



*Tree of Life and Death*

# *sofia*

*down to Earth*

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**Back cover:** Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Adam and Eve*



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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.

# Tree of Life and Death

First, I must apologise if you were expecting your magazine at the beginning of March. It has come to you a bit later because I have been abroad. However, the March *Sofia* usually has an Easter theme and this is also true for this issue: *Tree of Life and Death*. A publication date at about the time of the Spring Equinox seems more appropriate and in future the first *Sofia* of the year will be an Easter March/April issue and published on March 21<sup>st</sup> or thereabouts. The other three magazines for the year will continue to be published on the 1<sup>st</sup> of the month: the Summer *Sofia* in June, the September issue, and the Christmas *Sofia* in December.

For our title *Tree of Life and Death* Anthony Freeman has contributed his two-part *Eden Project*. In Part 1 he reflects on the origin of moral consciousness, starting from the story of the ‘fatal tree’ in the Garden of Eden. In Part 2 he looks at how the Passion Narrative in St John’s Gospel picks up and ‘reverses’ the theme of the tree in the Garden of Eden. The tree of the Cross undoes the harm done by eating the fruit from the forbidden tree in the Garden of Eden, so that the ‘Tree of Death’ becomes a ‘Tree of Life’. In the words of the ancient Easter hymn:

*Mors et Vita duello  
conflixerit mirando*

Death and Life  
in strange strife.

Easter is the struggle of life against death. The Garden of Eden story of our ancestors eating fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil can be seen as a story about the achievement of

## Acknowledgment

The frontcover photograph for *Sofia 96*, June 2010, is ‘Crossroads’ by Martin Liebermann. It can be found at:  
[flickr.com/photos/liebermann/580181284](http://flickr.com/photos/liebermann/580181284)  
where some of his other fine photographs can also be seen.

moral consciousness, which surely, is not a ‘sin’ but an evolutionary advance. However, the arrival of moral consciousness means humanity becomes an animal that can be not only kind but *unkind*. We have a choice.

In our history we see the colossal cruelty human beings, including religious people, have constantly inflicted upon one another, especially the rich and powerful upon the weak. (Fascinatingly, Freeman speculates that ‘the evolutionary Original Sin was **bullying**’ and up to this day we have seen plenty of that by religious people, as well as others). Throughout our history we have also seen heroic struggles of resistance to bullying and countless examples of great kindness and nobility.

That is the struggle of life against death, the struggle for *humanity*. Jesus was unjustly killed by the powerful of his day. We do not have to believe – how can we? – that his corpse was resuscitated. The story of his resurrection is a crucial (in every sense) ‘poetic tale’, which we can believe whole-heartedly with poetic faith. It proclaims that in the struggle of life against death, life is stronger than death, love is stronger than death. Even though as individuals we all die, the struggle for humanity, for kindness, matters supremely, whatever the cost. What kind of animal are we? We are a poetic kind of animal who can be kind or unkind. To choose human kindness (which includes poetry) is our salvation.

Of course there are other ways in which trees are our salvation (we and our planet cannot survive without them). Of the huge amount of possible material about trees, we can, of course, only present a tiny selection here, with we hope, a few surprises. There is a ‘magical’ tree in the traditional ballad of Thomas the Rhymer, who meets a supernatural being, the Queen of Elfland, by the rowan tree. She carries him off by the road which is neither the road to Heaven nor to Hell, but to Elfland. There he must *keep silence* for seven years until she finally releases him, giving him the gift that he can never lie. That is the story of the

emergence of a poet (in contrast to Plato's exclusion of poets from the Republic because they were *liars*).

Thinking it over, I saw there were parallels with poet Anne Ashworth's brave, hard struggle for *honesty*, which she continues to relate in Part 2 of her Spiritual Journal printed here. We also have my favourite poem by Dorset dialect poet-parson William Barnes: 'Trees Be Company.'

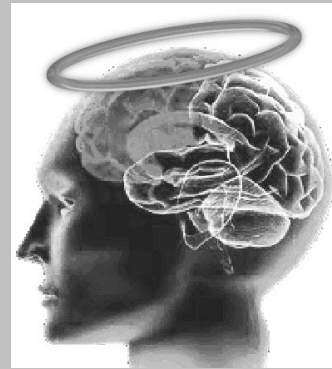
Poet, rock climber and botanist Libby Houston tells how she discovered three new tree species (of the *sorbus* genus to which the rowan tree belongs), while clambering about on Cheddar Gorge in Somerset. Her account is immensely cheering in a world where we constantly hear of species being threatened and becoming extinct. Long-term SOF trustee, cabinet-maker Oliver Essame, describes an intimate lifetime relationship with wood. And Cicely Herbert writes about the British Library great exhibition on the English language, which can also be compared to an enormous tree.

This edition of *Sofia* has a large crop of letters, reviews and regular items such as the SOF Sift column from a former Vice Chair of *Catholics for a Changing Church*, Christine Hacklett, and Radio Rockall with a report of an ugly little story of censorship.

Finally, please note the advertisement on the right hand side of this page for the SOF Annual Conference in July. It will take place in Leicester, as usual, and has a strong line-up of speakers on the subject of *Brain, Belief and Behaviour*. With the magazine you will receive an insert flier telling you more about the Conference and containing an application form. That is to encourage you to come, and to sign up as soon as you can to give cheer to the organisers.

I hope you will enjoy the magazine, approve the little springward shift of the publication date, closer to Easter, and find that it has been worth waiting for.

P.S. Thomas the Rhymer is said to have been one of your Editor's ancestors. One family member claims to have his sword, which is almost certainly a fake!



## SOF Annual Conference

# Brain, Belief and Behaviour

Leicester University  
22<sup>nd</sup> - 24<sup>th</sup> July 2011

This year we approach religion as a human creation from the perspectives of neuroscience, practical theology and behavioural psychology. Our principal speakers will be:

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- Gwen Griffith-Dixon
- Alan Allport

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# An Eden Project 1

## The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil

Starting from the story of the 'fatal tree', Anthony Freeman discusses the origin of moral consciousness.

*And the LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden ... the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. (Gen 2:8-9)*

It is easy to dismiss the Eden story as mere myth. It is less easy to dismiss the central question it poses: from where do we get our knowledge of good and evil? And it is much less easy again to answer that question.

The biblical narrative portrays the awakening of human moral consciousness as a fall from an initial state of grace. The tale of restoration that ensues is the subject of the second article in this two-part project. In this first part we follow an alternative but no less puzzling story that is based broadly on the principles of Darwinian evolution. The puzzle can be distilled into a single question: how has the mechanism of natural selection, associated with slogans such as 'survival of the fittest' and 'the selfish gene', given rise to a moral sensibility that highly rates qualities like self-sacrifice, generosity, and care for the helpless?

Before embarking on an answer to that puzzle, a word is needed on the status and character of good and evil. The SOF movement is committed to exploring and promoting **religion** as a human creation. Does this also require us to treat **morality** as a human creation? Is the distinction between good and evil something already existing 'out there', for humankind to discover, or is it something we have created for ourselves? And when we designate a particular act or event or situation as either good or bad, are we acknowledging the inherent character of the thing, or do we ourselves make it good or bad by declaring it to be so? From my own study of the origin and exercise of moral consciousness, I conclude that good and evil are neither inherent characteristics nor arbitrary designations, but rational assessments that are

objectively grounded while depending upon the context of the moral judgement being made.

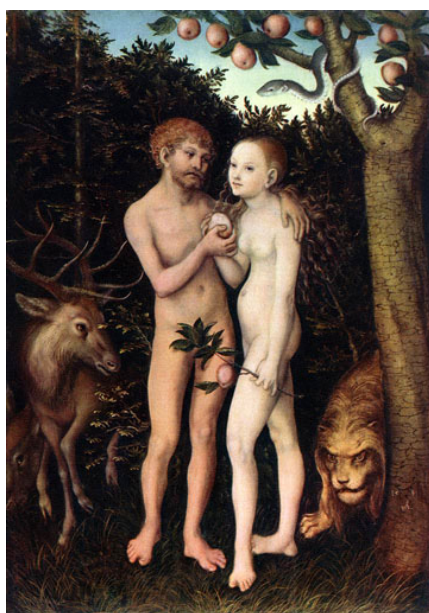
### The Unselfish Gene?

To return to Darwinian evolution. Consider a situation where there is a shortage of food and some animals in a given population are bound to die of starvation. Those individuals with a trait that favours slightly more efficient eating (bigger mouths, say) are more likely to survive and have children. That trait will be passed on to their offspring, who will form the majority of the next generation, meaning that bigger

mouths will be found in a higher proportion of the second generation than the first. After a time the smaller mouthed branch of the family will die out: big mouths will have been 'naturally selected'. Now imagine another group in a similar situation, where part of the population is characterised by a tendency to hold back and let others feed first. By analogy with the first case, we can assume that on average these altruistic individuals will be more likely to starve, less likely to have children, and therefore the proportion of animals bearing this trait will be smaller in next generation than in the previous one. Eventually the increasingly smaller proportion will die out altogether and the

altruistic tendency will have been naturally deselected. That is Darwinism in action. So how have moral traits such as self-sacrifice and putting others first not only survived but come to be valued?

