



God is Human

sfia

down to Earth

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Front cover image: *The Rest on the Flight into Egypt* by Gerard David, c. 1460-1523, Netherlands.

Back cover image: *Homeless in the Snow*, England.



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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.

God is Human

The Christmas message is God come down to Earth from heaven.

In a recent interview with the BBC Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, said that he was ‘very anxious’ about the Government’s Spending Review and the benefit cuts that will be imposed on the poorest in our society. ‘Quite often,’ he said, ‘that can make people start feeling vulnerable – even more vulnerable as time goes on – and that’s the kind of unfairness I feel.’ He had ‘a lot of worries’ because ‘people are often [on benefits], not because they are wicked, stupid or lazy, but because their circumstances are against them, they’ve failed to break through into something. To drive that spiral deeper – as I say – does seem a great problem.’

With gentle irony he said he was not convinced that all sections of society are making an equal contribution: ‘I am not completely convinced about that, I must say. Because with the stories we have of continuing large bonuses of the very wealthy, it’s not the sort of thing that convinces people that’s something they can all sign up to.’

The Government’s ideologically driven attack on those who are out of work is even more brutal because it is accompanied by the loss of so many jobs, so that there just will not be jobs to be had. The cap on housing benefit means that thousands will lose their homes in high-rent areas like central London, when the lack of social housing is a direct result of previous Conservative governments’ policy, and there is no plan whatever now to put a cap on *rents*, or to acknowledge that these high payments do not go to the families in need of housing but to landlords. At the same time we have a cabinet of millionaires and their recent Spending Review has made no serious attempt to tax the rich, curb bankers’ bonuses or collect huge sums in unpaid taxes from wealthy tax dodgers.

Jesus said: ‘Whatever you did to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.’ He said he had come to bring ‘good news to the poor.’ The Government’s Spending Review certainly is not good news to the poor. Jesus also preached the Golden Rule: ‘Do as you would be done by.’ The basis of that Golden Rule is

imagination, the ability to see ourselves in another’s place. Blake said:

Can I see another’s woe
And not be in sorrow too?

And Mary Wollstonecraft wrote to her lover, Gilbert Imlay: ‘Imagination is the true fire stolen from heaven that renders men social by expanding their hearts.’

SOF regards God (and all gods) as the product of the human imagination too. In this issue of *Sofia* we have an article by David S. Lee reflecting on some Old Testament themes from that point of view. And an article by Eric Whittaker compares the usefulness of imagining God to the usefulness in mathematics of the imaginary number ‘*i*’, which, he says, is very useful. We also have the first extract from *Part of a Pilgrimage*, a Journal kept by long-time SOF member Anne Ashworth following her long spiritual odyssey.

This is the Christmas issue of *Sofia* in a midwinter that will be very bleak for some. The Christmas message is ‘God is human’. God has ‘come down to Earth from heaven.’ Jesus offers a God who *is* Love, *is* Kindness, so that: Love rules! Kindness rules! That is to say, they should. Not only that. In the Christian story, Jesus the newborn baby *is* God. When Paul speaks of Jesus as Christ he says that in him: ‘We are one body because we all share the same bread.’ But of course in the world today we humans very patently do *not* all share the same bread. That is a vision of what should happen. And today the only place to find Christ’s body on Earth – to find God – is in one another.

As we know, the early church fathers fought for hundreds of years over how Jesus could be both God and human. The great Athanasius, defender of the term *homousios* – ‘one in being’ or ‘consubstantial’ – had to escape at night by boat pursued by angry Arians. Finally at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 they came up with the **statement:**

we should confess our Lord Jesus Christ
to be one and **the same** Son,
the same perfect in deity,
and **the same** perfect in humanity,
true God and true man,
the same of a rational soul and body,
one in being with the Father in deity,
the same one in being with us in humanity,
like us in all things except sin;
begotten from the Father before the ages in deity,
and in latter days, **the same**, for us and for our
salvation,
from the Virgin Mary mother of God in humanity:
one and **the same** only-begotten Christ Son
Lord...

Jesus Christ is not only one in being – *homousios* –
with the Father as God, wholly God, but also one in
being – *homousios* – with us in humanity, wholly
human. If you listen to that statement out loud as a
kind of poem, what you hear repeated thunderously
is *the same, the same, the same*. It sounds even more
thunderous in Greek *ton auton ton auton, ton auton* and
in Latin *eundem, eundem, eundem*. There is something
scandalous here. What I hear the thunder saying is:
God is human, God and human are *the same, the same*
the same. Jesus Christ is one person with two natures.
Mary is called ‘mother of God’ because you are not
the mother of a ‘nature’ but of a *person*, and because
the fully human and fully divine Christ is one
person, in what is technically called the ‘sharing of
properties’ (*communicatio idiomatum*), whatever can be
said about the man Jesus can be said of God, so we
can say God was born, God suffered, God died on
the cross... The most orthodox christology, in
which Christ is wholly divine and wholly human,
leads to the most humanist outcome: God and
human are the same. God is human.

William Blake calls Jesus ‘the Lord, the universal
humanity’ and the heart of the Christian message is
that humanity has the potential to become like the
God we have imagined, at least partly, in knowledge
and creative power, in goodness, in love. Though of
course Athanasius, the great defender of the
homousios, did not think God was imaginary, he
wrote: ‘God became human so that we might
become God’.

If we imagine God *as love, as kindness*, the only
ones who *can* love or *can* be kind to one another and
create a fair society are ourselves. Meanwhile, merry
Christmas to all. The possibilities the story suggests
are well worth celebrating.



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The Spyglass

Assuming that God is a human creation, David S. Lee reflects on certain biblical themes.

The purpose of this article is to examine certain Biblical themes through the spyglass of theological non-realism. The title is suggested by the Philip Pullman's novel *The Amber Spyglass*¹ in which Dr Mary Malone, a physicist and former nun who becomes an atheist, makes a spyglass enabling her to see deeply into the nature of that wonderfully complex and beautiful world created by the author. Part of the meaning of the story is that rational thinking has the power to set free the human race from the tyranny and pain of superstition and religious bigotry.

Theological non-realism is that branch of learning founded on the proposition that God has no objective existence. Among those who accept this proposition are those who eliminate all reference to God from their thinking and writing. They turn the spyglass away from the Bible and all religious texts and look at the secularised world. A good example is Don Cupitt's *The Meaning of it All in Everyday Speech* – this is brilliant but somehow it doesn't catch on among the masses of ordinary people and it cannot really be thought of as a branch of theology.

There are those who accept the proposition but think that the idea of God as a ubiquitous presence in human thought and language has value. Looking through the spyglass they see in the Bible what appears, at first glance, to be an image of God as a real person 'out there' looking down in love and pity upon the human race and intervening sometimes to sort out the mess. We shall examine some of these situations and subject them to the critique of non-realism. This exercise may truly be thought of as part of contemporary theology.

Creation

Most of our ancestors believed that God existed outside the universe and possessed almighty power. By his word he called into existence everything that is:

God said, 'Let the water under the earth be gathered together into one place, so that dry land may appear'; and so it was. (Gen 1: 9)

God is also believed to be unchangeable. So his command to humans to 'have dominion over the fish in the sea, the birds of the air, and every living thing that moves on the earth' (Gen 1: 28) gave rise to the sense of power over nature which has proved damaging, in the long run, to the sense of

responsibility for the earth and its conservation.

It is interesting to see how some tend to think about the universe in 'absolutist' terms, that is, as if there is someone out there controlling the whole thing; the very word creation implies a

creator. For example the story is told about a group of scientists who visited Pope John Paul II in the Vatican some years ago. As they left his presence he was heard to say to them: 'Remember – there was nothing before the Big Bang!'²

To some the story of creation in Genesis 1 is the foundation of Creationism. However the text of the story speaks of the Spirit of God hovering over the surface of the water:

The earth was a vast waste, darkness covered the deep, and the spirit of God hovered over the surface of the water. (Gen 1: 2)

In this version of the creation myth there was



something there before God came along. Creation meant sorting out the chaos and giving it comprehensible form and structure. If we believe in God as a human idea then the story tells us that this is how the writers thought of the world; it is their thinking about the way things are and especially about the relationship between the human race and the natural world. They use the idea of God as a method of communication and to give their ideas divine authority. When it is argued that this God is absolute and unchangeable then these ideas cannot be challenged, there is no room for adaptation and change; the relationship becomes inhuman.

Power

Looking though the Bible we see nothing to justify the absolute power of the human ruler. Indeed the rise of kings to rule Israel is greeted with suspicion and warning:

The people all said to Samuel, 'Pray for us your servants to the Lord your God, to save us from death; for we have added to all our other sins the great wickedness of asking for a king.'

(1 Sam 12: 19)

Throughout their ministry the prophets stand before the kings in judgement. In the New Testament there is a clear separation between God and earthly power:

Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's.

(Mt 22: 21)

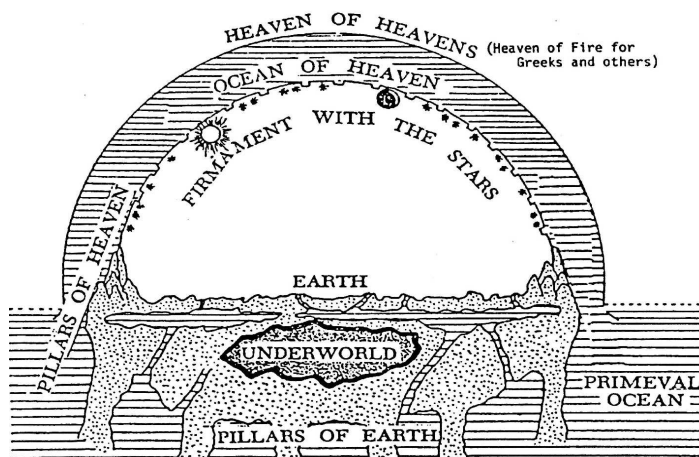
The disciples are urged to respect and obey the emperor for the sake of peace and order, but their focus is on God and his coming Kingdom. It is not until the fourth century that we see the emergence of absolutism in Christian thought. This is the result of the legitimating of the Church by Constantine, the sense of the magnificence and omnipotence of the imperial throne, and the accommodation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ

with Greek philosophy.³ In the 17th century in this country we see the final flowering of the divine right of kings and its tragic and fatal results. In the last century the idea of absolute power survived, for example, in the ideologies of fascism and communism in the 20th century.

