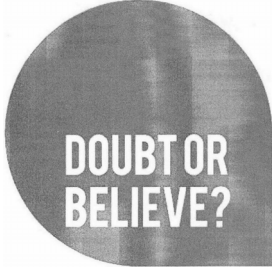
I was very pleased to receive the latest *Sofia* – as usual, it was a very nicely produced edition and I felt quite honoured by the prominence given my Creation article. Thanks very much; it was worth a sleepless night composing it!

I was also interested in your mention of the importance of kindness and Ken Smith's reference to the linguistic elision of kin/kind/kindness. I suppose you know of the little reflection on kindness:

I shall pass this way but once, and any good thing therefore that I can show to any human being, let me do it now. Let me not defer it or neglect it for I shall not pass along this way again.

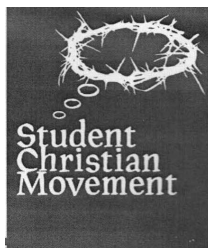

I don't know who wrote this but a little card with it on has been in our house for as long as I can remember. On reflection, its presence must have had a subliminal effect on me for it has served as something of a leitmotiv for my life. Of all the human attributes – though perhaps often ignored – it is one whose effects, I have come to realise, people value most. Indeed, I would go so far as to say, that the possibility of its quiet unheralded presence is the most distinctive feature true humanity. We could do with more of it in our world. I commend it to your readers!

Dominic Kirkham, Manchester



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SOF Sift

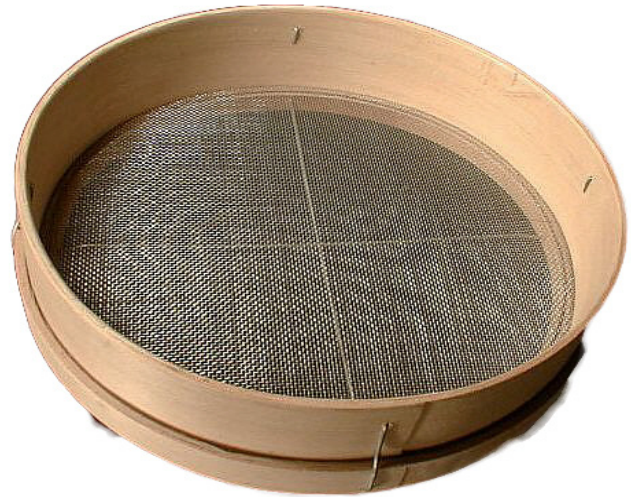
A column in which Network members think out loud about SOF and their own quest.

From Ann Egboro, Warrington

One of the reasons I began teaching at an Adult Literacy class was because of the enjoyment reading brings and the impact which books can have on us all. Reading gives access to new ideas and feelings, which is why it can be so dangerous and so liberating. For me, a student teacher in Coventry in the early 1970s, a book by the Methodist minister Dr Leslie Weatherhead was a turning point in my spiritual life. Loaned to me by a sympathetic minister who recognised the distress of someone, sitting in his vestry doubting their faith, it helped me to let go of the heavy load of dogma and creed which I just couldn't believe. Dr. Weatherhead served as a minister at the City Temple in London for nearly 25 years and died in 1976. The book, *The Christian Agnostic*, was written in 1965. In the book Dr. Weatherhead suggests that the theological demands of Christianity are a barrier to many who would like to be part of a church community.

Back then I had never read or heard any ideas like his expressed by people in the church and I was excited by the idea that you might write your own creed, based on your own experience, and think that the miracles, Virgin Birth, Resurrection etc. were irrelevant to the main issues concerning the leading of a Christian life. Here was the idea that the value of the Gospel story is not in its historical accuracy but in the value of its teaching – the idea of Jesus' embodiment of all that is best.