A number of theories have been put forward. Suppose, for instance, that in the second case just considered, the altruistic individuals do not hold back for just any member of their group, but only for their own children. This changes the calculations. Previously we assumed that lessening the chances of survival for



the individual would lead to fewer of their genes surviving into the next generation; but holding back in favour of their own offspring will have the opposite effect: the altruistic parents are now increasing the chances of survival for their own children. If this pattern is repeated in succeeding generations, we shall have a situation where the proportion of altruistic parents in the population will increase and the 'unselfish gene' will have been naturally selected. There is evidence that this kind of behaviour does in fact take place. It has been observed among both humans and some non-human animals that individuals are more likely to sacrifice themselves for their children or other close relatives than for the population in general. So here is a way, despite the apparent selfishness built into evolution, that a kin-related altruism could be the result of the 'blind' mechanism of natural selection.

The idea that self-denial by an individual, although negative for that individual, can have a positive outcome for the group, is not new. It is known as the principle of 'group selection', and as a possible evolutionary explanation for altruism it goes back to Darwin himself. He gave the example of a stinger bee, who inevitably dies in the act of stinging an intruder to the hive, but whose self-sacrifice saves the life of the queen and whole community. In its original form this theory assumed that individuals spread the benefits of their selfless behaviour randomly, and researchers showed that on this basis natural selection would not work to increase the tendency to unselfish behaviour. But as we have seen, when selective altruism is exercised in favour of one's offspring or other close kin, the situation changes, and the evolution of such a trait does fit in with Darwinian principles.

To recap, individual self-denial can, in some circumstances at least, be wholly explained as adaptive behaviour in the Darwinian sense. That is to say, having first arisen as a chance characteristic of one or more individual animals, it has become a dominant trait, established by the blind mechanism of natural selection alone, without anyone intending it or planning it. This is an important conclusion, because it shows that evolution can be mechanistic and deterministic and at the same time result in something unexpected. Of course, what we call an altruistic act, even when repeated across a population, does not of itself constitute moral awareness. However, the natural emergence of such a seemingly unlikely characteristic makes it possible – and even likely – that the knowledge of good and evil also has a natural explanation.

## From Altruism to Morality

Another approach to the origin of self-denying behaviour in evolutionary terms, which also turns on the relationship between the individual and the group,

looks at patterns of behaviour among social animals. Research on apes, for example, has found that sharing resources and resolving conflict appear to result from individuals exercising empathy and sympathy for each other. Moreover, these one-to-one relations can sometimes spread into community-wide concern. Such behaviour patterns may not make non-human primates into moral beings, but they do exhibit a sense of social regularity that is mutually beneficial. This could well be a biologically-grounded stepping stone to the moral norms developed among humans.

These ideas are scorned by evolutionary biologists like Richard Dawkins, who warned in *The Selfish Gene* that, 'if you wish, as I do, to build a society in which individuals co-operate generously and unselfishly towards a common good, you can expect little help from biological nature'. Yet primatologist Frans de Waal and others have offered detailed evidence for biologically grounded 'protomoral' behaviour in non-human species. And philosopher Mary Midgley, writing about the origin of ethics, sees the universality of ethics across all human cultures as evidence for its biological origin. In her opinion, even though they are not moral in our sense, these animals do demonstrate 'a willingness and a capacity to look for shared solutions' that provide the building blocks of human morality.

SOF members are familiar with the emphasis laid by Don Cupitt upon the role of language in the human creation of religion, and cultural anthropologist Christopher Boehm is among many who see language as a key also in the transition from the protomoral behaviours of non-human primates to full blown moral communities of humans. This trail was signposted by Darwin himself, who supposed that at the later stages of the evolution of morality, culture and learning (which must include language) takes over the major role from biological natural selection. But what triggered the crucial step to conscious moral awareness among early humans?

Boehm's study of both non-human and human hunter-gatherer communities has led him to speculate that the 'evolutionary Original Sin', as he calls it, was bullying. Once this had been identified as deviant behaviour, ethics developed in tandem with politics to cope with it.

The argument runs as follows. Hunter-gatherer societies are known to be egalitarian, and this makes sense because large beasts require co-operation in the hunt and a willingness to share equably the resultant meat. But individual primates (both human and ape) exhibit a desire to dominate, so an egalitarian society could only develop if the majority acted in concert to stamp out the despotic behaviour of the inevitable

bullies who would emerge and otherwise dominate them – the so-called alpha-males. Such co-operation was driven by the dislike of being dominated, which in all primates matches their desire to dominate others. This co-operation was able, in the case of early humans, to develop into a moral and political system, because of the biological development of the large brain that had already taken place and made possible the beginnings of language.

This sketch of the evolutionary origins of morality – of the knowledge of good and evil – has brought us to a concept of morality as a means of social control, closely linked with politics. The individual's inherent selfishness and desire to dominate is tempered by the realisation that the good of one member is tied up with the good of the whole community, including oneself. But within this continuing focus on self-interest, the shift from individual selfishness to 'group selfishness' does open up a new perspective on other individuals in the group.

## 'the evolutionary Original Sin was bullying'

First comes the move from seeing others only as my competitors to seeing them as agents whose welfare is bound up with mine. In this situation, working for another's good is encompassed within working for my own good, especially when the 'other' is my child or other close kin. But once the idea of working for another's good gets a foothold, the possibility arises of treating it as an end in itself, and not merely a means to serve my own selfish ends. This development has been explored by philosopher Elliott Sober and evolutionary biologist David Sloan Wilson, who were also the ones who rehabilitated the theory of group selection, when they argued that putting the good of one's offspring before one's own could be adaptive behaviour resulting from biological natural selection.

That first stage, which developed in pre-human animals, they called 'evolutionary altruism'. Their extension of the principle to conscious human behaviour they term 'psychological altruism', the existence of which is also supported by an evolutionary argument that focuses on parents and their offspring. The upshot is that neither of these forms of altruism is itself the same as morality, because they lack the crucial move of translating a concern for the welfare of specific others into generally applicable ethical principles. Sober and Wilson conclude that behaviour driven solely by selfish motives and the desire for one's own pleasure (as proposed by the more widely held theory of psychological egoism) has given way, in the process of evolution, to a naturally

selected plurality of human motivations that balances one's own good with that of others as ultimate ends in themselves. Thus the stage is set for full-blown morality.

## The Knowledge of Good and Evil

Whatever the mechanisms – biological, cultural or spiritual – by which moral awareness first developed in humans, its application depends upon our discernment of good and evil in particular cases. The evolutionary path discussed so far suggests that at least some choices that we regard as ethically positive (such as the selfless nurturing of our children) are biologically based, and therefore the classifying of them as 'good' is not an arbitrary designation. It is founded on the way things actually are, in the natural world as studied by science. But accepting that the designation is not arbitrary does not commit us to the opposite extreme of asserting that goodness is an absolute quality, inherently and permanently belonging to the action in question.

Here is the reason. In Darwinian evolution a key concept is 'fit' or 'fitness'. This is a family of words that needs always to be used in relation to two or more things. It makes no sense to say that something is 'fit' without also saying what it is fit for, or what it fits with. A particular key fits a particular lock; in relation to any other lock it does not fit. Even physical fitness, often (wrongly) used as an absolute term, requires a context: the kind of fitness required for my desk job and that needed by a professional sportsman are two very different things (luckily for me!). So when we say that something is 'good' in the context of evolution, we mean that it fits the survival requirements of the organism in question. This is certainly not an arbitrary claim, but neither is it absolute. Species become extinct precisely when their environment changes and they fail to change with it, because an adaptive characteristic that in one context was good (fitted), proves to be bad (unfitting) in a new one.

I have long believed, on the basis of simple observation, that all moral judgments are context-dependent, and that moral absolutists are mistaken when they oppose 'relativism' in this sense; but in most cases what they are actually condemning is arbitrariness in ethics (which they wrongly regard as the only alternative to absolutism). An evolutionary approach to morality, such as I have indicated here, offers a way clear of the sterile debate between relativists and absolutists. Because it is grounded in biology, it is genuinely objective; and because it concerns always a specific context, its judgements may change in changed situations. This would seem to safeguard the key insights, and meet the chief anxieties, of both sides.

# An Eden Project 2

## The Tree of Life

In Part 2 of his Eden Project Anthony Freeman looks at how the Passion Narrative in St John's Gospel picks up and 'reverses' the theme of the Tree in the Garden of Eden.

*Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden ...*  
(Jn 19:41)

The Christian Bible opens with the tree of Life growing in the midst of the garden of Eden (Gen 2) and closes with tree of Life growing in the midst of the river in the new Jerusalem (Rev). So you might expect that in the sixty-four books in between there would be regular references to this tree of life; but you would be wrong. The term nowhere appears except in Genesis and Revelation. Indeed, given the subsequent shadow they have thrown over Christian theology, it is noteworthy how seldom the themes of the tree, the garden of Eden, and even of Adam and Eve, occur in the Bible.

After two occurrences at the beginning of Genesis, Eve is never mentioned again in the Old Testament and Adam gets just three passing references. Outside the Pauline writings, Adam appears only twice in the New Testament (both in genealogical contexts) and Eve never. Even when we include Paul, Adam comes into just three passages (Rom 5; I Cor 15; I Timothy 2) and Eve two (II Cor 11; I Tim 2). These are pretty meagre pickings, and they are not much improved if we add the garden of Eden to the items searched: just three of the prophets refer to it in a proverbial way, but there no other mentions in either the Old or New Testaments.