On the evidence of his novel Philip Pullman's atheism appears to rest on his belief in the moral corruption of the Catholic Church. He gives us a good example of the mind-set of those who hold to the existence of an absolutist God to whom they claim a direct line:

The President held up his hand. Pre-emptive penance and absolution were doctrines researched and developed by the Consistorial Court, but not known to the wider church. They involved doing penance for a sin not yet committed, intense and fervent penance accompanied by scourging and flagellation, so

as to build up, as it were, a store of credit. When penance had reached the appropriate level for a particular sin, the penitent was granted absolution in advance, though he might never be called on to commit the sin. It was sometimes necessary to kill people, for example, and it was so much less troubling for the assassin if he could do so in a state of grace.⁴



Old Testament cosmology

Death and Eternal Life

The Psalmist speaks about death with uncompromising realism:

It is not the dead who praise the Lord, not those who go down to the silent grave: but we, the living, shall bless the Lord now and for evermore. (Ps 115: 17, 18)

Isaiah makes the same point:

Sheol cannot confess you, Death cannot praise you, nor can those who go down into the abyss hope for your truth. The living, only the living can confess you... (Is 38: 18,19)

The Old Testament says nothing about personal immortality; its focus is on the tribes of Israel. They shall survive into the future if they continue to obey the Lord God. In the New Testament most scholars understand the term eternal life as referring to a quality of life to be experienced in the here and now as a result of faith in the risen Christ. Pullman is also uncompromising in his view of death so in *The Amber Spyglass* when Lyra proposes to visit the Land of the Dead the author leaves us in no doubt what he believes:

The two spies were looking at her with open-mouthed incredulity. Then Salmakia blinked and said, 'What you say doesn't make sense. The dead are dead, that's all. There is no world of the dead'...
'Child,' said Tialys, 'when we die, everything is over. There is no other life. You have seen death. You've seen dead bodies, and you've seen what happens to a daemon when death comes. It vanishes. What else can there be to live on after that?' (p.242 in the 2005 paperback edition)

In fact it is clear that human beings cannot tolerate too much of this realism. Popular culture speaks about dying and going to heaven. Indeed all language about death and life after death functions as a means of enabling us to face our end with courage and hope. We evoke the judgement and mercy of God and we understand that this has its place in our experience of mortality. Nevertheless belief in the existence of a supernatural God causes us to believe in the reality of life after death, of meeting again our loved ones, and so on. The extreme of this position is the example of those who blow themselves up as suicide bombers.

The examination of these themes through the spyglass of theological non-realism suggests that dogmatic faith is conditioned by social circumstances. Those who hold to the existence of a supernatural God do so because they need certainty in their moral attitudes, and to feel that they have a direct line to their God and that they share in his power. The problem with this position is that it leads to impossible and inhuman choices and it negates the Gospel principle that the righteous person lives by faith.

The spyglass of theological non-realism is not a negative concept saying simply 'There is no God'. Rather it says: 'The idea of God in the human

mind is a creative and critical force, purging us from the prison of ideological and theological absolutism, and setting us free to meet the challenges of our situation with clarity and purpose.'

NOTES

1. Quotations from this book are taken from the paperback edition 2002.
2. This encounter with the Pope is described in *A Short History of Time* by Stephen Hawkin (paperback edition Bantam Books 1988 page 128).
3. This thesis is well argued in *The Closing of the Western Mind* by Charles Freeman (William Heinemann 2002).
4. *The Amber Spyglass* p.72. On the evidence of this book Pullman's atheism is founded on his deep revulsion to the corruption of the Catholic Church. The situation here is, of course, complete fantasy, although it touches a nerve as I remember the times in history when the Church has been complicit in mass murder. The situation Pullman describes is, of course, incompatible with the Doctrine of Grace central to the Church's moral teaching.

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

Underground Poem

I can't stand it.
The only thing I thought of at that moment
was to tell my wife and children I miss them,
them anxiously waiting for me to come to that door.
Down in here I began to cry.
A few days passed and we knew nothing.
Then in the small hours came a sounding
and you know the rest my friends.
They were Chilean voices we could hear.

Victor Zamora

From among their number, as well as a leader the 33 trapped Chilean miners appointed a poet – Victor Zamora.
Translated by Dinah Livingstone.



What does it mean if one says:

‘I believe in God’?

Eric Whittaker compares the usefulness of God as a human idea to the usefulness of imaginary numbers.

There was undoubtedly a time when it would have meant that I believed that there was a powerful old man sitting on a throne on the top floor of a three-decker universe. But what does it mean now? Some people insist that it must mean that someone called God exists as an objective fact (whatever that means), but is this essential? On the contrary is it acceptable to regard the existence of God as an idea of the human mind? I think one can clarify the matter to some extent by considering two very much simpler questions of belief, in mathematics and physics, in which one cannot easily distinguish objective fact from ideas of the human mind. But first it is perhaps best to consider the history of the belief in God or gods.

It is commonly said that Judaism, Christianity and Islam all proclaim belief in the same God, the God of Abraham, who is in fact proclaimed to be the only real God. In the history of religion I think one can distinguish three different approaches, all of which initially involved many gods. The one that I find most difficult to understand is the classical religion of the Greeks and Romans. These people did not apparently attribute the existence of the world to the gods, – they were just part of the existing order. In Crete you can visit the cave where Zeus, the king of the gods, was born. They were superior to people and more powerful, but they seem to have been little more than characters in a soap opera. I find the religion of ancient Egypt much more attractive. People tend to be put off it by the fantastic animal-headed figures of many of the gods, but it was through the gods that the world came into being, and different gods represented different aspects of divinity. I do not know enough about Hinduism to be sure but I imagine that similar comments would apply to that.

The religious view that reaches us in the Old Testament also envisages the existence of many

gods, but these are not accepted simultaneously. Each nation or locality has one or a few gods, and they are in competition with one another. The Lord thy God is a jealous God! And they can demonstrate their relative powers through the fortunes of their people. Gradually from this background the Jews developed their belief in the power and love of God which we have inherited from them, and it was the Jewish ideas about the character attributed to the God of Abraham that made him so manifestly unique. It not only made their religion monotheistic but also paved the way for the insight into the nature of God provided by Jesus. I am not sure that Mohammed’s God is the same at all.

Now let us consider some much simpler questions of belief that arise in maths and physics. I suppose everyone believes in the existence of the real numbers. The positive whole numbers 1, 2, 3, 4 etc. are obvious, and as soon as one starts taking things away, or sharing them, negative numbers and fractions become almost equally obvious. Historically, and practically in school, irrational numbers like $\sqrt{2}$ have caused much more trouble, but no-one doubts that the diagonal of a square that is 1 unit long on each side has a real and definite length, and the square root of 2 is well known to be 1.4142135, and on and on for ever. But there is no real number which when multiplied by itself gives -1. All positive numbers multiplied by themselves give a positive number, and so do all negative numbers. To mathematicians this seemed to be a very unsatisfactory position, so they invented an imaginary number that would do just that, the square root of minus one. You can’t express it in numerals, and so as it is imaginary they just called it i , for imaginary. Well it has turned out to be a very useful idea. It is not just that i times i gives minus one. It does all sorts of other things that you would never have expected. Quite remarkably it links together those other two peculiar

mathematical numbers, e and π , because it turns out that e raised to the power of $i\pi$ is -1 . Also if you raise i to the power of i (that is multiply together i instances of the number i , whatever that means) you get a real number that you can work out on a pocket calculator, namely 0.2078795763 (to the first ten figures, but going on and on for ever). It has all sorts of uses, and nowadays physicists would be lost without it. So I certainly believe in the square root of minus one. It is not a real number; it is an idea of the human mind, and yet it seems to be an objective fact that is part of the way things work.

There are a lot of things in physics that come into the same mixed category. In the 1890s people started trying to pass an electric current through a vacuum, and found that it was carried by things that travelled in straight lines but could be deflected by electric charges, so they concluded that these were little particles of some sort that carried an electric charge, and they called them electrons. However the more that was found out about electrons the more difficult it was to believe that they really were little particles. You could never tell where they actually were until they hit something. They were more likely to be in some places than others, but there was always a small chance of them being anywhere else. When they arrived somewhere and hit something you could never tell which way they had travelled to get there, only that there were different probabilities that they had taken a variety of routes. They turned out to be essential constituents of atoms but they certainly weren't particles within the atoms.

They form patterns within the atoms rather like the vibrations of a violin string – there are some places where the string is vibrating with a large amplitude and points in between where it is still, and the more of these there are the higher the harmonic that is being generated. But the vibrations are not vibrations of anything, like a violin string; they are more like the smile on the face of the Cheshire cat after the cat had disappeared. So what are these particles called

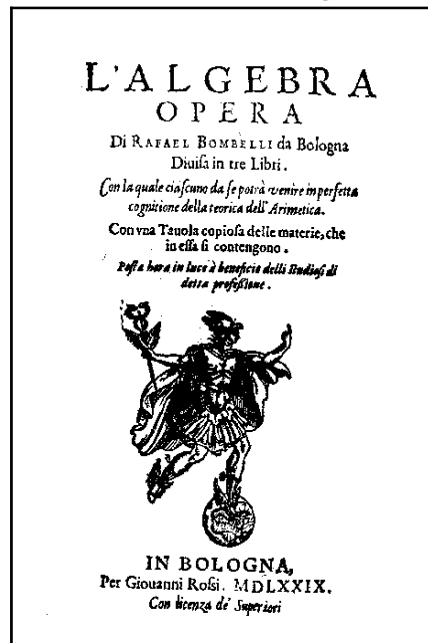
electrons? Are they objective facts or are they ideas of the human mind? Whatever they are I certainly believe in electrons. They form the picture on my television screen, and they make my computer work.

Equally I believe in God. It is difficult to see how anything that we talk about can be other than an idea of the human mind. Non-believers say that the idea of God was invented because people felt a need for him. But the square root of minus one was invented because mathematicians felt a need for it. Non-believers say that the idea of God is absurd because he is alleged to have incompatible characteristics – being a god of love and yet creating a nature red in tooth and claw, and an earth rent by catastrophes. But electrons have incompatible characteristics – hitting things like a particle, travelling like a wave, and existing as harmonic vibrations of nothing.