The background to my spiritual quest started in South Wales, the youngest of four children with a father and grandfather who were Baptist Ministers. Church life was the centre of our family, but there was also a healthy interest in sport, politics, TV comedy shows and education. Humour and moderation were threads running through Dad's sermons – *Honest to God* getting an airing on a few occasions. The love, patient support and routine of church life which were characteristics of our home encouraged my belief and I enthusiastically put myself forward for baptismal classes. This was an emotional and spiritual high-point – feeling completely in tune with God, Jesus and the whole church family. The warmth and completeness of the occasion is still memorable. People talk of 'coming home' and I think that's what I felt.



Through the young people in our church I was introduced to an evangelical housegroup. This was the beginning of a questioning which led some years later to the meeting in the minister's vestry in Coventry. Following the example of Jesus was one thing; accepting the idea of eternal damnation and the whims of an all powerful God was another.

Coming to Warrington eight years later I joined a local 'Open Forum' group, attached to a Methodist church, which explored ideas of various faiths, agnosticism and atheism. I now belong to this church where I find people who are able to accept a wide variety of seekers and recognise the importance of the Open Door. The 'Forum' was made up of different faith traditions and none. The Don Cupitt's *Sea of Faith* series on TV was mentioned and some years later I found an ad in the paper for the *Sea of Faith* magazine. I read the magazine, joined the Network and now convene the NW Group meetings.

The magazine brings me back to where I started. My life is enriched by reading and sharing the poetry, words and experiences of others and helps me appreciate the variety and insight of fellow travellers on the spiritual journey.

So I attend church even though I have a metaphorical take on the Bible and belief. The church challenges me to act and be involved in doing as well as thinking, for example supporting the work of overseas charities and working alongside Ugandans who have a vision of a better future for their children. The example of those leading the work is an inspiration and I've been glad to have a part to play. Being part of the SOF Network keeps me in touch with others who find institutional religion a bit tricky or irrelevant, but recognise that searching is what makes the journey interesting.

Ann Egboro is the convenor of the North West SOF group.

Red Letter Days

A page which recalls the birthday or death day of people who have made a notable contribution to humanity.

30th November: Etty Hillesum



Etty Hillesum was born on 15th January 1914 and died on 30th November 1943, aged 29. 67 years ago Etty was murdered and her body thrown away by people caught up in the horrific systematic atrocity we call the holocaust. Etty died at Auschwitz. Her spirit, though, lives on in a remarkable document – her letters and diaries 1941-1943, which was published unabridged in 2002. Simply called *Etty*

it is a ‘must read’ book for anyone interested in human spirituality. Described as ‘the most spiritually significant document of our age’ it is, for Rowan Williams, ‘a *Confessions of St Augustine* for our own day’. Her diary displays her quest to find harmony between the outer world of real life in all its forms (joys, suffering and death) and conflicts and the inner life of reflective solitude. It records the transformation of a woman with a deep eroticism and vast intellect from someone with an atheist streak which meant she could not pray or say the name of God into a woman who did both all the time. Her prayers and her God are unconventional. She was a secular Jew, with no attachment to a synagogue and stood at the point where humanism, Judaism and Christianity meet. For Etty, the word ‘God’ is ‘only a metaphor after all’, one which signposts ‘an approach to our greatest and most continuous inner adventure,’ (and which points to the deepest and best in oneself and others. In response to her situation in the concentration camps she offered love and acceptance rather than bitterness and hatred. Above all, she celebrates the beauty of life, inclusive of suffering and death. She teaches us to die by living. As such, she exemplifies what Don Cupitt has called ‘solar living’ and for Etty, as for Cupitt, God and life are two sides of the same coin. Should you read the book of *her* life, her *Letters and Diaries*, as I would strongly recommend, it may well become *the* book of your life too.

Philip Knight

Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum, ed. Arnold J. Pomerans, (Eerdmans 2002) . Abridged version: *An Interrupted Life*, ed. Eva Hoffmann (new edition, Persephone 1999).