This is all a salutary reminder of how slender is the biblical basis of much Christian theology (even the Protestant 'Bible-based' variety). However, in what follows I hope to show how one New Testament writer – St John – does in a subtle way provide the groundwork for the mediaeval idea that the cross of Jesus can be seen as a tree whose role in redemption mirrors and reverses that played in the fall by the earlier tree in Eden. The idea received classic expression in the sixth-century Latin hymn *Pange lingua*. The refrain establishes the metaphor in which the cross is the tree and Jesus the precious fruit that it bears:

*Faithful Cross! above all other,  
one and only noble Tree!  
None in foliage, none in blossom,*

*none in fruit thy peers may be;  
sweetest wood and sweetest iron!  
Sweetest Weight is hung on thee!*

The verses then draw the parallel between the forbidden tree that brought death and the chosen tree that will bring life, as here:

*God in pity saw man fallen,  
shamed and sunk in misery,  
when he fell on death by tasting  
fruit of the forbidden tree:  
then another tree was chosen  
which the world from death should free.*

The parallelism is complicated by the fact that in the midst of the garden in Genesis there was not **one** tree but **two**: *the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil* (Gen 2:9). The forbidden tree is described both as *the tree of the knowledge of good and evil* (Gen 2:17) and as *the tree which is in the midst of the garden* (Gen 3:3).

The threatened penalty for eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was instant death (*in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die*); but the actual penalty suffered by humankind was expulsion from the garden, *lest he put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever* (Gen 3:22). So in terms of the Genesis story itself, the serpent was right; Adam and Eve tasted the forbidden fruit and they did not die, at least not that day. They were prevented from eating of the tree of life, which would have gained them immortality, and the assumption must be (although it is never stated) that they were not created immortal. So when Christian theology teaches (as in the hymn quoted above) that human death was the result of eating the forbidden fruit, it is going beyond the Biblical account.

I have said that one New Testament author does make use of these themes, and that is St John. What follows is a kind of Easter meditation on the way John uses the Eden story as a lens to focus on the fall and resurrection of humankind. Whereas St Paul openly named Jesus as the Second Adam, and declared that 'as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made



alive’, St John is both more subtle and more thorough in portraying the life and death of Jesus as re-capitulating the life and death of Adam and reversing its dire consequences. Nowhere is this clearer than in his account of the passion and resurrection of Jesus (Jn 18–20).

All four evangelists tell us that on the night before his crucifixion Jesus had a meal with his disciples and then went out to the place where he would be arrested. John is the only one to call that place a **garden**, and that is where he starts his story: *There was a garden, which Jesus and his disciples entered* (18.1). For Matthew and Mark it was ‘the place called Gethsemane’; for Luke it was just ‘the place’; but for John it is a garden. Although he gives it no name, it immediately becomes apparent that it symbolises that other garden, east of Eden, where God had placed the first Adam and also the Serpent.

The narrative cuts instantly from Jesus to Judas, the other chief protagonist at this point, of whom John has already told us that during supper *Satan entered into him*. So when John reports that Judas arrives with a band of men and officers to meet with Jesus, we are to understand that Satan also is present. We know from elsewhere that Johannine school of writers identified Satan with *that old Serpent, called the Devil, which deceiveth the whole world* (Rev 12:9), so the scene is now set for the showdown: Jesus confronts the Serpent in the Garden. This may seem a far-fetched claim, but only this interpretation makes sense of what happens next.

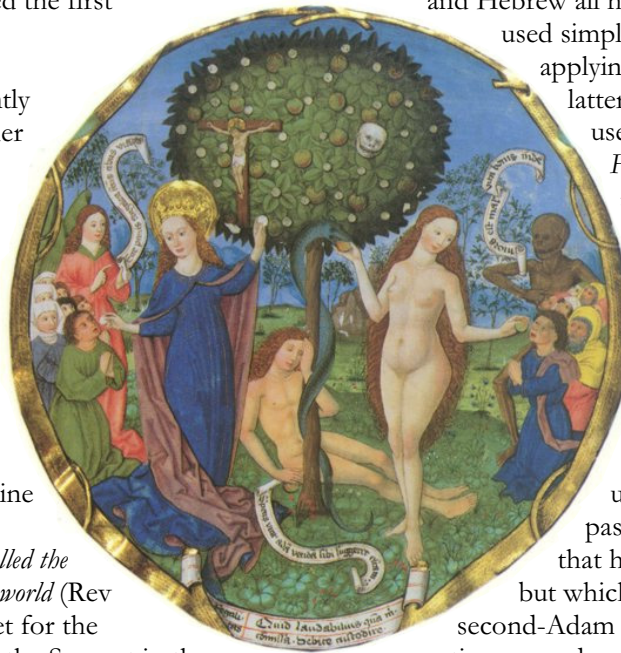
In the other three Gospels, Judas identified Jesus to the soldiers by greeting him with a kiss. According to John, it is Jesus himself who takes the initiative and asks the soldiers for whom they are looking. They answered *Jesus of Nazareth*, but when *Jesus said to them, I am he* (18:5), instead of arresting him, *they went backward and fell to the ground* (18:6). This makes no sense, until we realise that for John it is not just Judas and the soldiers in ‘Gethsemane’: it is the Serpent/Satan in ‘the Garden’, with the ancient curse ringing in his ears, *Upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat*. And the words of Jesus, *I AM*, assert the presence of God walking in the garden as he did in the first days of creation.

But Jesus has a dual role in this drama. Not only, as the *Word made flesh*, does he uniquely incorporate

‘God’s presence and his very self, and essence all divine’, but the image of God is present also in his common humanity that he shares with us all. So having established the divine presence by the falling to the ground of the soldiers, John now describes how Jesus surrenders to his captors and allows himself to be taken to Pilate’s judgment hall, where the Governor will unwittingly underline his representative humanity, in which ‘a second Adam to the fight and to the rescue came’.

The hostile crowd are baying for blood and Jesus is displayed to them: *And Pilate said unto them: Behold the Man!* (19:5). The words are two-edged. At one level, Pilate is mocking both Jesus and the mob, saying: Here, take a look at the pathetic fellow you’ve brought me; is he really worth executing? But Greek and Latin

and Hebrew all have two words for ‘man’, one used simply of an adult male, the other applying to the whole human race. This latter is the one that John has Pilate use here: in Latin the famous *Ecce Homo!* Which in Hebrew translates as, ‘Look – it’s Adam!’



*And Jesus went out to a place called The Skull, in Hebrew Golgotha. There they crucified him.* All the Eden-pointers we have seen so far – the nameless garden, the falling to the ground, Pilate’s ‘Behold the man!’ – are unique to John’s account of the passion. Now we come to two details that he shares with the other gospels, but which in his hands reinforce the second-Adam theme. One is the name of the execution ground, called ‘the skull’. In later tradition, and quite possibly already by the time of Jesus, Golgotha was reputed to be the burial place of Adam, whose skull is commemorated in its name and which is depicted lying at the foot of the cross in many mediaeval paintings and stained glass pictures of the crucifixion.

Closer to our main theme in this article is the other detail that John shares with his fellow evangelists: the use of the cross – the tree – as the means of execution. Here Jesus’ obedience to death won new life for humankind, a mirror-image of the tree in the garden where Adam’s disobedience had brought death to humankind. The symbolism of the tree-of-death that becomes the tree-of-life is doubly represented. First, the tree of the cross will restore the life of humankind lost through the act of disobedience brought about through the tree in Eden. And secondly, the single tree-of-the-cross is itself simultaneously the instrument of death (for the one man, Jesus) and the agent of new

life (for all mankind). Once again Paul will make explicit what John tells through his narrative: *For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous ... That as sin hath reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life* (Rom 5:19,21).

Back with St John, and the scene of the crucifixion, *Jesus said to his mother, Woman, behold thy son* (19:26). So far the common elements linking John's account of the passion of Jesus to the story of Adam have included the garden, God's presence within it, Satan's confinement to the ground, the name 'the Man', and the tree. The glaring omission has been Eve, but her name was given to her only after she and Adam had sinned and were expelled from the garden. Up to that point in the Genesis story she was simply 'the Woman'. And in St John's gospel – notoriously – the mother of Jesus is never named, and is only ever addressed by Jesus (first at the Cana wedding feast and then again from the cross) as *Woman*. Now we know why: for John she is the second and obedient Eve who complements Jesus' second and obedient Adam.

Again I have to say that to us this may all seem far-fetched and contrived. But to John's first readers, steeped in the Hebrew Bible and its interpretation by the rabbis, it would all have been as clear as daylight. And just in case there remains any doubt, John has not yet finished with his theme.

*Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden* (19.41). Another nameless garden; and yet, of course, for John – and now that we can read his symbolism for us as well – it is not just **A** garden, it is **the** garden. *And in the garden a new sepulchre, wherein was never man yet laid*. Of course he wasn't. Adam had been expelled from the garden paradise before his death. *And they laid Jesus there* (19.42). So 'Adam' is lain in his rightful tomb at last.