One could say that objective realities never change whereas ideas of the human mind do change. We no longer believe that electrons go round an atom like planets round the sun, and we no longer believe that God foreordained a small proportion of people to have an infinitely long life of bliss, and the majority to have an infinitely long life of torment. Ideas of the human mind can change. You could

say that when we discuss electrons we are really telling stories about the way that they behave. You could even say that there is not a total difference between describing small scale electric effects in terms of electrons and describing large scale electric effects like thunder-storms in terms of the god Thor.

So I do not know the difference between an objective reality and a construct of the human mind that enables me to discuss how the world works, and that is what my belief in God enables me to do.



Rafaele Bombelli invented the imaginary number i .

Eric Whittaker is a retired academic scientist and a member of St. John's Church, Kidlington. He attends the Oxford SOF group.

Part of a Pilgrimage

Anne Ashworth, a long-time SOF member, kept a spiritual journal between 1980 and 1997. Here is the first of three extracts covering a period before she left the church.

Background

Between 1980 and 1997 I kept, sporadically, a spiritual journal. Entries were only made when I was deeply moved by some experience or idea.

In the early 1970s, having returned to church attendance in the wake of *Honest to God* and in the hope that Christianity might after all have a usable language for spiritual/aesthetic experience, I felt drawn to theological exploration. This became crystallised into a vocation for the preaching ministry. After two years structured study and practical experience, I became in 1976 an accredited lay preacher of the United Reformed Church. My commissioning service was like an ordination, yet I continued steadfastly to resist all pressures to become a full time, fully ordained, minister. Somehow I knew that was not the way for me. However, my Sunday ministry, taking services in many churches around the URC District, was clearly nourishing and inspiring my congregations and I took the preparation it required very seriously. It also stimulated my further reading and spiritual exploration. My modernist liberal and radical Christianity grew nearer to atheism. The Bible and the hymnbook both shrank for me, as I struggled to select material that I could use with integrity. The end was in sight. Yet how could I deny my own authentic religious experiences, and those of others from all cultures?

[Explanatory words in square brackets have been added at a later date.]

Extracts from the Journal

August 1980

'Be good,' said one. 'You're as good as gold,' said another. But no: this is not what we seek. What is to be sought, exclusively, is Truth. Goodness is only a by-product.

Evelyn Underhill: 'The life of the minister of religion depends almost entirely for its value on the extent to which it is bathed in the Divine Light.'

Doubts are necessary. But we must be like Simone Weil, *en hypomene*, in attentive open waiting on God. Compare the same activity in intellectual work: translation, solution of scientific problems, making sense of poetry.

Lesslie Newbigin: 'A Christian has no right to ask where he is going.'

December 1980

Spending the night before Christmas on the floor in much discomfort on account of a back injury, and remembering the severe backache in labour pains, I felt closer to Mary in the draughty stable – more at one with the significance of incarnation.

January 1981

Peter Porter on Patricia Beer: 'Her sense of the world as a place of annunciations and epiphanies.' Here religion and poetry converge, as for me they must.

February 1981

Dean Inge: 'Faith is a kind of climbing instinct.' The spiritual ascent is the rightful activity of the soul. But the mountain is criss-crossed with tracks. The poet plunges sideways to gasp at waterfalls; he uses the mountain for his own purposes. The prophet scales a peak, shouts from a cave mouth, 'This way!' But the highest peaks are cloud-capped. Only the silent Zen monk, attending to his every footfall and not looking up, enters the cloud. If he returns, that mystic, his face is transfigured, but his silence remains. The air on the upper slopes is rarefied; we cannot breathe it for long. Most of us must, as Allison Peers said, be content to potter about on the lower slopes, plains dwellers yet encouraged and energised by the peak-scalers.

[This later became the poem *Mountain*.]

March 1981

In the cross of Christ I glory
Towering o'er the wrecks of time. (*hymn*)

So many wrecks, so much suffering. Pain, fear, hate, despair, cruelty, injustice, torture. What is this animal humankind? Unbearable. Open your heart to concern and prayer and it cracks and bursts with the intolerable pressure. Glory in the cross? Shake fists at heaven, rather.

Yet only the cross will do. In a way it's not so much an answer as a redoubling of the question. But in face of so much suffering, a suffering God is the only kind one dares to believe in. An omnipotent God would be by definition *infinitely* wicked. The cross demonstrates vulnerability as the ultimate force. They are wrong who say Christianity would be acceptable without the cross. Only the cross will do, when despair strips away all else. It is hard to be a Christian, to open the heart to all the world's passion, to dare the groaning prayer.

April 1981

Thomas à Kempis: 'Blessed are the eyes which are shut to outward things, but intent on things eternal.' I read this on a halcyon spring day, sitting amid daffodils, watching birds on the apple blossom against a blue sky. No, Thomas, it won't do! – unless we twist your statement and argue that response to beauty is an inward and eternal verity.

Easter Sunday April 1981

On Good Friday I wondered: how can I gather up all the world's woe, not only into the cry of dereliction, but into affirmation of life for Easter Day? This morning I thought rather cynically – the congregation knows nothing of and cares less about the preacher's Gethsemane. All they want is a bright spring festival.

I gave them laughter and liveliness, but in the sermon led them up the garden path into Ezekiel's valley ('Can these bones live?') and the dead in the streets of El Salvador. They were spellbound.

Afterwards a woman from the holiday caravan site clung to me with tears. 'I don't know what made me come this morning. My faith has been dead for years. But something has happened here. You have restored it. "Can these bones live?" Pray for me. I think you're great.'

'No,' I said firmly. 'I'm only ordinary.'

'I'm ordinary too. All this make-up' (she was heavily veneered), 'it's all false. Part of the deadness. But I'm coming to life again.'

I am drained by her demands, and the unspoken demands of the 200 or so other worshippers who perhaps seek affirmation of life in a world of dry bones. Drained - but wiser. I was too cynical. Affirmation is not only possible, it is contagious. Easter can still work.

October 1981

From Carlo Caretti, *The Desert in the City*:

Of vocation, p.60:

'God's gifts are so marvellous that they tempt us to idolatry. Our vocation is making us proud. Without our love for God each of us sooner or later becomes the slave of his vocation. Do not be afraid when he asks you to perform some task, but do not be afraid when he asks for it back. God is greater than his call.'

Of frustration, p.49:

'In the Kingdom it is deeds that count. There is, however, a fact that is not a deed, yet bestows the right

of citizenship in the Kingdom of Heaven. This is "the poor man's longing". Most men do not succeed in fulfilling themselves in action on this earth. Defeated, humiliated and unemployed...[but] in God's eyes, doing or not doing, succeeding or not succeeding, are not the point, what matters is loving. And if my love has not been realised in action, then it is realising itself today in my poor man's longing. [Otherwise] the Kingdom of Heaven would be the heritage of the strong, the intelligent, the competent and the clever – it would be a very small thing.'

December 1981

Truth of our life, Mary's child,
You tell us God is good.
Prove it is true, Mary's child,
Go to your cross of wood. (*a carol*)

A cross to prove the goodness of God? Stated so, the idea appals. The 'truth of our life' is that goodness is vulnerable; so much is clear. But that this proves God's goodness – ! Paradox. Suffering, is this the highest ideal we recognise? Well, the highest we know must be the nearest we can get to glimpsing the nature of God.

New Year's Day 1982

Characters in conflict: AA poet, AA preacher, AA librarian, AA mother. [I had at the time a son

and two student protégés who needed mothering.] AA poet and AA preacher ask questions; AA mother and AA librarian provide answers. AA preacher is a public persona; AA poet is excessively private. AA mother, AA preacher, AA librarian give themselves; AA poet conserves herself defensively. AA librarian is a conformist; AA poet is a rebel.

All are rivals for the 24 hours of the day. Each works at the expense of the others. If there can be any harmony between them, it must spring from their commitment to God – each to 'that of God' which she is able to apprehend. AA preacher offers her prophetic and priestly functions, AA librarian her service, AA mother her love, AA poet her truest insights. They must be content to echo Dietrich Bonhoeffer: 'Who am I, Lord? Whatever I am, I am thine.'

January 1982

Is it true that the magnetic north pole attracts worldwide like a great magnet? God – the divine – the beyond – That Other – is like that. That of God in us responds to the magnet. There is the tiniest of iron



Anne Ashworth

filings embedded in me – enough to feel the pull and have no ease. Brahman to Atman – Self to self.
[This later became a poem.]

February 1983

For love of man and praise of God, a project: a poem sequence called *Annunciations*, beginning with my existing poem of that name and including others already written; but the structure to be provided by autobiographical incidents, moments of annunciation and epiphany. Can it be done without unwholesome self-absorption? If every session writing it is made a committed act of worship, will this help to safeguard, to keep self from obtruding?

[The sequence was written but never published. It remains important to me.]

July 1983

'Foxes have holes, birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.' With these words Jesus is said to have discouraged would-be followers, or at least to have emphasised that his Way was a way of insecurity. Literally he was indicating the vagrant lifestyle of himself and his men. Yet reflecting on the words I see wider significance, which Jesus himself may or may not have intended. The comparison with the animal kingdom has only just struck me. Nests and foxholes are part of the natural order, the life of the instincts. Man, perilously and full of justified anxiety, has evolved beyond the instinctual. The son of man (all of us) has to live in the freedom of humanity, a terrifying state. He has to make decisions. He builds, not simple mindless repetitive nests and holes, but cities and schools and hospitals, bridges and barriers and ghettos and sports stadia, churches and temples and theatres and prisons and houses of parliament. He must live like a gypsy, always agonising over the decision 'Where next?' The challenge of Christ is to a commitment which sits loose to all other commitments. We are the Exodus people.

July 1983

'Blessed are the meek' does not commend itself to the temper of the age. But what about Phillips' translation 'Happy are those who claim nothing, for the whole earth will belong to them'? Set that in the light of claims for territory, oil resources, income differentials, against land use and abuse.

September 1983

[After a severe accident]

Leg in plaster, arm out of joint, body shocked and shattered; upheld by the prayers and love of others. Within, love in greater quantity and quality, greater

strength of soul, growth in prayer. Grace!

I am addressed as 'plaster saint' and laugh. No saint, in the modern sense! Yet in the ancient sense of *sanctus, bagios*, holy – set aside for God? I am a temporary saint, set aside for God; waiting on God, but also active for God, if active contemplation is an acceptable oxymoron.

Prayer: for grace to be used, now and afterwards, in the invisible movements of love. This newly acquired mental strength – I must not seek to use it, only to offer it for use. And submit to accepting uselessness too!