22nd November (birthday): George Eliot



Robert Evans recognised the exceptional intelligence of Mary Anne, his youngest daughter, and, unusually for the time, ensured that she received a proper formal education to the age of 16. His role as estate manager at Arbury Hall also allowed her continuous access to the treasures of its library, where she immersed herself in its Greek classics.

As a young adult, struggling with the evangelical faith she was raised in, she developed a strong friendship with the progressive, free-thinking Charles and Cara Bray and, nurtured by their radical circle, anonymously published her translation of the liberal theologian David Strauss in 1846. In London as assistant editor of the left-wing *Westminster Review* from 1851, she went on to publish Feuerbach’s *Essence of Christianity* in English, endorsing his view that religious belief is ‘an imaginative necessity for man’.

Adopting George Eliot as her pseudonym for the popular early novels which made her name, she withstood the rejection of her beloved brother, Isaac, and moral outrage from the likes of Mrs. Gaskell, when she embarked on her 20-year partnership with the married George Lewes.

Throughout her life, Eliot developed and maintained her view of religion, anticipating Don Cupitt’s insights by more than 100 years. In a personal letter of 1874, she writes: ‘The idea of God, so far as it has been a high spiritual influence, is the ideal of a goodness entirely human’.

After her death, Eliot came under repeated and patronising attack by male critics who emphasised the division between her creative powers and supposedly damaging intellect. Although Virginia Woolf in 1919 defended *Middlemarch* as ‘one of the few English novels written for grown-up people’, Eliot’s reputation was not established until, in 1948, F.R. Leavis recognised her as ‘not as transcendently great as Tolstoy – but great, and great in the same way’.

Mary Lloyd

Readers are invited to send in nominations for this column. For the next issue please send those with birth or death days between 1 December and 28 February, with a short biography (max. 300 words and, if possible, jpg picture) by post or email to the Editor.

Tony Windross reviews

Theology's Strange Return

by Don Cupitt

SCM Press (London 2010). Pbk. 133 pages. £16.99.

I lost my theological innocence in 1984, with the Sea of Faith. Apparently religion wasn't the sole preserve of the weird – and from then on I bought everything Don produced. It sits proudly displayed (and substantially unread) on my bookshelves. The problem is that he expects too much of us – or at least, of me. I remember him saying (with genuine incredulity) during the plenary at the first SOF conference, that apparently there were still people in the churches who had yet to come to terms with Derrida. A ripple went round the hall, as those involved in churches reflected on the gulf between the congregations they knew, and the world where Don spent his time.

And that gulf is still there, in the assumptions he makes. All this heart-warmingly inclusive 'we' business – when maybe it's just him (plus a few of us trailing breathlessly behind). When he talks of 'the postmodern condition that is now everyone's everyday normality' – who's he kidding? Or when he says that 'old-style 'belief in God' is at long last in final collapse', he's obviously not speaking for the church congregations I know. Or again, when he says that 'we know that there is not literally any God, nor life after death, nor supernatural order', who's he speaking for? Not the people who pay my stipend, nor the frighteningly clever Rowan Williams – and maybe not that many religious radicals either, at least in terms of his degree of certainty. Aren't things just a bit less clear-cut than that? Isn't there some wriggle room? Doesn't our postmodern world allow (even encourage?) some shades of epistemological grey?

He can't leave us in peace – because the essence of his position is that there is no position – but simply an unending conversation. And as long as there's breath in him, he'll keep exploring and dismantling and re-creating and teasing and prodding and cajoling, never escaping the shackles of language, and (therefore?) never reaching a conclusion. The sheer quantity of his work is an expression of the openness and inconclusivity of it all – and a reproach to most of us, with our yearning to escape the full implications of postmodernism, by pitching our tent just somewhere.