But even now John has not finished. Here is the encounter between Jesus and Mary Magdalene thirty-six hours later: *Jesus saith unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? Whom seekest thou? She supposing him to be the gardener, saith ... Supposing him to be the Gardener! And the Lord God planted a garden east of Eden ... and the Lord God took the man and put him into the garden to dress it and to keep it* (Gen 2:8,15). The same truth John had put into the mouth of faithless Pilate he now puts into the heart and mind of faithful Magdalene. Jesus is indeed the Man, he is indeed the true Gardener, who restores to humankind access to the tree of Life.

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**Further Reading:** *Evolutionary Origins of Morality: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Leonard D. Katz (Imprint Academic, 2000).

## Whitebeam, Rowan and the Wild Service Tree

Poet, rock climber and botanist Libby Houston discovers three new tree species in Somerset.

In 2005-6 I discovered three new tree species – in Britain. They even overlap, in Cheddar Gorge in Somerset. The largest of the twelve individuals of one species (Gough's Rock Whitebeam *Sorbus rupicoloides*) had a girth of 31cm: my hands encircled it. We cannot be sure that a larger, older ancestor never existed, but this tree, the oldest present, may well have been the first. If so, an entirely new species evolved here within the last – 30 years?

I'm not a scientist by original training and fell accidentally into this specialist area of botany. Because I'm quite at home on steep slopes and cliffs, with or without ropes, I've become an expert on cliff plants – in particular, limestone cliffs, and *Sorbus* trees. Too small to compete in level woodland, *Sorbus*es are well adapted to life in steep places, growing out diagonally or horizontally from edges, ledges or rock-face cracks. The meanness of their environment may stunt or slow their growth, so that what at first appears a half-metre twig may be mature and fruiting; a waist-high whip may be 20 years old. And when the main stem of a larger tree fails, sucker growth from the base can simply carry on.

In Britain we have three main normal sexual species of the genus (and one much rarer, outside this story), Rowan *Sorbus aucuparia* probably the best known – that lovely scarlet-berried upland tree with its feathery, tooth-edged, divided leaves, turned to for protection against evil. Less widespread, the Wild Service Tree *Sorbus torminalis* is a taller, more woodland species, its seven-pointed leaves like badly-drawn stars, its brown fruit taken for colic. And then Common Whitebeam *Sorbus aria*, named for the white-felted undersides to its leaves which mark the tree out pale on spring hillsides ('beam' from OE beam = tree), less common than a bee orchid in the wild, but a favourite street tree, leaves variously oval, flowers and fruit like Rowan's, itself never huge.

I think there is no record of Rowan and Wild Service hybridising. But Common Whitebeam can hybridise with either, a key factor in the continuing evolution of *Sorbus* species. Alongside

our sexual species are forty apomictic species, i.e. that produce fertile fruit asexually. They need male pollen from another tree to trigger the process, but use none of its genetic material. Apomictic children take after their mother, exactly; they are virtual clones – and may be very localised. Thirty-two of our apomictic Sorbuses are endemic to the British Isles – some, like *Sorbus rupicoloides*, to a very small corner – and variously rare. Apomixis occurs in other plants, producing for instance 232 known British species of Dandelion *Taraxacum*, or 334 Brambles *Rubus*. What for me differentiates apomictic Sorbuses is their beauty.

Recent research has been analysing the DNA of the rare Sorbuses to find their origins and relationships. In the field you can recognise inherited characters that apomixis has fixed. Species with Wild Service and Common Whitebeam in their origin, for instance, show toned-down variations of the star-pointed leaf-lobes, long leaf-stalks and brown berries of their ‘mother’ *Sorbus torminalis*, and can grow relatively tall.

But more than that: carrying out wild Sorbus surveys in Cheddar or Bristol’s Avon Gorge, looking at hundreds of trees, I began to notice that beauty might be an actual characteristic. Where a species may ultimately have derived from Common Whitebeam alone, the process sharpens and simplifies the original characters. Common Whitebeam’s leaves are ovalish, roundish, floppy, flouncy, hard to flatten, overcrowded, quilted, crimped, misshapen, top- or bottom-heavy, teeth slightly blunted, crowded veins slightly curved and black against the light. These apomicts’ leaves tend to be flat above and glossy, the base often cuneate (streamlined), teeth sharp, often *porrect* or pointing straight outwards from the end of the vein, veins fewer and straighter, often translucent against the light. Kite-shaped, diamond-shaped, fan-shaped, paddle-shaped, paw-like, according to species, they all show bilateral symmetry. Never looking ‘bottom-heavy’, very often they are widest above the middle – perhaps at the golden section.



*Sorbus eminens* on cheddar cliffs

Both of which characteristics lead into aesthetic theory. In the field I could note a hundred trees, and suddenly, really, feel my heart lift – at the sharp-toothed rounded leaves of *Sorbus eminens*; or some repeated character, a certain green, or neat lobe, that made me think: this is a species in its own right. The leaves are held in sprays of 4-6, from generously open (*Sorbus eminens*) to upright – as if to say Pick a card, any card – on horizontal outspread branches (*Sorbus leighensis*), or upright on upward-reaching branches (*Sorbus wilmottiana*). Artists often make a straight flower-stalk wavy; these trees are typically the opposite, with sinuously graceful or arching stems.

The old plant identification characters were, and still are, studied dried and flattened on herbarium sheets in the botanical collections. With digital colour photography, macro photos are easily sent, and we can now record all kinds of back-up features of colour and form. I clamber among the trees wordlessly, making myself remember to record necessary data: girth, height-estimate, basic form and GPS; and taking photographs. Colour, shape, proportion: the theories are still outside my knowledge. It’s as wordless as dancing. Much more could be said. This is what I have myself observed.

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Libby Houston’s *Cover of Darkness: Selected Poems, 1961-98* was published by Slow Dancer Press in 1999. She lives in Bristol.

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# Ballad of True Thomas

True Thomas lay on Huntlie Bank,  
A ferlie he spied wi' his e'e,  
And there he saw a lady bright,  
Come riding down by the Eildon Tree.

Her shirt was o' the grass-green silk,  
Her mantle o' the velvet fine,  
At ilka tett o' her horse's mane  
Hung fifty siller bells and nine.

True Thomas, he pulled aff his cap,  
And louted low down to his knee:  
'All hail, thou mighty Queen of Heaven!  
For thy peer on Earth I never did see.'

'Oh no, O no, Thomas,' she said,  
'That name does not belong to me;  
I am but the Queen of fair Elfland,  
That am hither come to visit thee.

'Harp and carp, Thomas,' she said,  
'Harp and carp along wi' me;  
And if ye dare to kiss my lips,  
Sure of your bodie I will be.'

'Betide me weal, betide me woe,  
That weird shall never daunten me.'  
Syne he has kissed her rosy lips,  
All underneath the Eildon Tree.

'Now, ye maun go wi' me,' she said,  
'True Thomas, ye maun go wi' me;  
And ye maun serve me seven years,  
Thro weal or woe, as chance to be.'

She's mounted on her milk-white steed,  
She's ta'en True Thomas up behind;  
And aye when'er her bridle rang,  
The steed flew swifter than the wind.

O, they rade on, and farther on,  
The steed gaed swifter than the wind;  
Until they reached a desert wide,  
And living land was left behind.

'Light down, light down, now, True Thomas,  
And lean your head upon my knee;  
Abide and rest a little space,  
And I will shew you ferlies three.

'O, see ye not yon narrow road,  
So thick beset wi' thorns and briars?  
That is the path of righteousness,  
Tho' after it but few enquires.

'And see not ye that braid, braid road  
That lies across the lily leven?  
That is the path of wickedness,  
Tho' some call it the road to Heaven.

'And see not ye that bonny road,  
That winds about the fernie brae?  
That is the road to fair Elfland,  
Where thou and I this night maun gae.

'But, Thomas, ye maun hold your tongue,  
Whatever ye may hear or see;  
For, if you speak word in Elfyn land,  
Ye'll ne'er get back to your ain countrie.'

O, they rade on, and farther on,  
And they waded thro rivers aboon the knee;  
And they saw neither sun nor moon,  
But they heard the roaring of the sea.

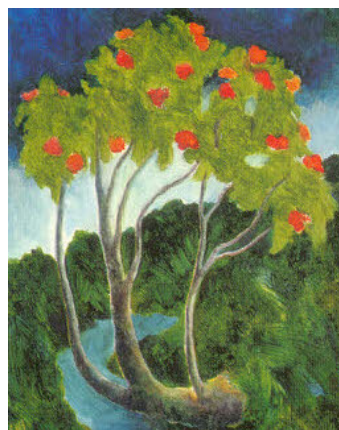
It was mirk, mirk night, and there was nae starlight,  
And they waded thro red blude to the knee;  
For a' the blude that's shed on Earth,  
Rins thro the springs o' that countrie.

Syne they came on to a garden green,  
And she pu'd an apple frae a tree;  
'Take this for thy wages, True Thomas,  
It will give thee tongue that can never lie.'

'My tongue is mine ain,' True Thomas said,  
'A gudely gift ye wad gie to me!  
I neither dought to buy nor sell,  
At fair or tryst where I may be.

'I dought neither speak to prince or peer,  
Nor ask of grace from fair ladye.'  
'Now hold thy peace,' the lady said,  
'For as I say, so must it be.'

He has gotten a coat of the elven cloth,  
And a pair of shoes of velvet green;  
And till seven years were gane and past,  
True Thomas on Earth was never seen.