October 1983

Reading Frank Topping, *The Words of Christ*. 'Blessed are the poor in spirit.' According to Topping, poor, *ptokos*, is a translation of an Aramaic word used to describe a Hebrew concept of the *ani* or *anaw* which meant the humble, the pious, those close to God, or those who seek God. So the first beatitude might read 'Blessed are those who seek God in spirit.' Now look at 'in spirit'. Luke does not use it at all, and Matthew has *pneumatikos*, belonging to the wind, or freely, in spirit, or willingly. So the whole verse could say "Blessed are those who seek God willingly, freely." Jesus is saying this directly to his disciples who have given up everything to follow him: 'Blessed are you, who have willingly put yourselves in the path of the wind of God,' is Topping's final suggestion. Oh for courage to step out willingly into the path of the wind!

September 1984

Sixty-six wrens are recorded as crowding into a standard RSPB nesting box for winter warmth. They lived. What an amazing phenomenon life is.

Poustinia [hermitage – the name of my home], a life system. The garden, a semi-natural ecosystem of plants, insects, birds. A nesting box is its focal point, a fostering of life. Indoors, a fostering of life in all my poustinic visitors. Within, the deepest realest poustinia of all, the poustinia of the heart, where in the heart's silence burns the intense silence of God. And that flame is the same life that fosters all other life.

Breathe in the life of God, breathe out the love of God. And the silence and the flame and the breath are one.

Why am I not an atheist? Because no matter what my reason may shout, its cleverness is ignorance. To *know* is to partake of immediacy which cannot be denied.

God inhaled, exhaled. Light, new and glistening. Air sweet scented, morning washed. To pray is to be silent with joy, enfolded in the beloved. To pray is to agonise in pain over suffering friends, suffering world. Both prayers co-exist, intertwine, cannot exist without each other.

Don Cupitt and Everyday Speech

David Wemyss ruminates on some of the pitfalls of the 'ordinary'.

In Don Cupitt's earlier books, there was ample evidence of an author intensely preoccupied with the anxiety of speech.¹ This began to wane, however, and has now been pretty well reversed. Also, Cupitt did not stay long with what might be called his 'Heidegger period', a brief flirtation with the notion of pre-linguistic being, something not literally outside language but the necessary (primordial) obverse of it.² He was clearly wary of Heidegger's antipathy towards humanism, yet the family resemblance between the two men is evident in their fondness for things that flit in and out of existence, things that are delicate and light, things that are not *instrumental*.

One finds this in Cupitt from first to last. A favoured image is that of insects, pond skaters traversing the surface of things, reacting to the contingent ripples in the water, ripples which just happen to be what is there (rather than what is not there). We also hear about butterflies, and songbirds who only live for half a day but sing their hearts out for that brief span.

No time to worry about what we say, or, more to the point, what it feels like when we say it. We should live as if each day were our last. The picture is of creatures burning themselves out like the sun, doing whatever it is they do to be what they are. Birds sing, insects flutter, suns blaze, but – wait a minute – men and women *just do* take heed of the morrow. Suddenly Cupitt has a problem.

We may be grateful for modern healthcare, but then what is the real point of wanting to recover from an illness? To get back to worrying about long-term planning in modern healthcare, or whatever other social utility makes us 'useful'?

Cupitt is tempted by this yet recoils from it too. His compromise position is that 'burning ourselves out like the sun' means dismissing existential and material anxieties but taking heed (playfully) of social progressiveness. Solar ethics rediscovers ordinary speech, and finds it to be *extraordinary* in the remarkable work it does in bus queues and hairdressers' shops. Workaday words are the new poetry, and we should be glad about it.

The implication is that (*pave* T S Eliot) in the end is our beginning, which we now know for the first

time. Yet this may be less congenial than it sounds. A fondness for playful or easeful speech is by no means the same as just plunging heedlessly into everyday talk, however verveful the latter may sound.

To illustrate: in the weeks before she died, my cantankerous aunt – solidly working class – heard Beethoven's symphonies and quartets for the first time and said it had been the most wonderful experience of her life, and that she would have loved to have known this music earlier. 'But I never thought it was for the likes of me'.

Yet symphony orchestras doing 'outreach' work in poorer communities are often told to keep classical music to an accessible minimum and concentrate on television theme tunes, and 'songs from the shows'. In schools, children are to be allowed to handle the instruments, but should not be bored by hearing that Wagner comes after Mozart. No doubt all of this will be a condition of the local Council subsidising what it perceives to be elitist entertainment, and there's the rub. They don't know what the original privilege is.

The privilege is Beethoven, not the middle-class milieu that would hijack him. However, by telling orchestras to keep him out of school visits or community concerts, educationalists and community strategists give the game away: they obviously have no notion that they're democratising access to his symphonies. A straightforward modern egalitarian impulse, fresh and well-intentioned, turns out to be prosaic and hidebound. But the answer is not to be seduced by scepticism about egalitarianism (as I once was) but to ask at all times if we are sure we know what our egalitarianism is really for.

However, if public discourse is in such a state of disrepair that people are confused about whether genuine egalitarianism can be reconciled with the assumption of Beethoven's world-historical stature – dead white males, etc. – then those who can reconcile the two easily are going to feel increasingly hurt and disaffected. This wound may then turn infected, and begin to close. The poison will no doubt be right-wing, or worse. I know this to my cost.

So can the wound be kept open and fresh? Don

Cupitt certainly comes to mind here. He has been a marvellous presence in British theology for more than thirty years. In his edifying pictures of pond skaters and songbirds and butterflies, he breathes new life into the old idea that timelessness is real – utterly and wonderfully real. But, in relating this to a vivid affirmation of ordinary language in all its idioms, he has never expressed wariness about what might be called doctrinally-settled speech, which is a pity because he is particularly well-equipped to do so without himself lapsing into the doctrinaire.

How would such wariness be expressed? Well, for example, politically correct language is sometimes said to amount to no more than an extension of good manners. But, then again, like a modern extension added insensitively to a beautiful old building, such language is often an ugly and graceless defacement impeding easeful style. In conversation, easeful style tugs on the formative tissues of liberty, and protects genuine differences. There's a lot of truth in that. Yet none of it is absolutely true.

My conclusion – very much contrary to what I used to think – is that politically correct speech is theoretically fine. It's just likely to be unstylish and clumsy in many actual instances. And it may blind people to beauty and liberation. I suspect that Cupitt knows all of this. If he were to write about it, I think the outcome could be a richly-nuanced 'late period' in a life sorely troubled by language but dedicated to an unsurpassable joie de vivre. I'd love to read that essay or book. So I'm finished now, Don. It's over to you.

NOTES

1. Don Cupitt, *The Long-Legged Fly: A Theology of Language and Desire*, SCM Press (1987) p. 26. Cupitt observes that 'there can be no doubt that the force of our speech is a matter of great moment to us, for we spend a surprising amount of time in reviewing our past conversations in order to decide whether we have managed to express ourselves as forcibly as we should have done. In banter, we are particularly pleased with ourselves when we are able promptly to find a spirited retort, and contrariwise we reproach ourselves bitterly when we are conscious of having responded feebly. We were dull-witted, slow on the uptake, and the right words did not come to us until too late'.
2. Don Cupitt, *The Religion of Being*, SCM Press (1998).

David Wemyss lives in Aberdeen with his wife and family and works in local government.

The Arrival of the Orchestra

I think silences are good
 But for how long these silences?
 Enough of silences
 Let the orchestra come!
 Let the grave, roaring and
 melancholic flame of the great storm come!
 And the sweet street ballad
 And the noise of people and cars
 And the entire guitar of my breast
 made to resonate by the hurricane
 Let life come
 with its peaks and troughs
 Let the seas and winds come
 and the rains and desolation
 and the dust of the roads and the fatal
 mists of solitude
 Let mad fortune come wearing a Phrygian bonnet
 to know we are alive!

Gustavo Pereira

This is the title poem of *The Arrival of the Orchestra*, a bilingual collection of poems by Gustavo Pereira, translated by John Green, Michael Boncza and Eduardo Embry (Smokestack Books 2010). The author was unable to attend the book's recent launch at the Bolivar Hall in London as he was busy with the Venezuelan elections. His poems were read in Spanish by the Venezuelan ambassador H.E. Samuel Moncada and in English translation by the publisher Andy Croft.



Gustavo Dudamel conducts the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra. The Orchestra is part of *El Sistema*, the Venezuelan Music Education Scheme that has enabled half a million children, including some very poor, to play classical music to a high standard.

SOF Sermon

Stephen Mitchell preached this sermon at St Mary's Daleham and All Saints' Church Gazeley on Sunday 12th September 2010, the Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity.

If you've cocked half an ear to the news over the last few weeks or glanced at the newspapers, you'll know that the Cambridge scientist Stephen Hawking, together with some of his colleagues, has published a book called *The Grand Design*. It's all about the latest theories in physics. The thing which has caught the press's attention is what he has had to say about God: God isn't needed to light the blue touch paper.

Spontaneous creation is the reason there is something rather than nothing, why the universe exists, why we exist.

There's another reason why God isn't needed in Hawking's world. It's to do with something else that has caught the press's attention, a theory of everything. If physicists have a theory of everything then that explains everything. There is therefore no need to bring God in to explain anything. Most of us are lost at this point and think clever scientists. But let's just pause for a minute and think about the idea of 'a theory of everything'.

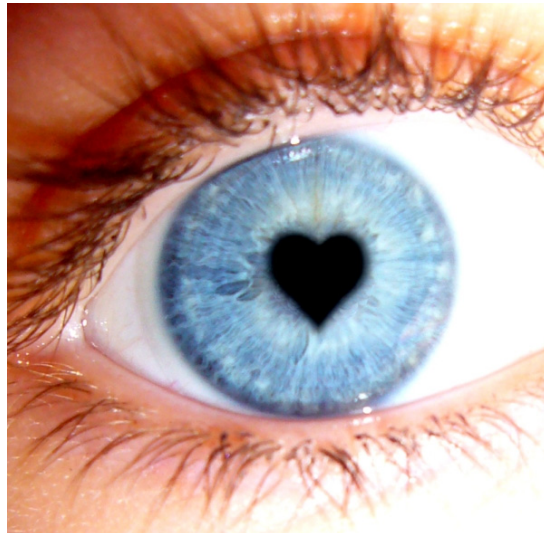
Remember at school when you played with magnets. There were things that we learnt about magnets and their north and south poles. And perhaps we even sprinkled iron filings on a piece of paper with a magnet underneath and produced pretty patterns. On other days in physics we learnt things about electricity with batteries, bulbs, wires and galvanometers.