There's an austere purity about *Theology's Strange Return*, which demands more than most of us can give. 'We have all read our Nietzsche and we all know the score'. Have

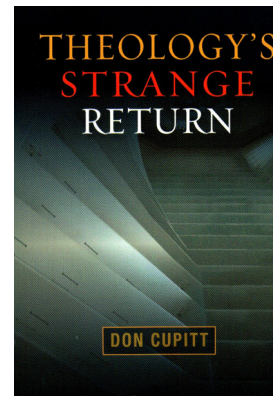
we? Do we? Who says? What's the evidence? So many assumptions, Don – and so far removed from the world that I live in. I wish I'd read my Nietzsche in the sense you mean – volume after volume, in the original German. I'm not up there with you – and I don't know anyone who is.

So who is this book for? A few dissident academics? Thoughtful inhabitants of pews? Clergy who aren't entirely brain dead? Members of the Church Alumni Association? SOF anoraks? Will it convert anyone? Or is it of interest only to those who are already part of the club? As has been the case for thirty years, Don finds himself almost entirely unsupported by both academic and clerical colleagues – and that's a lonely place to be. His life's work has been to try and reposition Christianity so that its message stands some slight chance of speaking to our secular age.

The problem is that substantial parts of our age are in fact not at all secular, and have adopted literalist religion as if the Enlightenment had never happened. It's enough to make anyone with a brain despair – and Cupitt comes close to it. But the book ends on a positive note, focusing on the consolations that religion can, even now, bring to our lives, if we're prepared to put in the hard work needed to reinterpret/reinvent ideas and doctrines that have found earlier gainful employment in very different circumstances.

Most people won't, of course. They will continue uncritically dismissing religion as ludicrous; or uncritically accepting it as revealed truth. There are few with whom this book will resonate – but those few are in for another rare (and rarefied) treat. Thank you Don for this book. And thank you even more for making the world of religion a possibility for people like me.

Tony Windross is the Vicar of Hythe, Kent, and a former SOF trustee.



reviews

Helen Bellamy reviews *What should I Believe?*

Why Our Beliefs about the Nature of Death and the Purpose of Life Dominate Our Lives

by Dorothy Rowe

Routledge (Abingdon 2008). Pbk. 312 pages. £9.99.

Many of us have cause to be grateful to the renowned psychologist Dorothy Rowe. Her best-selling 1983 book on depression (*Depression – The Way Out of Your Prison*, 1983) provided us with a perspective we were urgently seeking. It helped us to make sense of and to see a way through the blackness and bleakness that had overtaken someone we knew. In that book she made abundantly clear the difference between the world and our interpretation of it. She pointed out that our understandings are human constructs not absolute truths. In the course of helping us towards comprehension of a bewildering phenomenon, she took us in the direction of a SOF-type philosophy.

Since then Rowe has written a dozen or more popular books, each offering help in understanding a particular emotional need or problem. In them all the underlying presumption is that we create our own reality. Our thinking is based on premises we ourselves have developed. It seemed reasonable to assume, then, that her latest volume *What Should I Believe?* would be of interest to SOF people. I think that, up to a point, it is.

I was distinctly disappointed to find, having obtained my copy by mail order, that much of it had already been published under different titles. In fact this is the third reprinting of much of the material, which had previously appeared in 1989 (*The Courage to Live*) and 1991 (*The Construction of Life and Death*). I supposed that I had wasted my money, but revised that opinion somewhat as I read.

In her useful extended preface, which seems to promise much worthwhile to follow, Rowe explains her book as a contribution to the discussion of religion prompted by the militant atheism of Dawkins and Hitchens and the sceptical questioning of John Humphreys. She maintains that our sense of being a person arises out of the meanings we create and proposes that *perdition is to lose our sense of being a person; salvation is to be the person we know ourselves to be*. Being ourselves takes courage, she argues, *and when courage fails, we resort to believing all sorts of impossible things adding we all have fantasies that we treat as truths*. Then she points out that neuroscience has shown that our brains create maps of the world rather than showing us what actually exists. We need constantly to check our maps, she insists, against experience – our own and other people's.

The opening chapter, titled *Religion in the Twenty-First Century*, surveys how religion has been depicted in recent writing, politics and psychology.