In this traditional ballad Thomas the Rhymer meets the Queen of Elfland by the Eildon (Rowan) Tree. She carries him off into Elfland and keeps him there seven years, during which he must keep silence. Then she gives him the (disturbing) gift that he can never lie, (hence the name 'True Thomas').

# Working with Wood

Cabinet-maker Oliver Essame describes an intimate life-long relationship with wood.

In the corner of my workshop, on top of the cupboard next to the lathe and waiting patiently to be refinished, is a fruitwood salad bowl that I turned in a school carpentry class when I was 11. Three pieces have survived from those days: the bowl, a bookstand in oak that was a gift for my father, and a small urn that holds paper clips and is on the desk beside me as I type. The timber for all three was a gift from the sea.

When I was eight years old I followed my brother to a school on the coast of Kent. He had been sent there for his health. For a while we shared a room from which it was possible, if you stood on his bed, to see the North Sea breaking against a distant promenade.

On wild winter nights the wind battered and rattled the large, curtain free, sash windows. Lightning filled the room. In the mornings, before plainsong in the chapel and breakfast, we ran first through a cold shower and then, if the tide was out, down to the beach.

We were often on the beach. Swimming, running, or playing games and, especially after a storm, scavenging for whatever flotsam or jetsam could be added to the pile of timber in the school yard. I don't think we wondered where our haul had come from or what its destination, or speculated on how parts of ships or their loads came to be washed up on our shore. When it was dry enough we trundled it on a cart through the town to the sawmills, where it was cut into usable dimensions by huge, noisy machines, driven by

long sagging belts. It was there that I first became intoxicated by the smell of freshly cut wood.

Our sense of smell is a powerful stimulant to memory. In my twenties I taught in India for a year. When new furniture was ordered for one of my classes, a carpenter came with a bullock cart loaded with timber, and, sitting on the floor and using only rudimentary hand tools, made desks. I don't know what timber he used, but I can still recall the rich perfume of the shavings, so

redolent of that Kentish mill that I was inspired to think that this might be a way I could make a living.

I have been a jobbing cabinet maker now for well over thirty years, making furniture of all kinds for all kinds of places: for penthouse and cottages,

for palaces and museums, for churches and crematoria. 'It must be lovely to work with wood,' people say. Well, yes. Usually.

The whole of my first week as trainee was spent learning how to sharpen and set a plane and then to use it to make a piece of rough sawn timber absolutely straight and true and square on all four sides. No power tools in those days. It was tough, but eventually, years later, there comes that moment which all craftsmen and artists will recognise, when you find that you have developed your skills so much that you can sense without looking that what you are doing is true and good. I have had to learn to respect the materials I work with. Some timbers are soft and easy to handle, others are resistant and toxic; some can be carved like butter, others blunt your tools in a moment;



*Christ in the House of his Parents* by John Everett Millais



some look their best with just a little wax, others need all the subtleties of a deep French polish. A bit like people, really. And wood never stops moving; even a well-seasoned hardwood will be

either expanding or shrinking, all the time. A piece of furniture of quality must take all this into account, if it is to survive to become an antique and still be functional and look good.

When I turned that bowl in the school workshop, I was using a treadle lathe and ended each lesson covered in shavings, with my eyes stinging from the dust and my hands and face sore from the bombardment of wood chips. Now, I am required to dress as if for a space walk. A mask protects my eyes and face and fresh filtered

air is pumped into it, I wear heavy gloves, and steel capped boots. And many of the skills that I paid for so heavily in time, I no longer use. We have machines that do it almost as well – and much quicker. I miss the intimate contact with my materials that I once had.

In the cupboard next to my lathe, on which the fruitwood bowl sits, are fifteen planes. Long ones for straight edges, short ones for smoothing, and specialists for moulding, trimming, and grooving. They are old and dusty and none too sharp; a little like their owner. I expect they recall the old days with fondness too.



Oliver Essame is a SOF Trustee.

## Trees Be Company

If leaves be bright up over head,  
When May do shed its glitt' ren light ;  
Or, in the blight o' Fall, do spread  
A yollow bed avore our zight –  
Whatever season it mid be,  
The trees be always company.

When dusky night do nearly hide  
The path along the hedge's zide,  
An' dailight's hwomely sounds be still  
But sounds o' water at the mill ;  
Then if noo feace we long' to greet  
Could come to meet our lwonesome treace;

Or if noo peace o' weary veet,  
However fleet, could reach its pleace –  
However lwonesome we mid be.  
The trees would still be company.

William Barnes

Dorset dialect poet and philologist William Barnes (1801-1886) was also a Church of England parson .



The English oak tree supports a huge variety of life. Its open canopy allows plenty of light to reach the ground, so that many other plants, including primroses, violets, bluebells and ferns, can grow here. The tree is home to many birds, small mammals, mosses, lichens and fungi, and at least 350 varieties of insect. Those living in the bark attract birds, such as great-spotted woodpeckers, to feed. In summer the canopy hosts colonies of the rare Purple Emperor Butterfly. The oak's soft leaves rot quickly in autumn, forming rich leaf mould for insects and earthworms. The acorns which fall to the ground in autumn provide another important food source, for wood pigeons, rooks, squirrels and mice. Source: icons. org.uk

# Part of a Pilgrimage 2

This is Part 2 of long-time SOF member Anne Ashworth's spiritual journal, covering her hard struggle for honesty during the years 1986 until the beginnings of 1991.

## 22 September 1986

Precisely ten years since my commissioning. I have been re-living that service. The hymns:

Be thou my vision, O lord of my heart,  
Naught be all else to me, save that thou art.

Lift every gift that thou thyself hast given,  
Low lies the best till lifted up to heaven.  
Low lie the bounding heart, the teeming brain,  
Till, sent from God, they mount to God again.

Kindle a flame of sacred love  
On the mean altar of my heart.

And my tutor's words: 'Preaching is parable, parallel, paradigm.' I have also been reflecting on two modern hymns:

I ask no dream, no prophet-ecstasies,  
No sudden rending of the veil of clay,  
No angel visitant, no opening skies;  
But take the dimness of my soul away.

To each man in his language,  
To each man in his home,  
By many paths and channels  
The faith of Christ may come.

May I be granted the grace to find each individual's language – however unchristian – and seek each individual's 'home', the point they've arrived at. For the vision, the nourishment, inspiration, encouragement, growth of these ten years – humble and marvelling thanksgiving. As love is bigger than lovers, ministry is bigger than ministers. We are small creatures, pulled by the wind to swell sails hardly our own.

Dr A. J. Gossip on ministry: 'The whole point of ministry, the reason why there is a ministry at all, is that people out in the press of life and finding that there they cannot keep in sight of God but get continually drifted away from him, that the little matters, to which it is their duty to attend, of necessity crowd him out of their preoccupied minds – lay hands on a man, praying him, 'Live in the secret of God's presence; and in the hush there, which we cannot know, commune with him face to face; and week by week, come out and share with us the message which, in that stillness, you have had a chance of hearing. We'll pay you for it, man, if you will only do it!'

## October 1986

'Pilgrimage' is not an adequate metaphor for commitment. The whole point of pilgrimage is making for a specified spot. One has maps. The commitments I know – love, poetry, faith, ministry – are Abraham's nomad not-knowing-whitherings. On a geographical pilgrimage, though practical necessities may deflect us, still every decision has reference to the known intention. These commitments of life offer no such guiding principles. Only in retrospect do we discover the route our blind decisions have traced; and we can never locate our destination.

## October 1986

At Devoke Water. Brief notes made at the scene:

Air palpable a felt presence as I stepped from the vehicle till that moment no elevated thoughts the ambient presence touched stroked flowed over face neck hands an ancient presence – 'thousands of years if all were told' (Yeats) – anonymous but not wholly impersonal.

## 3–5 October 1986

Some notes from a retreat at the Windermere Centre, led by Benita Kyle. I felt them of sufficient significance to keep them in my journal afterwards:

*Caretti*: 'You are not the dawn, you are the land that awaits the dawn. Your God is the dawn, and later he is full daylight, and later still high noon.'

*On Adelaide Hill*: Sound of cows chewing grass, sharp, incisive, repetitive, like a mantra. I too feed from earth, become earth. Haze on far hills, a meltdown of hills, rock dissolving in air. Silver shimmer on water, horizontals counterpointed by verticals of sailing craft. Crows freewheeling. Grass studded with gold of ragwort, white of seeded thistles. Breeze disturbs grass, my hair. All things move in God; dance of particles, trajectory of comet, growth decay death birth, love's interaction. Lord of the dance. Tat Tvam Asi. This I: a collage of memories, sensations, notions. Ground of being, the unchanging ever moving That or Thou.

To be poet first is to establish a criterion of what is real. Religion is a narrower interpretative way of underlining poetic experience – to be rejected where it contradicts poetic experience, enlarged where it is inadequate to poetic experience. Others have other criteria, such as marriage, science, art, philosophy, community.

Meditation is not to learn, but to kindle love, to let the finite expand into the infinite. Three stages: way in, staying in, way out. Way out should always include thought for others. A mantra: win me, wean me, wing me.