Now if you have ever ridden a bicycle with a dynamo or taken an electric motor apart, you will know that moving magnets about near coils of wire produces electricity. Or pass electricity through coils of wire near to magnets and things move. There's a connection between electricity and magnetism. That is pretty extraordinary. You can convert electricity in magnetism and magnetism into electricity.

And once physicists get on the case they come up with yet more equations for us to learn in our physics

lessons about something they call electromagnetism. Electromagnetism turns out to be a pretty basic force in our universe.

And what about some of the other things we learnt about in physics, gravity for instance. Apples fall to the ground because of gravity. Planets whizz around each other because of gravity. There's less of it on the moon and there's zero gravity in space because the astronauts float about in their spaceships. Is gravity connected to electromagnetism? Apparently there are two other fundamental forces in our universe. Are they related to electromagnetism and gravity?



Joy and love are more than whizzing things in the brain.

Well, it turns out they might be. Certainly physicists want to create equations that link all these forces together. Einstein did a pretty good job in bringing space and time and gravity together and energy and mass and the speed of light. That's also pretty weird. Space and time are somehow connected and connected to mass and energy, gravity and the speed of light.

So a theory of everything is a mathematical equation that has in it references to things like space, time, gravity, mass, energy, electro-magnetism and all the forces of quantum mechanics. Now I hope there are no physicists here because I am sure they are already seething at this very simplistic explanation. But it's complex enough for some things to be immediately very obvious.

What about the idea of this being a theory of everything? Everything? – what about joy and happiness and love and imagination and redness and ugliness and crime and hope? Now I suppose it may be argued that things like joy and love are simply the result of particles whizzing about in our brains. But it won't quite do to say joy is simply particles whizzing about in the brain and if we make things whizz around in our brains in a particular way we will feel joy. If joy is confined to brain function so too is courage and bravery and self-sacrifice. What does that say about our commemoration of the Battle of

Britain?

Joy and love are more than whizzing things in the brain. They are about how we describe the world, how we think about the world, how we experience the world, how we imagine the world and picture the world, how we are aware and conscious of the world.

It's a very, very, very long way from a mathematical equation to a Shakespeare Sonnet. You may remember the book and the radio series *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* which had the famous answer 42. (If, by the way, you put the answer to life, the universe and everything into Google it comes up with 42 at the top of the list!)

The joke in the book is that the computer which has spent millions of years working this answer out doesn't know the ultimate question for which 42 is the answer. 42 is the answer but the question which it answers seems to have been forgotten. It's a bit like that with theories of everything. What has 42 got to do with 9/11?

Now the way physicists have brought all the different elements of the physical world together and come to understand their relationships is an awesome intellectual achievement and one which has helped shape our technological world. But we mustn't be misled by the physicists' everything. It isn't everything – it isn't poetry and art and love.

The second thing that should strike us about theories of everything is that they don't actually explain everything. If we come up with an equation like $E = mc^2$ then that may tell us how the speed of light is related to energy and mass but it doesn't tell us why there is light. It doesn't tell us what we might do with light or what meaning light might have in our life or how we might use light as a metaphor for understanding, God or a margarine.

$E = mc^2$ won't tell us anything about the life cycle of an eel - not that I particularly want to know anything about the life cycle of eels. It won't tell us which spending cuts to make in the economy or how deep to make them. It won't tell us which school to send our children to or who would make a suitable wife or husband. It won't tell us where our lost coin is or whether to forgive our neighbour.

In fact a theory of everything doesn't have very much say about anything in our day-to-day lives. A theory of everything is almost a

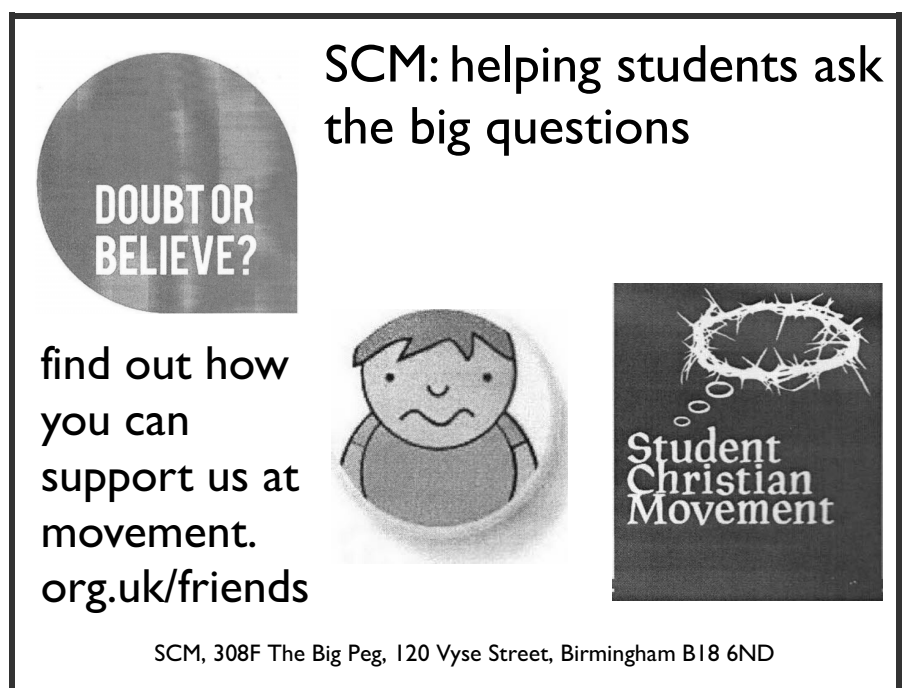
theory of nothing. And it should be said, in passing, that many physicists don't think it possible to produce a theory of everything. There will always be a missing link. But even if such a theory is possible it wouldn't be the answer to everything. There would be many more practical things to answer. It would be a bit like this sermon on life, the universe and everything. You wouldn't expect it to be the last sermon that I ever preach. You might hope that it was the last sermon that I ever preach. But there are so many other things to talk about.

There is one thing about which Stephen Hawking is right and that is that we are not going to find God in cosmological theories about the beginning of the universe. God is to be found in day-to-day living. God is to be found in making our lives meaningful and valuable. God is to be found in love and imagination and forgiveness.

We've always known that. We've always known that God is love and that the commands of God are to love one another and our neighbours as ourselves. We know God is to be found in acts of forgiveness.

It's sometimes said that religion gets above itself. Well science can get above itself too. And we shouldn't feel over-awed by the astonishing and marvellous revelations of science. As people of faith we have our own gifts of faith to reveal to the world.

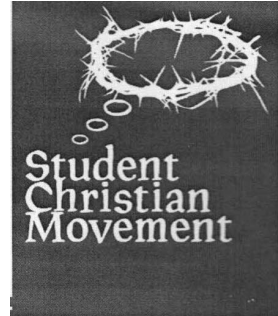
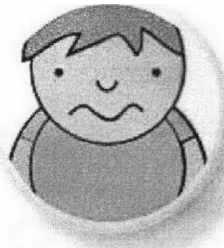
Stephen Mitchell is the Vicar of Gazeley and four other parishes and Rural Dean of Mildenhall, Suffolk. He is a former Chair of SOF trustees.



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I shall pass this way but once...

I'm sure many people will have already responded to Dominic Kirkham to say that his quotation in the September *Sofia* is by Marcus Aurelius. My primary school teacher wrote these words in my autograph book when I was leaving, aged 11, (in 1952!). Maybe her ideas were in advance of her time. I too am frequently 'visited' by this sentiment.

Best wishes

Mary C. d'Ath, Worthing

Further thoughts on the 'broken body'

I have much enjoyed reading Dinah's book. As an introduction to the nature of poetry I think the first section could hardly be bettered, the phrase 'poetic trope' is exact and useful. The examples given are all apposite and chosen with economy and skill and the references leave nothing to be desired. I shall read this part again and again, and recommend it heartily. Altogether, I think the book is elegantly and tersely written, and, as a partially-sighted person, I found the type very welcome.

I want to leave 'Mother and Father' for further consideration, passing on to what Dinah calls *The Grand Narrative*. There are other narratives. One of my favourites is from the south-East. I found it in an old tome by Mircea Eliade called *From Primitives to Zen*. It goes like this:

Once upon a time a young man gathered and split a coconut. Inside he found a tiny girl. He took the child back to his hut, where she rapidly grew and became a beautiful young woman. She had what we call charisma, becoming popular and much loved. She was chosen to be the gift-giver at a festival. But some people were jealous and conspired to murder her. The people were very sad. They cut her body into parts and buried these in different parts of the ground. From these grew the principal food plants of the tribe. But the goddess was angry. She ordered that Hainuwele's arms should be made into a gate. Before the murder the people were on easy terms with the spirits but now they could only approach the divine beings through the gate.

That is an aetiological myth, i.e. it is an attempt to account for origins: that of murder (cf. Cain and Abel), and of horticulture amongst hunter-gatherers, and of priestcraft and religious authority.

I am no lover of priestcraft, but I do find the 'poetic trope' of Hainuwele's arms most pathetic and

beautiful. A book called *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* deals with a similar theme. The wedding feast of those two personages in Greek myth was the last time the people were on easy terms with the gods, who had sat down with the rest.

So we have another 'broken body'. I want to discuss that theme. I do find Dinah's redaction of the theme persuasive but there is more to be said. It seems to be part of 'fallen (?) human nature that some, on occasion, have a problem with what is whole, discrete, and therefore perhaps felt as withholding, enigmatic, other, and disturbing. It isn't only people. I read somewhere that in the days before Whitefriars glass became the fashion, people used to pile it up under car boot stalls and throw stones at it. Breaking and smashing can be such fun. When it takes the form of 'Ripperism' I think the perpetrator is 'saying': 'How dare you keep your secrets from me, who do you think you are?'

Then this becomes institutionalised, ritualised and some religious narratives afford sanction. Put this together with the fact that people get satisfaction – on occasion – from the pain and humiliation of others, from the exercise of power and the frisson of permitting oneself to go to extremes, and you have torture and ritual killing. Executions must be done by due process and are therefore ritualistic (recall the unease of the hasty disposal of the Ceaucescus) but much pleasure can be had from the design and form of these ceremonies. Anyone who has witnessed a class of clean twelve-year-old lower middle class schoolgirls tormenting a weak teacher will never have inordinate faith in human nature.