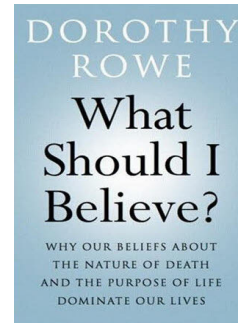
These portrayals she inspects through the lens of Karen Armstrong's categories *mythos* and *logos*. Rowe is clear that these are not two separate strands of thought. *Mythos and logos both use the form of a story*, she points out, claiming also *we cannot live just with mythos or just with logos*. Fundamentalists attempt to see everything in black and white and try not to recognise *mythos* because it allows shades of grey. The tone of her writing I find somewhat strident, but consider her analysis a useful one.

It is in the following chapter, *What it is to be Human*, that Rowe begins to illustrate her points using accounts of encounters from her work as a psychotherapist. Later in the book such references, often lengthy and far from contemporary, dominate the content and encouraged this reader to skip ahead repeatedly. Here, however, there is also substantive content. We read about truth and why we cannot know it is absolute (I disliked use of *fantasy* for unverifiable theory); language and how it creates reality; emotions as meanings we create in response to our personal sense of safety or danger; and the basic nature of ideas about morality and about the cosmos. At some level of consciousness, she claims, fundamentalists know they are lying to themselves.

What remains of Rowe's thesis is buried in several chapters of recounted conversation and recalled incident. From these she emerges to conclude that religious beliefs held defensively are a sign of inadequacy and that our beliefs should be chosen so as not to create suffering for ourselves and others, but to be a source of personal courage and optimism.

At the time of its publication certain reviewers understood this book as condemning religious belief. In fact it simply points to the damage that can be done by absolute beliefs, whilst explaining clearly the nature and role of belief. I cannot recommend a typical *Sofia*-reader to buy this book. I suggest you borrow a copy, read until boredom threatens and then skip ahead merrily. Perhaps you should do so ahead of next year's conference?

Helen Bellamy is a SOF trustee. Next year's SOF Annual conference will be on psychology and religion with the working title *Brain, Belief and Behaviour*.



Kathleen McPhilemy reviews *A Compression of Distances*

by Daphne Gloag

Cinnamon Press (Blaenau Ffestiniog 2009) Pbk. 80 pages.
£7.99.

Daphne Gloag's work is new to me but I was impressed by her technical skill. She acknowledges Mimi Khalvati as a mentor and this influence can be seen in the movement of her lines and, I feel, in the images of light. Her collection, *A Compression of Distances*, is an affirmation of her relationship with her late husband, Peter Williamson, also a poet. This elegiac quality gives the book a unity which is reflected through the repetition of 'I said'... 'you said' in poem after poem, creating a sense of a continuing dialogue.

The poet's central concern of relating the cosmic to the personal, the 'compression of distances' is evident from the first poem, 'The geometry of space/ and the curving of galaxies./ Then think about our space,/you said, and the curve of bodies/together' and continues till the last: 'We knew/ how one word encompassed the weight/ of stone and the places where we walked/ in drifting difficult light/ and in unmeasured brightness'. These last lines balance tension and achievement; the adjectives 'drifting', 'difficult' and 'unmeasured' are a concession to the unknown and unknowable, counteracted by the serenity of the 'we' and the underpinning, unspoken 'one word', which is love.

I admire Gloag's ability to use her understanding of cosmology productively, particularly evident in the extracts from the sequence, *Beginnings*. In one poem she relates the discoveries of astrophysics to everyday life. Acknowledging that life became possible through irregularities in the structures of the universe, she develops this notion into a celebration not only of the particularities of the immediate physical world but also of the relationship with her husband. The poem has a dialectic framework: 'A bit of magic, you said'... 'The magic of facts/ I said' ... 'Irregularities are life, we said'; the 'I' and the 'you' are synthesised as 'we'.