Meditation on a silver chalice. Empty. Receptivity. 'The pool was filled with water out of sunlight' (Eliot). Chalice a little tarnished, filled with golden wine 'out of sunlight'. In meditation turned darker, richer, became flame; a chalice of living fire. Colours began to separate, reds and golds. The meditation of the chalice:

Breathe in the life of God into my emptiness  
Breathe in the light of God into my darkness  
Breathe in the fire of God which warms, sings,  
consumes

Breathe in the artistry of God, colour, form,  
pattern archetype, into my creativity

A contemplative explores silence; a poet infringes silence. How can this be resolved? A contemplative ascends the mountain, a poet uses the mountain. To use a third metaphor, both are inward movements, probing inner layers of self to reach and touch that Self, ground of being. Deep in those recesses, closer to truth than the superficial I, is a poet. To deny her validity would be to disengage from the quest, to turn back. These two summoning imperatives, these two primary loves: God and poetry – are they in apposition or in opposition? How can they be opposed? The wellsprings of spirit – illumination, inspiration (metaphors of light or breath) are recognisably the same.

I went to Windermere determined not to make poetic capital out of it, to allow as far as possible no ulterior motives. I found myself instead wrestling with these interior complexities: faiths and certainties which now coalesced, now pulled apart, ranging from synthesis to antithesis.

### *June 1988*

The more I learn from radical and feminist theologians the less I can cope with traditional Christian language, so that it is increasingly difficult for me to attend worship unless I am conducting it. (What arrogance!)

So I consider whether in the long term I will be able to stay in the church. In some ways the debate is similar to that regarding choosing to be ordained. At that point the most serious of my objections was a determination to remain, like Simone Weil, 'at the intersection of Christianity with all that is not Christianity'. That still holds good. I now add to that affirmation the question whether I must forego what I value in corporate Christianity because I can no longer with integrity handle the whole package.

Perhaps it will not come to that. Some Christians at least are becoming more open to other faiths, other philosophies, lifestyles other than the traditional Christian family. But equally there is a recrudescence of fundamentalism, neo-orthodoxy, reactionary moral

and political viewpoints, including a new witch hunt against homosexuals. I'm becoming more sensitive (over-sensitive?) to Christian language. It's sexist or literalist or sub-literate, sometimes all three at once.

### Reasons for remaining in the church:

*The central points of the myth* are profoundly emotive and enriching. Incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection are focal images for psychological healing, more powerful than any others I know.

*Public worship is nourishing.* I know of no other comparable nourishment. Quaker worship is impoverished by comparison, other fellowships mundane by comparison.

*The social ethics of Jesus' message* (as I understand it) of the 'Kingdom' provide a necessary disturbing challenge to my idleness, complacency and cowardice.

*There are experiences and dimensions of life* – in particular, perhaps, the aesthetic – for which only a religious language is rich enough. So it is convenient to have available a public vehicle, the religion of one's own culture.

### *February 1990*

Two directions of post-Christian theology. Daphne Hampson, describing herself as a 'post-Christian feminist', rejects Jesus but keeps God. Don Cupitt, described as a 'Christian atheist', rejects God but keeps Jesus. I see both points of view; am slightly more attracted by Cupitt, whose reasoning is better, yet my 'God-shaped blank' yearns to retain a spiritual dimension even though the theist view is untenable.

### *March 1990*

From Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*: 'I became more and more conscious of the necessity of a vital faith, and the total unreality and unsubstantiality of the dead, selfish rationalism which had been freezing my mind and will for the last seven years. By the time the summer was over, I was to become conscious of the fact that the only way to live was to live in a world that was charged with the presence and reality of God.'

I still long for the contemplative life and yearn for God, if God there be. Almost an atheist, yet still repeating Tagore's impassioned plea: 'That I want thee, only thee, let my heart repeat without end./ All desires that distract me, day and night, are false and empty to the core.'

But I don't agree with that second line. All good things are to be desired – in art, in nature, in love and fellowship and domesticity and work. Yet through and beyond them all beats and throbs 'I want thee, only thee.' And over against all other desires, the pull to withdrawal, to solitude, to contemplation. But how? What is one to 'contemplate' if reason demands the relinquishment of all supernaturalism?



### March 1990

Shall I disengage from the church? From its naivety, its parochial exclusiveness, its limited spirituality based on untenable philosophy? Once I thought Christianity could provide a language to interpret spiritual experience, and a vehicle within which to develop it. That was liberating. Twenty years later, I need to be liberated from Christianity.

'It's a matter of breaking the pain barrier,' two people from SOF have said to me. No it isn't. Would it were so simple, for I could muster courage enough for that. No, it's the betrayal of others I fear: how can I be responsible for their hurt, their sense of loss? The congregations I have nourished and challenged – if they see me walking away as a renegade their own faith journeys could be endangered. And there is the further question of vocation. Can I be true to my own calling if I leave the church? One does not need a belief in a divine call to acknowledge vocation. Rather, it comes from one's inner depths. Jeremiah still speaks for me:

If I say, I will not mention him,  
or speak any more in his name,  
there is in my heart as it were a burning fire

shut up in my bones  
and I am weary with holding it in  
and I cannot.

I set myself, long ago, at Simone Weil's 'intersection of Christianity with all that is not Christianity'. How do I view that junction now? Must I move away to preserve my integrity, or remain and – as on a cross! – be destroyed?

Richard MacKenna in *God for Nothing* asks: 'Wouldn't it be a Christian success story if someone came to church regularly and then decided, on mature reflection, that they couldn't accept the Christian viewpoint? Shouldn't we be glad that they care enough to wrestle with the problems and then come to a decision which they feel makes sense for them? Better, surely, an empty church and a body of people who have left it, caring, compassionate, open to life and others, than a church full of people meekly obeying orders and dutifully taking their elixir.'

### January 1991

Extracts from what began as a letter, was never sent, and developed into a lengthy self-examination, kept in the journal:

A dark night of the soul? My soul doesn't aspire to the lofty reaches of a John of the Cross, though there have been periods when I think I believed I had something of the gifts of a mystic. Nor, even if I were to use the phrase in its trampled-upon everyday sense of 'depression', am I subject to the fairly normal ravages of low spirits. My life is well ordered, comfortable, cheerful and as happy as any human can hope for.

What then? Let me approach the question by in-directions.

Ideas and language have been my life, or its most vital part. So like all 'people whose business is words' I have wrestled often with the nightmare beastie, the shapeless horror – the fear that words *can't do the job*. Words distort. Words obfuscate. Words confuse. Words always mean something other to the reader or hearer anyway, and we have no control over that.

Words strain,  
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,  
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,  
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,  
Will not stay still. Shrieking voices  
Scolding, mocking, or merely chattering,  
Always assail them. (Eliot)

Beneath ideas and language, or beyond and encompassing, or behind them – let whatever preposition best makes the metaphor be selected – has been the single basic concept: Honesty. My life has been a long losing battle for honesty (as at least two of my poems have proclaimed). And the problem of precision in words has been a part of that battle, a sharpening of swords as you might say.

At those periods when honesty has seemed impossible to me, words have failed me. During a lengthy sleep, the fifteen years or more when I was absent from myself (though to outward appearance in the prime of early adulthood, fit and vigorous and always learning), I did not write at all. Though I still read poetry, I lost all notion of writing it. The creative self was sound asleep, fearing to wake. When, at age forty, it woke, the words began again; so did everything else, everything that pertains to the soul and its wakeful functions. Religious experience began again; love, writing, individuality.

Honesty was a hard taskmaster. It led me out of a comfortable marriage. It led me out of the unpolitical myopia of the unquestioning petit bourgeois. It led me into the pulpit and other uncongenial places. But every fresh venture was a fresh point of disillusion, for each time I was stepping, not as I hoped out of darkness into light but into yet another Chinese box of dishonesty. No sooner had the words been sharpened sufficiently to articulate a new position than that position ceased to be entirely tenable.

Jugglers improve with practice. My word-manipulation improved, of course. My poetry got better, so did my preaching. So did my self-critical judgment. Each poem, each sermon, because it could articulate only one truth, was false by definition. Every statement, even the carefully symmetrical paradoxes, left so much unsaid and unsayable that honesty grew fainter than ever in the distance.



*Sofia welcomes comment and debate.*

Please send your letters to:

*Sofia* Editor: Dinah Livingstone,

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## Brilliant Cartoon

I was amazed (and delighted) to read your comments on government policy (to which I say 'Amen') and the cartoon (which is brilliant). But I wonder what any Con. or conned Labs readers may think. So be it.

A few other points which may interest you: The TV show. My immediate reaction was to be appalled by the kind of slanging match which went on, and I wrote such a note on the website. But watching the programme again since then I have realised that they did give you a reasonable opportunity to talk – but I still felt what followed was hardly a reasonable discussion. So my report on the chairman remains in effect: 'Could do much better'.

The first answer to the whole question should surely be a Joan-like 'It all depends on how you define the word "Christian".' If it means accepting Jesus as a role model (as my dictionary suggests) the answer is Yes. If it means necessarily including the whole doctrinal Greek-like structure which 'the scoundrel Christ' added to the 'good man Jesus' (à la Pullman) and foisted on the Church by a pagan Roman emperor because it suited his purposes, – the answer is 'No'. As simple as that.

I gave a copy of *Sofia* to my daughter. She was surprised and interested to learn my current view. She and other folk also watched the TV and were very interested in the SOF view, as was an intelligent grandson. Previously they have all been fervent non-believers. Maybe that tide will ebb!