We know that mutilation can have erotic appeal – remember the film *Crash*. Once in our chapel (we liked to be fair to all sects) I saw an elderly Salvation Army 'lassie' give her testimony. She mimed washing her arms up to the shoulders in the blood of Christ. She was an innocent abroad. I imagine that the young man giving the (very good) sermon knew that she was 'getting off' on the thing. I recall a headmistress I worked for: 'I can't stand these cannibal hymns.'

Christianity has been called a 'composting culture' because it takes evil and re-processes it to make good – thus our *Grand Narrative*. *But might some quietist sage call it a bit of an abomination? Discuss.*

Anna Sutcliffe, Leeds



Josh

Waiting

for birth
or its news

how the wind blows
this whirling turning world.

I would say what I cannot say
speak
write out upon some page
of what lies on my mind
and how my stomach churns
along with birth of unseen things.

And it is not because I cannot find them here
but fear presumption
of a place where I might be
not so much in peace as purpose

linked not only to this birth
joined
to what unborn as yet is waited on
some other union
of what when born
we'll nurture well enough
to go beyond a symbol of our times
something to last and outlast
dust that ends our days
wherein our future has become their past
and
– hopefully –
their praise.

Steve Regis

Steve Regis became a member of SOF fairly recently. He was a non-conformist minister but left the ministry in 1977. The poem was written while awaiting the birth of his first grandchild in 1996.

SOF Sift

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

From David Hatton, Althorne, Essex

My Ebb Tide

My tide has been receding very slowly, but has at last reached its end – so, time for a higher sub. to SOF!

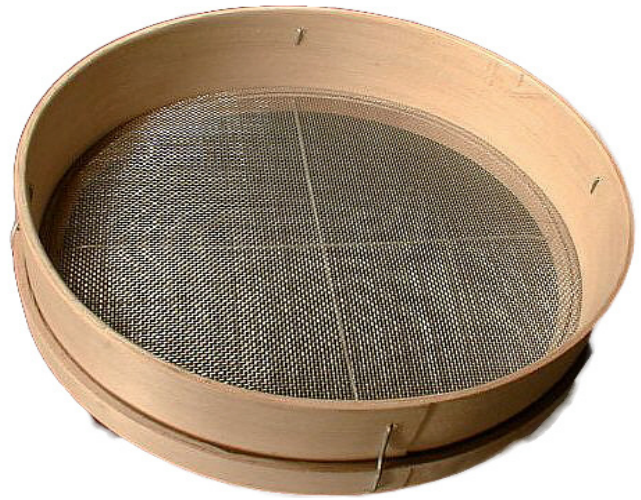
I was brought up in the usual way for the 1920s – much church and Sunday School. Although basically a Methodist, through much of my life I have sometimes attended Quaker meetings. I became a Methodist minister – the one described in David Boulton's *The Trouble with God* as 'a "Modernist" Christian Socialist minister', which may imply the tide beginning to ebb even in those early days?

Unhappy experiences led to my leaving the ministry and becoming an R.E. Teacher. There I worked on the principle that I would prefer a pupil to become a thoughtful atheist than an unthoughtful Christian. In school assemblies instead of prayers I invited all present to reflect on the day's subject – perhaps another ebb flow? and one which did not tie in with headmaster's view. He preferred 'real prayers' – although he always got stuck at the phrase 'our inestimable benefits'. By now I was beginning to realise I was happier teaching about religion than preaching it.

I next became a college lecturer on Religion. My approach caused some trouble with the County Council when I invited the then president of the British Humanist Association, Harry Stopes-Roe, to address R.E. teachers. In a conversation which ran late into the night he reckoned my 'religious' views were more tolerant than his non-believer's ones.

My developing views may be apparent in the title of a series of booklets I wrote for the Methodist Publishing House *The Questioning Christian*. One title *Did Jesus Say That?* took a few tiny steps along the path of the Jesus Seminar, which I was to encounter later.

The subject required for the final of the Times Preacher of the Year event in 1999 was 'Christianity in the 21st Century'. I spoke of the need to make clear the real nature of the literature in the Bible and to move on from fourth century concepts and language in expressing Christian belief. Interestingly it was the non-Christians among the judges (the secretary of the National Secularist



Society, Keith Wood, and Rabbi Lionel Blue) who took the trouble of making particular personal comments afterwards, and much later the latter recalled in a newspaper article points which 'an elderly preacher' (!) had made. How far do any of these indicate the ebbing of the tide for me I can't be sure.

The tsunami was the beginning of the end, its inflowing waves leading to my ebb tide and eventually a full acceptance of Christian belief as a myth (though a good and useful one) – a process brought to conclusion by recent issues of *Sofia*.

Of course 'unbelieving' has its problems. A colleague felt he had to give up singing carols in the college choir because they contradicted what he taught in the lecture room. I felt this unnecessary, although it does require explaining mythological concepts to others. I used to ask school pupils if the fable of the race between the tortoise and hare was true – and ultimately one would say: 'In a way it is'.

Where now? I like the thoughts in the 13th century Persian Muslim poet and theologian Rumi: *I searched for God among the Christians and on the Cross and therein I found Him not, I went into the ancient temples of idolatry; no trace of Him was there.*

He continues his search at Qandhar, Mt Caucasus, the Kaaba, and turns to philosophy, but finds God in none of them. He concludes *Finally, I looked into my own heart and there I saw Him; He was nowhere else.*

Now, as a 91 year old, I sometimes sit watching what I call my Assisi corner with its bird feeding systems just behind a glass door, and at trees moving in the wind, the clouds, flower beds created by a lovely daughter, rabbits and blackbirds on the lawn – and I feel close to Louis de Bernières and his incredible sequence of nature's wonders in his poem beginning 'I give thanks to God, in whom I do not believe'.

Red Letter Days

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

10th November (birthday): **Martin Luther**



Luther 1483–1546

Martin Luther's prosperous peasant father, a Mansfeld town councillor, was devastated when his eldest son announced that he was quitting his law studies. Put in terror of eternal judgment by the thunderbolt which killed his close friend in early July 1505, he became a monk by the end of the month. Following ordination in 1507, a wise supervisor packed him off to study theology at the University of Wittenberg, where

he flourished, gaining his doctorate in 1512.

Appalled by corruption in Rome, Luther was horrified by the sale of indulgences to raise funds for rebuilding St. Peter's. Luther's fundamental objection was his belief that forgiveness was God's alone to grant and that salvation is obtained only through faith. His 95 Theses, detailing his criticisms, spread rapidly across Europe – speeded by the new printing process – and sparked the Protestant Reformation.

Following excommunication, Luther faced secular trial at the Diet of Worms. After 24 hours' consideration, he defended his position: 'Here I stand. I can do no other.' Protected and hidden by the Elector of Saxony, Luther spent much of 1521 corresponding with friends, propagating pamphlets including one *On Monastic Orders* which encouraged monks and nuns to break their vows and marry, and completing his New Testament translation into vernacular German.

On returning to Wittenberg, he organised the new church in Saxony, assisted his friend Tyndale on the English New Testament and, in 1524, embarked on a long and joyful marriage with Katharina von Bora.

Luther, the great reformer and theologian, is remembered affectionately for his honest and open expression of emotions, replying to an inquirer on one occasion, 'Love God? Sometimes I hate Him!' and often afflicted by self-hatred: 'The penalty of sin continues as long as hatred of self continues,' while recognising that, 'The smaller the love, the greater the fear.'

Mary Lloyd

17th December: **Elizabeth Garrett Anderson**



E.G.A 1836–1917

When Elizabeth Garrett Anderson finally gained membership of the B.M.A. in 1875, the regulations were promptly changed. Although parliament ruled in 1876 to admit women to medicine, the next woman member of the BMA was not accepted until 1894. Inspired by meeting the first American woman doctor, Elizabeth's resolve met initial family opposition and rejection by UK medical schools.

In 1860, as a nurse at Middlesex Hospital, she was barred from medical lectures by doctors' complaints: she had come top in the examinations. Discovering that women were not excluded from the Society of Apothecaries' examination – which granted MD status – Elizabeth passed their exam in 1865. Like the BMA 15 years later, they immediately changed the rules. Determined to gain a medical degree, she took and passed the Sorbonne's examination in 1870, but was still not admitted to the Medical Register.

Elizabeth's career was made possible when she persuaded her father, who had left Whitechapel in 1838 to develop his prosperous family business in Suffolk, to support her. As she wrote to a friend in 1864, 'My strength lies in the extra amount of daring which I have as a family endowment. All Garretts have it.' In line with feminist practice, she kept her own surname after marriage to James Anderson, and maintained control of her own earnings.

Establishing the Women's Dispensary in Marylebone, renamed the New Hospital for Women in 1872, she combined motherhood with work as its Medical Director for 20 years and founded the London Medical School for Women in 1874.

Evelyn Sharp wrote of her at the age of 78, '(she) was only old in years, for there was never a younger woman in heart and mind and outlook...'

Mary Lloyd

Please send submissions for the next *Red Letter Days* for famous birthdays or death days between March 1 and May 31. Maximum 300 words per person.

Antipodean Angles

David Paterson reviews

Such is Life

by Lloyd Geering

Polebridge Press (Salem, USA 2010) Pbk. 213 pages.
£17.05 .

I'm a great admirer of Lloyd Geering. He has held very clear ideas for many decades, and expressed them with clarity and courage. This book is a further example of his expression of them. The Bible did not fall from heaven, it has a long and complex history of authorship and of compilation. Nonetheless it contains insights and wisdom which have been highly valued and still inspire us today.

When I was at Theological College – a very earnest young man – I felt ambivalent about Ecclesiastes. Cynicism and pessimism were not what I expected in the Bible. Yet it was very beautiful, and it was this which eventually endeared it to me. The book contains an honest, no-nonsense, unafraid approach to the facts of human living. With the author Qoheleth we face unpleasant truths and unsettling doubts without panic. Such is life!