Gloag combines her scientific knowledge with her sense of wonder and magic. In *Afterglow*, there is a prose note which tells how telephone engineers discovered the afterglow of the big bang. The poem develops this anecdote by building connections, between the pigeons nesting in giant radio horn and pigeons on her own bird table, between the etymology of the word 'bang' and the science of the 'big bang'. The last section of the poem is almost prosaic, but is successful because the links have been made: 'They'd blamed / the pigeon droppings unfairly, the birds/ died for nothing. / It was the cool afterglow/ of

creation.'

It is when the poet succeeds in building a personal connection that her poems are strongest. In *Galaxy of Days*, she links the

concept of dark matter to a Rembrandt nativity scene and then to her own relationship. As has already been noted, images of light are recurrent and occasionally, perhaps, provide a slightly glib resolution:

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

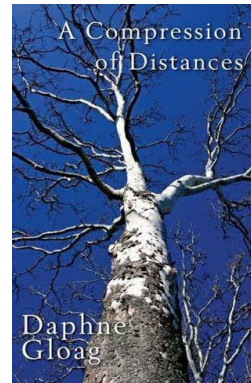
Once, it is impressive, but I feel too many of these poems end on light or images of light. If I have any other reservations about this collection they might be to do with the absence of the middle ground. The poet deals beautifully with the vastness of space, the achievements of art and the minutiae of the personal, but there is only occasionally an acknowledgement of the struggle with the real in the public and political world, as, for example, in *The children's charity concert: matter and antimatter* where she contrasts the safety and privilege of grandchildren with the fate of the Kosovan children they are raising money for. The collection as a whole is a polished achievement; but while Gloag often acknowledges the difficult and the painful, these qualities are not strongly present in the work.

Nevertheless, I really liked this book, particularly the opening poem and some of those set in Italy. It may have been the fact that I first read *Words and Water* on an Italian beach, which made it so attractive to me. The lines of the poem convey the immensity and movement of the sea, as well as its promise.

Three year old Lorenzo
played in the sand, carried water to his sandcastle
in a blue bucket; he would never

empty the sea.
The inexhaustible reserves of waves
and words waited.

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



reviews

Anne Ashworth reviews

Poetic Tales

by Dinah Livingstone

Katabasis (London 2010) . Pbk. 148 pages. £9.95.

This book's title is taken from William Blake, who clearly understood that gods are a human creation, 'poetic tales'. The subtitle is *Logosofia*, which means Word Wisdom and was coined by Coleridge. It combines the Greek words *logos* (masculine) and *sophia* (feminine).

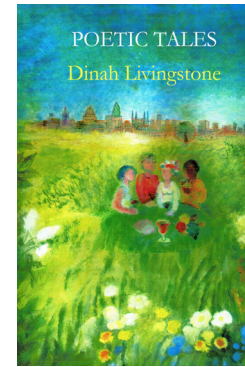
Dinah Livingstone is a poet. Her book is a strong plea for the word-wisdom of poetry and myth, beginning with a long chapter on 'The Necessity of Poetry'. Necessity? A strong word, she admits, for the majority in our culture who regard poetry as a peripheral activity. People are wary of poetry and poetic tales, especially rationalists on the one hand and fundamentalists on the other. This chapter has been developed from a talk for the Ethical Society and is a cogent argument. (It also happens to be an excellent introduction to how and why poems work, with detailed examples. I could commend it to any young student or aspiring poet. There are plenty of examples.)

Poetry, Dinah stresses, is nothing if not earthy. The more precise it is about its physical referents, the stronger its effect. Not merely a bird, for instance, but a thrush, which 'sings its song twice over' (Browning) or displays its 'terrifying...bounce and stab' (Hughes). Such words affect us viscerally, by their sound as well as their descriptive power. Poetry depends on simile and metaphor, such as personification. This urge to personify must have been at the root of primitive religion, with natural forces assumed to be spirits, demons, gods. This 'supernaturalisation' continues through history. Though gods may be shed along the way, emerging monotheistic faiths became even more sure of their poetic tales about a single 'supernaturalised' being.