I also showed *Sofia* to a carer here (we live in a group of bungalows covered by a care system). She was amazed. Said I have a reputation here of being a 'very religious person' – probably the result of my wife once telling a carer I used to be a Methodist minister, but not saying that stopped 60 years ago). At a Xmas 'do' someone sitting near us asked 'Do you mind if I sip a little wine? I know Methodists object'. It's a funny old world.

And I hope you didn't mind my sending the cartoon to David Cameron, and Ann Black of the Labour I.E. I should have asked you.

*David Hatton  
Althorne, Essex  
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## Thank God!

'I give Thanks to God, in whom I do not believe.'  
What a wonderful prayer! Thank you, David Hatton.

Please will you print the whole of Louis de Bernière's poem? If that is not possible, more details so that it can be tracked down. It would be lovely to read it out at our local SOF group. Looking forward to the London Conference. Thank you for all that you do.

*Julia Nicoll  
Hemel Hempstead*

This poem was broadcast on BBC Radio 4 in July 2010 but is no longer up on their website. We can't print it whole in *Sofia* for copyright reasons but I found the full text on [uk.answers.yahoo.com](http://uk.answers.yahoo.com). If you can't get it I will post it to you. – Ed.

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## What about Joseph?

I was disappointed to see the front cover of the December 2010 issue. In the foreground is a picture of Mary holding the child Jesus and, in the background the shadowy figure of Joseph. If we believe that Jesus was a human being, then he had two parents, equally responsible for his creation. In the Old Testament the creation story in the book of Genesis tells us that, having created various animals, God chose to create human animals in his own image and likeness. The story tells us that God created them, male and female. From these, God's creation, presumably all the earth, was populated.

The New Testament tells us of a new creation, raising human animals to a spiritual dimension, and thus fulfilling the potential foreseen at the original human creation. As in the first story God chose a woman and a man to begin his new creation. Mary was a young woman who had only one precious gift – her virginity. Until fairly recently women who were found to be pregnant before marriage were deemed 'soiled goods', and even today in many cultures are disgraced and rejected by their families. In this story, Mary is asked to renounce the only power she, as a woman, possesses, and this she freely and willingly does. Having done so, she is taking a great risk, as she does not know what the future may hold for her, even death. This doesn't happen because we are told Joseph was a 'just man', but instead he considers 'putting her away quietly'. However he too responds to God's challenge, to forego his power as a man to choose a

virgin to be the mother of his child. Even today not many men would happily accept such a situation, and in an earlier age they would, presumably, risk being despised and ridiculed as weak. But this, like Mary, Joseph freely and willingly does.

It is from these two 'weak and powerless' people, Mary and Joseph, that the Christ-child is born. Thus, God becomes incarnate in human flesh, and a new era for humanity begins. Christianity needs to identify, in its theology, liturgy, and biblical exposition, both the masculine and feminine in its imagery of God. And both women and men relinquish their power to dominate, and co-operate together, for Christ to be born in this generation, and the Kingdom, for which Christ prayed, to begin to appear on earth. But power comes in many guises and is incredibly hard to relinquish, and this is seen just as often in religious as in secular society!

*Valerie Langdon  
Fareham, Hants.*

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## Imaginary Number

I'm grateful to Eric Whittaker (*Sofia* 98) for his exposition of how slippery, and perhaps arbitrary, the words 'exist' and 'existence' can be, not only when we apply them to God, but also in apparently straightforward contexts such as maths and physics. He has pointed out that because the imaginary number  $i$  – which was indisputably invented by humans – works so effectively, it would make no sense to deny that it exists. I think his point may be taken further. As with  $i$ , I suggest, so too with all the 'real' numbers. Although I understand some mathematicians would disagree, I believe that before any humans started to think numbers, no numbers existed. The same is true of – among other things – music, and language.

Lloyd Geering, in a keynote address to the New Zealand Sea of Faith conference in 2008, put all of this into what has been for me a very enlightening context, borrowing an idea from the philosopher Karl Popper. Popper 'suggested that to understand "all that is" in a way that does justice to human existence and to human knowledge, we should think of three worlds... The first is the physical world, which now consists of the vast space-time universe... But in the course of time... through the collective creativity of the human species [our planet Earth] began to bring forth a non-physical, non-spatial reality – the world of consciousness. [Then] conscious human reflection on these experiences, in collective conjunction with one another, created a third world. This also is non-physical and non-spatial. It contains language, the names of things, ideas, stories, religious beliefs and rituals, arts... The idea of God belongs to this world.'

One thing that follows from what Lloyd said is that the words 'is', 'exist' and 'existence' have somewhat different meanings – or at least the criteria we must use in deciding whether something 'exists' or not will

be somewhat different – according to whether we are speaking of what Popper has called World I, World II and World III. Things in World II and World III are all 'non-physical and non-spatial' but they truly exist. For me, this has moved my understanding beyond the discussion of 'realism' and 'non-realism' of a few years ago, which I never found very helpful. I am once again comfortably affirming that God does 'exist' – because I now locate God neither in heaven nor on earth, but in 'World III' – the world created by human culture.

*Donald Feist,  
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feist@clear.net.nz*

The writer points out that the whole of Geering's address is up on the New Zealand SOF website:  
<http://sof.org.nz>

\*

Eric Whittaker clearly struggled in his attempt to square a belief in God with the reality or otherwise of mathematical symbols, and in so doing left me unconvinced. (*Sofia* 98) Yes, mathematicians refer to common finite numbers as real, but I guess this in order to distinguish them from others which they name as irrational or imaginary. They may also take this position due to over-familiarity – in much the same as believers in a real God. If we take as 'real' the notion that physical objects are there when we are not perceiving them as well as when we are, then numbers can only ever be (as you put it) a construct of the human mind. They certainly have no physical reality; five cows exist to be sure, but like all others the figure five is an abstraction, a symbol we have created to number a given quantity of matter or objects.

As an electrical engineer I have also found the imaginary number  $i$  to be useful, but in order to avoid confusion with the symbol for electric current, engineers refer to it as  $j$ . Nevertheless, the fact that something is useful does not make it real. Eric believes in God because it enables him to discuss how the world works, from which I assume he sees God as both the author and sustainer of all things. For him it was a short step from 'real' numbers to a 'real' God, whereas my 'non-real' numbers could be likened to the non-real humanly created God we in SOF talk about.

Belief in a real God may 'work' for many people, but philosophically it is not good enough. One has only to ask the question 'who made God?' to realise that there is no end to the search for the origin of all things in this fashion. I hold that energy is real because it is the essence of everything physical; without it there would be nothing. It follows that the only possible candidate for the post of creator is energy, but even then one cannot escape from once more asking the question where it came from. Surely the only honest answer to all this is we do not know and moreover, never will.

*John Gamlin  
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# SOF Sift

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

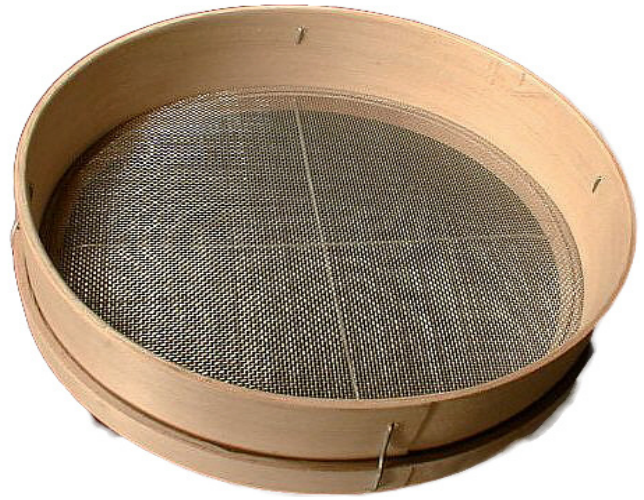
*Christine Hacklett, Harrow, Middlesex*

I wasn't taken to church as a child as one parent was Methodist and the other Church of England; they didn't attend either church. But they did send me to Sunday School, so what with that, and state education with its Christian bias in the 1930s and 40s, I grew up with the vague idea that there was some sort of God existing.

After World War 2 my best friend returned from N. Ireland where she had lived with her mother and sister for the whole of the war. Pat and her sister were church-goers (Church of England) so I went along with them and eventually got confirmed (I had been baptised as a baby). It didn't really mean much to me. However, when I was about 20 I gave some thought to what the creed said. I found it really didn't make much sense, so I decided I'd look around for something else. I dipped into Buddhism, Existentialism and I can't remember what else – what a pity there was no SOF at the time or I might have considered that!

In the middle of all this searching, while on holiday in 1951, I met an Irish boy who was a Catholic. His view that his church was the only valid one irritated me, so when I got home I started reading about Catholicism, mainly to reinforce my own disagreement as I had no intention of pursuing the friendship. Months slipped by and I came across an anti-Catholic book which I started with glee but by the end realised I was mentally backing the Catholic side. I eventually decided I should become a Catholic, to the dismay of my parents and some of my friends.

I embraced the new religion enthusiastically. It was mainly the historical continuity that appealed to me. At one point I toyed with the idea of becoming a nun, but fortunately instead, I threw up my job, deserted my friends, and went to Ireland to do a degree in Philosophy, a subject which had always interested me. Why Ireland? I had been on holiday there many times and relished the idea of living there for a while. I enjoyed my three years in Cork



immensely. The studies were very interesting and the social life most enjoyable.