This is what Lloyd Geering picks up in his book of that title, calling Ecclesiastes 'the heretical book'. It seems totally to ignore earlier Hebrew writings – the Torah, the historical books and the Prophets – with their great themes of Exodus, Exile and Return. But it has much in common with 'Wisdom literature'. Had Qoheleth (the Preacher) read the Book of Job? or Proverbs? or indeed the Psalms? And was Qoheleth serious about claiming to be 'son of David, King in Jerusalem'? Lloyd explores these and many other questions through a 20th Century device – a Close Encounter of the Third (or some other) Kind. An inventive idea, but I think it has serious snags.

Part 1 of Lloyd's book is – as usual – a good read: clear, accessible, radical in its thinking. Excellent scholarship and a powerful message: what we make of life must arise from our experience and the evidence of our senses, illuminated by, but never reliant on, what other people have done, said or written. Qoheleth writes 'I studied all human activities, everything that happens to people on the face of the earth' (Ecclesiastes 1: 13 – Lloyd's translation 'into the English language and secular culture of the 21st Century C.E'). So we are introduced to the method of dialogue in which Lloyd will have a 'close encounter with Ecclesiastes'. Lloyd writes (page 32): 'These dialogues are of necessity very one-sided, for Ecclesiastes has only very limited opportunity to

question me.' He's right. I must have instinctively identified with Qoheleth. I found myself getting more and more irritated by this man who persisted in calling me 'Ecclesiastes' (a 'churchy' word I'd never heard before),

altered my poetic 'under the sun' to the prosaic 'in this world', repeatedly told me what I had 'really meant to say', and bored me with lots of philosophical and scientific jargon. And he kept on talking to his 21st Century readers in the middle of talking to me. He wasn't really listening to me at all.

While I was taking Qoheleth's side and ploughing reluctantly through the dialogue, I turned for relief to the last chapter of Lloyd's book, entitled 'Afterword'. I was reassured as I read about the Axial Period (towards the end of which Qoheleth wrote), and an assessment of Qoheleth's pessimism within the global context of that time. Everything was changing, the old certainties were collapsing, new questions were taking their place. Are we now in a second 'Axial Period'? Is that why Qoheleth's words seem so apposite today?

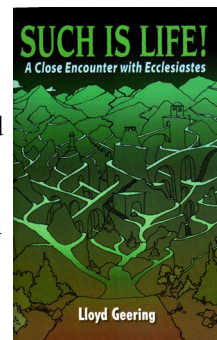
Reading that last chapter about the historical development of ideas encouraged me to go back to the dialogue, and I found a lot to learn both from Qoheleth and from Lloyd – about meaninglessness and the search for meaning, and how modern attitudes such as existentialism might be prefigured way back in the 3rd Century BCE. 'Ecclesiastes displayed a remarkable number of the traits of today's secular person; it is tempting to say that it has taken us twenty-three centuries to catch up with where he was,' says Lloyd (page 204).

I would have liked to feel more of the poetic depth of Qoheleth's metaphors, less overlaid with the pre-occupations and fashions of today's thinking, but in general the book succeeds in challenging us to face questions concerning the meaning and purpose of our existence, and to avoid easy answers.

'The words of the wise are like goads.
They are like nails driven firmly home.'

(Ecclesiastes 12:11 in Lloyd's translation)

David Paterson is a former Chair of SOF Network and runs the Oxford SOF Group.



reviews

Antipodean Angles

Tony Windross reviews *I Met God in Bermuda*

by Steven Ogden

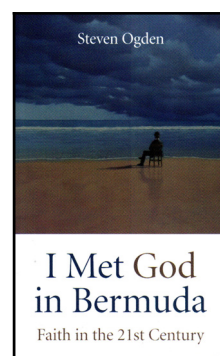
O Books (Winchester 2009). Pbk. 160 pages. £8.99.

Anglican priests who ask searching questions about God (and compound their heresy by daring to follow the argument wherever it leads) are thin on the ground (and getting thinner by the day). It was therefore initially hugely refreshing to come across Steven Ogden's book, and discover that he feels keenly the problems that anyone with half a brain is likely to feel when it comes to Christianity. He accepts that 'Christianity is widely regarded as irrelevant, embarrassing or offensive' – with the reason being that belief in God has become almost impossible for vast numbers of people in the educated West.

He has no time for the in(s)anities of fundamentalist religion, but is surely far too sanguine about the beliefs of what he terms 'mainstream Christianity' – which he wants to distance from Dawkins' description of 'the interventionist, miracle-wreaking, thought-reading, sin-punishing, prayer-answering God'. In my experience, that's a pretty fair way of encapsulating what mainstream Christianity is actually all about; with challenges to such ideas being angrily received and fiercely resisted. He says that 'in the mainstream Church there is wide acknowledgement of the symbolic value of bible stories', but although that may be the case in Australia, it's hardly so in the UK. He observes with amazement that 'many people outside the Church think Christians worship something like the old man in the sky'. But lots of them *do* – they *really do!* And this is why he is wrong to say that 'mainstream Christianity is radically different from Christian fundamentalism'. There *are* differences, but of degree rather than kind – and of course both of them are built on the hugely problematic God of theism.

'Where is God?' is deemed by him to be 'the theological question of our day' – when perhaps 'What is God?' or even simply 'Is God?' are stronger candidates. For Ogden the problem centres around the twin issues of suffering and absence – with the answer being found in the network or web of relationships: human, biological and cosmological (especially the first). By this he means it's primarily in other people that we catch a glimpse of the divine, that we feel part of a wider whole, that we feel grounded and connected. It's only in and through relationship that we feel transcendence (or 'presence'). He notes M C

Taylor's claim that the postmodern religious experience is one of God's absence – but sees things as less bleak and more ambiguous, to be understood in terms of *both* presence and absence: 'the



reviews

experience of absence arouses a yearning for God'. Maybe: or maybe it's just a yearning? (and then it becomes a matter of semantics, with some choosing(?) to interpret such an existential ache to be – effectively by definition – a yearning for God).

In trying to make sense of the Resurrection, Ogden examines some of the ideas of Paul Tillich and Karl Rahner (who – irritatingly! – are constantly referred to as 'our two German shepherds'). Many readers may be tempted/advised to skip this part – especially if they see things from a broadly SOF perspective. Theological speculation is an arcane activity, and it's unlikely (to the point of being inconceivable) that this section is going to engage *anyone* on the fringes of the Church, which is presumably the target audience. It sits uneasily with the rest of the book, and is presumably only included because the author had already written about them at length in an earlier book, and wanted to bring some of the material to the attention of a new audience.

Whether or not he is correct in his analysis that the reason people can no longer subscribe to the old-man-in-the-sky model of God is because of the amount of suffering in the world, it seems utterly bizarre to spend so long in a work of this kind looking at Tillich and Rahner. And although Ogden was deeply fortunate to have had his own epiphany in Bermuda, it's difficult to see how this book (after promising so much) with its curious mixture of thoughtful analysis, genuine challenge, idle whimsy, and rambling speculation, might help those who can't for the life of them make any sense of the idea of God – and wonder where (if anywhere) they might go looking.

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

Denis Gildea reviews

The New Economics

by David Boyle and Andrew Simms

Earthscan (London 2009). Hbk. 160 pages. £16.99.

Some of us may remember the stir caused by the publication in 1973 of E. F. Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered*. It so happens that we were just coming to the end of the idealistic post-war era, when those who had gone through the war were determined to have no more wars, no more slumps, which was named by the historian Eric Hobsbawm as 'The Golden Years'. We had established the United Nations and the European Communities, freed trade in goods and achieved a rising standard of living and some social justice, in our desire for a better world.

But within a decade we changed direction, with Milton Friedman's monetarism replacing Keynes, and the Reagan-Thatcher reforms. Competition, maximising profits, income and consumption and a touching faith in the infallibility of market forces took charge as the guiding principles of the ideals of the western world, and economic growth was the measure of the success of economic policy.

However in the unofficial world of thought and charities, Schumacher's ideas were continued and developed. Intermediate technology provided poor people, rather than governments, with what they needed to improve their lives. And in the world of academic thought and research, the work was drawn together in the New Economics Foundation. This book, by two of its leading members, selects and summarises some 40 years of research and writing for the benefit of the 'general reader'. They trace the tradition back to Jonathan Swift, William Blake, Ruskin, William Morris, G.K. Chesterton, and even Gandhi, or way back to the Diggers or the Peasants' Revolt. The middle of the book is mainly chapters about the perverse effects of the present system, with enticing titles, like:

'Why did Vanuatu come top of the Happy Planet Index?'

People were satisfied with very little, and were not consumer-driven. Life is about community, family, goodwill and sharing.

'Why did China pay for the Iraq War?'

It used its trade surplus to buy US government bonds. The US was hugely in debt, but could pay for the war on the proceeds.

'Why do Britons work harder than medieval peasants?'

Archaeology shows that 12th century peasants were tall and well-nourished. Our system impoverishes. We need two good salaries to pay the mortgage.

'Why are Cuban mechanics the best in the world?'

The US blockade ensures that cars must be made to last several decades. Waste must be eliminated.

'Why do fewer people vote when there is a Wal-Mart nearby?'

Driving to a supermarket for the weekly shopping undermines the quality of the local community.

As you read on with dismay and amusement you get impatient to find the answer on what to do about it. That is relegated to an Appendix. Some of the reforms seem familiar, like changing the rules of banking, and making taxation work. But it gradually brings in more daring ideas, like a financial transaction tax and a maximum incomes policy. Introducing local currencies, and protecting street markets,

Two previous books that have inspired me: *Happiness* by Layard, and *The Spirit Level*, which is now getting more publicity, presented a lot of evidence to support one major principle. This book is much more diverse, and perhaps more heavyweight. It is in a readable style, but still requires some effort. It is also a valuable reference book to have on the shelf, as ideas come into the news. It seems ironic that it may follow *Small is Beautiful* in that government policy now seems to be giving priority to fear of the financial bond markets over the interests of people.



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

Kathleen McPhilemy reviews
Poppy in a Storm-struck Field

by Lynne Wycherley

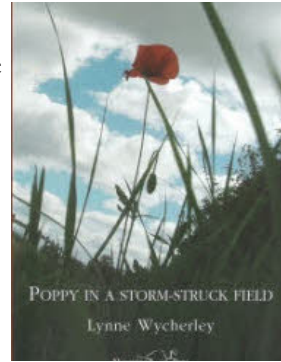
Shoestring (Nottingham 2009). Pbk. 66 pages. £9.