Humans have this basic disposition to make up stories, tales to enchant or to warn. So powerful are the myths we conjure for ourselves that we believe them, live by them and need them even when we realize that we made them up. We know we invented gods and religions, but bearing that in mind we can, Dinah argues, still use our myths and liturgies. Poetry's prime endeavour, according to Rilke, is to praise; and if we personify the values we praise it is easier to bring our whole hearts to the exercise.

This is a very Catholic view. Dinah's background is Catholic and she refers appreciatively to Catholic rituals utterly mysterious to your reviewer. For this is a

personal book. Not only is it the book of a poet, but as readers of this journal know, its author has been deeply concerned in the struggles of Latin American peoples, notably the Sandinistas of Nicaragua and the Zapatistas of Mexico; she has translated much of their poetry. So expect references to all this.



reviews

The book follows a Trinitarian outline. In the section on the Father we encounter Dinah's preference for a Mother Goddess whose worshippers are more likely to relate considerately to Mother Earth, our poor ill-treated planet. For Dinah the Son represents humanity, the Spirit humankindness. These chapters follow our Christian poetic tales through the New Testament. With admirable clarity she traces certain distinct myths. First came the Kingdom of God, the vision of the Jesus of the gospels. Paul develops this into the poetic symbol of the Body of Christ, equated with all his worshippers. Later come the Logos, the Incarnate Word; the Bride of Christ, in which those worshippers become the collective bride of the deified saviour; and the Beautiful City of Revelation.

Occasionally we discover Dinah Livingstone in fighting mode. She takes on Don Cupitt and the postmodernist philosophers. Postmodern nonrealism is described as 'the ideal partner for an aggressive capitalism that *commodifies* the earth.' About monotheist patriarchy she is less scathing but equally clear. The Father symbol, and even the Mother, are inadequate metaphors, for human parents may be good or bad. Dinah's ethical causes are care for the earth and the struggle for justice, especially for the poor who in the Beatitudes are meant to inherit that earth.

A fair familiarity with the New Testament and with English poetry would be useful in approaching this book, but it is not difficult to read and has much richness to offer.

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

The A to Z of a City

Cicely Herbert reflects on the streets and waterways of London past and present.

The hurly burly of city life leaves little time for dreaming. We are, like it or not, here, now, in this time and this place and there is much to do. There are goals to be achieved and ideas to be explored. It takes a great poet, perhaps, or an artist to help us to ponder upon the environment in which we live: to stop us in our tracks. Tracks lead us back as well as forwards, as in T.S Eliot's *Four Quartets*:

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.

Just what is the 'here and now?' of our existence? What exactly is this moment and when it is over, where has it gone? Several years ago whilst researching a local history project I spoke to ninety year old man, who assured me that as a boy he had fished in the river Fleet where it ran down Anglers Lane, in Kentish Town. There was no doubting the sincerity of his recollection, but it was unlikely to have actually happened since that area in north London had been developed in the mid nineteenth century, driving the Fleet and its tributaries underground. Rivers run deep in the collective memory and in our most profound dreams.



The Fleet River near St Pancras in 1825

To take a river trip in London is to experience the extraordinary confluence of the past and the present, where the ever-flowing Thames acts as the connection between past and present, between the 'now and then' of our existence. As the tourists float past towering blocks of shiny new developments, and the skyscraping homages to the god Mammon, one may glimpse decaying alleyways, wharfs and warehouses, reminders of duckings and drownings, of unspeakable pain and loss, and the quaysides where flights of rickety steps led to certain death, or the promise of adventure in far away places.



The 'Seven Sisters' in 1830

Away from the river, there is another Eden. The index of the A to Z of London reads like the litany of a lost Paradise. From Ash Tree Dell and Apple Tree Gardens, down Greenacres and Silver Tree Lane, along the Seven Sisters Road, to Orchard Avenue, Vine Lane, the Wildwood Grove, and Yeoman's Way, and on to the Yeoman's Acre: truly this Earth belongs to us all.