Lynne Wycherley is a poet of substance and her third collection is to be welcomed. Wycherley describes herself as ‘eco’ and her poetry combines a concern for the world, or even the universe, with a strongly personal presentation of the near-at-hand. This mixture of ‘far and near’ is reflected in the first poem which holds in balance ‘two joys/ the warmth in your eyes/the sea’s largesse,/ its gift of/ unbearable brightness.’ ‘Largesse’ conveys not only the generosity but also the immensity of the ocean. Wycherley is interested in the natural world and in the science which explains it, but her approach is humanistic and historical, as she imagines Isaac Newton in *The Apple-tree*, *Woolthorpe* and *In Search of Isaac* and Karl Jansky in *He Listens to the Song Beyond the Sun*.

An awareness of the conflict between science and nature or technology and the human is evident in a number of poems. In *The Apple-tree*, *Woolthorpe*, Newton’s apple-tree asserts its point of view against the aridity of theory: ‘the spring sun dressed me// in its dazzle and the zenith/burned through my branches,/god-gaps where the white stars grow’. Perhaps the poem also acknowledges the shifting of paradigms from medieval to modern, from a universe explained by God to one explained by science. *Path to Dungeness* is a more obvious conflict of ‘two worlds’, setting the marsh and its wildlife against the threat of the nuclear reactors. The tendency to portentousness is counterbalanced by the natural detail: ‘white sashed garganey’, ‘green-orange teal’, ‘red reeds’, colours which contrast with the ‘grey drums’ of the reactors on the skyline. Wycherley is at her best as the poet of landscape. She acknowledges John Clare and shares with that poet the naturalist’s exactitude. Unlike Clare, however, she goes on to meditate on what she observes and she places herself not only in the landscape, but also in history, relating herself to figures of the past such as Clare, Newton, Constable and Annora, the holy woman.

Wycherley’s poetry has always revealed her as a writer of scholarship and a range which is reflected not only in her subject matter but also in her vocabulary. When I first came across her work I was enchanted by her pursuit of the exact word, the word which most exactly names what is being

called into being in the poem. We could argue that the most exact names are proper nouns, but that these are only successful in communicating



meaning to those who already know the identity behind the names. I struggled with ‘fulvous’, ‘flavine’ and ‘samisen’. On the whole, I agree with John Lucas’ defence of language that challenges (*Acumen* 68). On the other hand, one would not wish to see abstruse vocabulary become a mannerism.

The most important influence in the whole collection is, of course, that of Wycherley’s mother whose illness and death are described in the title sequence which forms the second section of the book. It is very difficult to criticise these deeply felt poems; they commemorate and pay tribute. The poems which I found most effective were those which went back to the poet’s childhood, mining the vein of nostalgia. In *Opals* the evocation of the past through a fragment of a ‘Tom Jones’ song, a reference to a Nastase Wimbledon and to the indulgence in ‘brandy-cream cake for two’ is particularly effective. The poem conveys successfully the loss of childhood and the irrevocable nature of the past which is brought home when a parent dies. However, the theme of grief and loss is a particularly popular one in contemporary poetry. Such poems do not always communicate; reading them can sometimes feel like walking through a graveyard, noting the inscriptions on gravestones of people you don’t know. Although poetry is rooted in the personal, it also needs to transcend the personal and I wasn’t convinced that this was always happening.

Nevertheless, these poems are essential to the structure of the text, with the other poems finding their place in relation to them. The opening and closing poems of the entire collection are also concerned with the poet’s mother, indicating that her life and death provide the framework for the book. In the final poem, she asks ‘How can I/ thank you for all you’ve given?’ The implication is that the poetry itself is part of that gift.

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

R

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Rockall



Seeing Islam

Do we see Islam? Islam is the second largest religion in the world, about 1.5 billion and the second largest religion in the UK, over 2 million. We are persuaded that Islam is a challenge to our existence. We have heard of Al Qaeda and The Taliban; we think of 9/11 and 7/7 as 'Muslim inspired terrorist attacks'; 50% of us link Islam with terrorism. We think we see plenty.

As a sixth former, my train to school went through Woking. I peered through the window at the Woking Mosque. I now know that in 1889 it was the first mosque built in Britain and called the Shah Jahan Mosque. It briefly fell into disuse in 1910 but attempts to demolish it were refused on the grounds that it had the rights and status of a church. What a difference a century makes! Members of the Woking mosque helped to plan the Central London Mosque and Islamic Cultural Centre. In 1940, King George VI gave a site for the Islamic Cultural Centre, in exchange for a site in Cairo for an Anglican Cathedral, and he officially opened the ICC in 1944. What a difference a generation makes!

And what a difference ten years, 3000 miles and 3000 deaths make. A recent poll of New York residents revealed that 72% thought that people have the right to build a place of worship near Ground Zero, the site of the Twin Towers. Only 38% said No/Unsure. When they were asked: What if that place of worship were a mosque, 62% said No, rising to 67% when 41-51 Park Place was specified, just two blocks from Ground Zero. Only 33% now said Yes/Unsure. The debate is currently roaring for and against the proposed Park51 Centre, mosque and community centre, between politicians, among the locals and, significantly, between the relatives of the 3000 who died in the attacks. The US First Amendment prohibits any legal restriction to any religion but that professed Religious Freedom is not translated into Religious Tolerance. Mosques have been vandalised, even building equipment for mosques has been damaged. A Muslim New York cab driver has been stabbed.

After 7/7 in London, clearly carried out by militant Islamist terrorists, toleration and acceptance of Islam

declined severely. Threats to Muslims and vandalism of mosques have increased says the University of Exeter's Muslim Research Centre. That generalisation is not surprising but try these: A 2006 Home Office study found Asian Muslim youths the 'most tolerant of all' while white British youths have 'far more intolerant attitudes.' A 2009 Gallup poll found 89% of Muslims felt terrorism was unjustifiable and 82% of Muslims in Britain identify with the UK and are patriotic citizens as contrasted with 50% of the general public. In January 2010 British Social Attitudes Survey found only 25% feeling positive about Islam, the lowest of any religious group. Only 15% would have qualms about a church being built in their area but a majority would feel concerned if a mosque were planned. In June 2010 YouGov conducted a poll on Islam with 2152 selected adults. 58% linked Islam with extremism; 50% linked Islam with terrorism. The only surprise is that the figures weren't higher.

However: 57% received their information from television and 41% from newspapers. That seemed to explain a lot. Not one was a Muslim. None of the 2152 knew any Muslims. None had done any other reading about Islam. The occasional – though terrible – terrorist attack receives all the newspaper and TV attention. Unfortunately the media and politicians have been blamed for inflaming our attitudes by failing to distinguish between the terrorist fringe and the general majority. We believe them until 50–58% of us link Islam with extremism and terrorism and nothing else.

I wonder if YouGov asked the 2152 if they knew what 'Islam' means. Literally it means Submission [to God] and is derived from the word for Peace. 50–58% of the 2152 would scoff. Very few will have heard of Muhammad Tahir al-Qadri. He is a respected Muslim scholar who has denounced Muslim terrorists and terrorism. He is not, of course, alone. At the SOF Conference we were privileged to hear Maryam Namazie and her passionate distinction between the Muslim majority citizenry and Islamist power blocs. We can't distinguish Islam from terrorism but we distinguish Christianity from crusades, inquisitions, burning-at-the-stake, patriarchy, misogyny, slavery, homophobia, child-abuse, bombing, abortionist killing, Qur'an burning....

Plenty of Spirit

Cicely Herbert explores a surge of interest in the live arts in Britain today.

In Britain, today, we seem to be experiencing a surge of interest in the live arts, with much exciting and innovative work occurring in unexpected places. The Old Vic company recently acquired some abandoned tunnels underneath Waterloo Station, where new and experimental work is performed. It was there I saw *Scored* by the playwright Wajdi Monawad, which tells the harrowing story of a Lebanese woman and her twin children, now adult, living in London (there are echoes here of Shakespeare's lost children). This powerful play gained immeasurably from the damp and echoey venue in which it was presented and I cannot imagine that it would have had the same impact if presented from behind a gilded proscenium arch.

In his play *Pornography*, set in London during the first week of July 2005, another young playwright, Simon Stephens, has apparently given the director no stage directions, except to specify that the scenes of his play can be performed in any order, to be decided upon by cast and director, so that different threads of the narrative 'interrupt and intersect each other.' In this way, he has ensured that each production of the play will have a different resonance. At the performance I saw, given by acting students at the RADA, in an engrossing production directed by Trilby James, the sense of emotional isolation experienced by so many people in modern society was powerfully conveyed. Here, the character of a man who represents one of the bombers on the underground appears only at the very end of the play, thus engendering in the audience an instant recognition of the part chance plays in all our lives.

As a member of the Barrow Poets, during the 1970s I took part in a performance of poetry and music given to some of the women who were locked up in Holloway Prison. Our visit was an

unforgettable, if chastening, experience and it left me with a certainty that an alternative to a prison sentence should always be considered and that locking people up in such a frighteningly hostile environment is no way to rehabilitate those whose lives have gone amiss.

Tasmin Little, the internationally acclaimed violinist, has recently taken the unusual and undoubtedly courageous step of taking her solo violin to audiences who have neither the resources nor the opportunity to hear classical music played in a concert hall environment. Audiences for her *Naked Violin* have included men and women

living in hostels, men working on oil rigs and passers-by on Waterloo Bridge.

This summer I visited Edinburgh during the Festival and I was struck by the way that the Festival Fringe has grown out of all recognition since the early days, when conventional productions staged in traditional venues were

the order of the day. Alongside the magnificence of the National Gallery of Scotland one could watch escapologists, clowns and magicians strutting their stuff, teenagers performing acts of daring and risk-taking, flying or riding bicycles down the almost vertical slopes of Princes Street Gardens. There was a buzz of excitement at almost every street corner and an atmosphere of exploration and pleasure that comes about when we are set free to release the boundless store of potential creativity within us all.



Edinburgh Fringe Festival

Note: Re the report on a visit I made to The Jewish Museum (June 2010) I would like to thank Sarah Aaronson for the information that the Mikveh is a ritual bath taken by women only, which would not therefore have been used by any city business man, either today or in the medieval ages. So much for the imagination!

*Foxes have holes,
the birds of the air have their nests ...*



'Homeless in the Snow', England

Thousands to lose their homes and their jobs
under the Government's Spending Review
while, backed by a bullish cabinet of millionaires,
the rich roar on regardless.