Cicely Herbert is one of the trio who founded and runs *Poems on the Underground*. Her poetry collection *In Hospital* (together with the Victorian poet W. E. Henley) was published by Katabasis in 1992.

Mayday Notes

Is Non-Realism Hypermasculine?

I was reading about autism and the theory that it is caused by a 'hypermasculine' brain. Typical symptoms include 'impaired socialisation', meaning difficulty in relating to people and the world around you in a personal way. Then I began to wonder about the postmodernist idea that people and the Earth are 'non-real' and reducible to language. It makes sense to say that God is not real, because he is a product of the human imagination or poetic genius. But I see no reason to extend this 'non-realism' to people and things in the world, which we did *not* create. In any human relationship it is essential to realise that the other person is *not* me and to respect that. In relating to things on Earth it is essential to be aware that, say, a window, is *not* imaginary or you might crash into it and not live very long. Could postmodernist non-realism about people and things on Earth be described as a kind of philosophical hypermasculinity?

First, I thought, men have greater opportunities to distance themselves from material reality. A man can spend ten minutes with a woman, go abroad and nine months later become a father. Technology which distances the bomber from the target is also regarded as 'masculine'. So is it 'feminine' to relate more closely to people and be more closely associated with matter? Today in England women still do most of the housework. But what about all those skilled manual jobs men do – the carpenters and roofers I so much admire? 'Masculine' here is to get physical. (And they quite often refer to the things they are working with as 'she': 'Up she goes.') Men doing manual jobs cannot treat their tools and materials as non-real or they would soon have an accident.

But perhaps it is *hyper*-masculine to dream of *dominating* these intractable materials to the point where they lose any reality of their own, in order to move on to 'higher' things. Women and working men have both been regarded as 'low'. Philosophers usually belong to a higher class and are thus in a better position to distance themselves from the material world (through servants, wives etc). From that intellectual eminence it must be easier to mistake people and the Earth as 'non-real'. So just a thought. Can autism tell us anything about non-realism? Is such non-realism hypermasculine?



Chávez is good news for the poor

US televangelist Pat Robertson incites his flock to murder by calling in his TV show for President Chávez to be 'taken out' (Christian Broadcasting Network 22nd August 2005). And even here in Britain hack journalists like Nile Gardiner of the *Daily Telegraph* (23rd February 2010) spread disinformation about him, describing him as 'Venezuelan tyrant Hugo Chávez', a 'pathetic... Third World dictator' who 'would make a rather amusing court jester, or a menacing pantomime villain at Christmas'. Perhaps they feel threatened because Chávez is good news for the poor. It is unfortunate when unwary people of good will believe this disinformation.

Although by no means perfect, President Chávez is neither a dictator nor a tyrant. It is heart-warming to see him standing up to the USA, which has so long treated Latin America as its backyard and supported the likes of Somoza and Pinochet. Chavez' democratic credentials are stronger, for example, than were those of George W. Bush. Chávez was elected president in 1998 with 56% of the vote. After the introduction of the new constitution in 1999 (which included the provision that a president could only stand for election for two successive terms), he was re-elected president in 2000. In 2002 he was kidnapped in a US-supported coup. **The coup failed and Chávez was flown back to cheering crowds.** He was re-elected president in 2006 with 63% of the vote (elections certified by the Carter Centre and the OAS). In 2007 a referendum on whether to abolish presidential term limits and other changes to the 1999 constitution was defeated by 51% but in 2009 another referendum on the single issue of presidential term limits was passed by 54%. This does **not** mean Chávez is now president for life but that, like a British prime minister, he can stand for re-election as many times as he wishes.



Archbishop Tutu with Kumi Naidoo on the eighteenth day of his twenty-one-day fast in support of the people of Zimbabwe in 2009.