I kept up the Catholicism for quite a number of years. However, as I grew older and retired from paid work I found the idea of God more and more unbelievable. A crux came when I saw an advertisement for a two year theology course, a subject I had wanted to do years previously. But as an atheist (which is what I felt I was by then) could or should I really do it? I decided I would, and found it a great aid in reinforcing my views. For instance we looked at the New Testament and learnt when and why the Gospels were written, which was not as history. We considered the notion of images of God; studied the philosophy and theology of Aquinas, and much more. At the end of the two years (part time) I felt quite reinforced in my own views. It was about a year later that I discovered the existence of the SOF Network.

I joined the Central London Group. What a relief it was to find people not shocked by my lack of belief, and disagreement with the Church I had joined. I also welcomed the SOF magazine, which I read with enthusiasm.

This was in 1995 and I have been to the National Conference every year since then, and when the Central London Group closed I joined the North London Group, and have also become involved in the organisation of the London Conference every two years or so. I look forward to the Group meetings where there is always something interesting to discuss, and it is nice to meet up with old and sometimes new members of the Group.

# Red Letter Days

A page which recalls the birthday or death day of people who have made a notable contribution to humanity. Mary Lloyd presents Mary Wollstonecraft and John Ruskin.

## 27<sup>th</sup> April (birthday): **Mary Wollstonecraft**



Mary Wollstonecraft  
27<sup>th</sup> April 1759 – 10<sup>th</sup> Sept 1797

As her biographer, Janet Todd, rightly remarks, ‘throughout her life, Mary Wollstonecraft grappled with the complexities of women’s lot.’ Born in Spitalfields, second in a family of seven and the eldest girl, she struggled as a lady’s companion at 19; nursed her mother through fatal illness; set up a school in dissenting Stoke Newington to

support her friend, Fanny Blood, and sister, Eliza, whom she had encouraged to quit a miserable marriage; abandoned it to nurse Fanny, then dying of consumption; and spent an unhappy year as a governess in Ireland – prompting *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, her first published work. She died at 38, from complications 10 days after the birth of her second daughter (also called Mary).

The momentous luck of being appointed editorial assistant on the *Analytical Review* in 1787 spurred her mastering of French and German, publishing translations and reviews, and entering London Radical circles. Not until her early thirties did Wollstonecraft recognise that her underlying problem was the systematic denial of women’s education and autonomy, rather than her father’s fecklessness and her brother’s privilege. It was an understanding which produced the works of her intellectual maturity, the *Vindications of the Rights of Men* – her vigorous response to Burke’s critique of the French Revolution (1790) – and *of Women* (1792).

A period in France, an unhappy love-affair and illegitimate daughter (Fanny) prompted acceptance of her need for sexuality and companionship alongside freedom and autonomy, expressed in a final novel, *Maria*. The fruit of her brief but contented marriage with William Godwin, father of the daughter (Mary) who was to marry Shelley and write *Frankenstein*, the candour of this work, and Godwin’s honest biography of his wife, clouded Wollstonecraft’s name among ‘respectable’ feminists for a century after her death.

Her courage, resolve and hope sustain us still: ‘The beginning is always today.’

## 20<sup>th</sup> February: **John Ruskin**



John Ruskin  
8<sup>th</sup> Feb 1819 – 20<sup>th</sup> Feb 1900

Son of a London wine-importer, Ruskin published prolifically from the age of 15 and won the Newdigate Poetry Prize as an Oxford student. His reputation as a prominent art and architecture critic, author of *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* and *The Stones of Venice*, was well established when, in December 1860, he published *Unto This Last*. A radical critique of capitalism, that up-ended

Victorian England by rejecting the classical theories of economists like Adam Smith, David Ricardo and John Stuart Mill, it took the Parable of the Vineyard (Matthew 20) as its inspiration. Denying that human beings are primarily motivated by self-interested economic reasoning, Ruskin contended that people are often driven by emotions and motivations unrelated to the law of supply and demand.

Rejecting the ‘unfettered markets’ that justify and encourage economic inequality, he gave new meanings to many of the terms in the economists’ lexicon, such as utility, wealth, value, exchange, and believed that the theory of supply and demand resulted in misery for workers, because it encouraged them to sell their labour at a discount when jobs were scarce.

Against the claim that hoarding wealth is the path to greater happiness, Ruskin wrote: ‘That man is richest who, having perfected the functions of his own life to the utmost, has also the widest helpful influence, both personal, and by means of his possessions, over the lives of others. There is no wealth but life.’

The book influenced the development of Christian Socialism and profoundly affected Gandhi, who espoused Ruskin’s values – especially the view that whatever benefits the individual also benefits the group as a whole – in his teachings and writings.

Lancaster economist, Christopher May, comments (2010) that Ruskin believed, ‘We can choose how to treat others, and these choices have consequences.’

Submissions welcome for famous birthdays or death days for the summer quarter June 1<sup>st</sup> – August 31<sup>st</sup>.

# Radio Rockall



## Censorship

*A SOF Member's Plea from the West Country*

To my shock and puzzlement I have been subject to summary censorship from our local benefice magazine after a year of being included. Censorship has a long history but generally it means the suppression of information, considered objectionable, harmful or inconvenient to the populace. Which of the above can possibly apply to me?

When written ideas were copied by hand, scribes were easily subject to control, notably by the Catholic Church. After the invention of printing in the mid 15<sup>th</sup> century the Church issued a bull against unlicensed printing. While bibles and government information were available, dissent and criticism were controlled and in 1559 the first *Lzbrorum Prohibitorum*, the *List of Prohibited Books*, was published. It was abolished only in 1966.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century John Milton and John Locke had written about ideas and information being allowed to walk: a marketplace of ideas. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century John Stuart Mill had said individuals have the right to express themselves as long as they do no harm to others. If we silence an opinion we may silence truth. 'If all mankind minus one were of one opinion, and one, and only one person, were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing the one person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind.' The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw many declarations of Human Rights, including the freedom to speak freely without censorship.

Yet censorship remains: *Moral censorship* attempts to counter a current problem as with, say, child pornography; *military censorship* tries to prevent another, especially an enemy, from seeing sensitive material such as combat tactics, or suppressing politically inconvenient information especially in wartime; *religious censorship* is deletion by the dominant religion of material from or about a minority religion; *meta-censorship* is, roughly, censoring the idea that censorship is taking place!

Against all this my little bit of censoring seems to be rather trivial. Yet, I feel aggrieved in the manner described at the top and I want to pursue the matter. Our benefice magazine is very conventional: the Rector's letter followed by general items. Each of four

parishes supplies its own items starting with church services and readers. The main items are summaries of last month's events and reminders of this month's. Just occasionally there are specials, such as *Visit of Chiropodist*. My 300-word offerings were placed among the general items or on the last page. I email my pieces to the editor who assembles the magazine. He supplies it to the chief editor [the Rector] who pulls it apart then returns it for printing. My eight items over the year were all printed without change.

Then the editor alerted me: my pieces were under fire. Sure enough my October item was pulled. The Rector sent me a one-sentence email: 'Following a number of complaints over recent months this is to inform you that your contributions are felt to be inappropriate for the Benefice Magazine and it has therefore been decided that we will no longer publish articles from you.' Is this not summary censorship? Has *The List* been revived just for me?

I wrote a two-page letter to the Rector saying that I had received no complaints. Indeed, I had had kind words and compliments; some even looked for my piece first. I pointed out the various subjects I had tackled: responses to previous items and three on contemporary issues. I pointed out their disclaimer: 'Opinions expressed in this magazine are not necessarily that [sic] of the publisher, chief editor or editor.' I asked what the complaints were? What would make my contributions 'appropriate'? My letter began and ended with references to censorship, freedom of speech and democracy.

Ten days later a Church Warden phoned to warn me off: the Rector was ill and under stress. He emphasised that my 'opinions' were not wanted. I took this as an acknowledgement of my letter and confirmation of censorship although he denied it was censorship. So a bit of meta-censorship there, too!

As I type, nearly five months have passed and I still have had no reply but I hear on the grapevine that the PCC has discussed it and that the matter has been to the Bishop and back. Meanwhile, I have submitted pieces each month to force his hand and show I have not rolled over. Has anybody else experienced such petty censorship and if so with what outcome? Help, please, via The Editor, *Sofia*.

## Philip Feakin reviews

### *Eternal Life: A New Vision*

by John Selby Spong

HarperOne (New York 2010). Pbk. 288 pages. £6.99.

Compared to the titles of some of his previous books such as *Resurrection: Myth or Reality* and *The Sins of Scripture* one might at first glance think that with a title of *Eternal Life: A New Vision*, Jack Spong has softened in old age. However you are quickly disabused of this by the subtitle of *Beyond Religion, Beyond Theism, beyond Heaven and Hell*. Also there is no holding back with chapter headings such as, 'The Tools of Religious Manipulation' and 'Putting Away Childish Things: The Death of Religion'.

Jack's first words are: 'This may well be my final book' but then he qualifies this with, 'this is indeed my fifth final book'. We now know that a further final book will be published in the spring on *The Gospel of John*. He refers to his experience that 'the subject of the next book is always opened to me by the study done in preparation for the present book.' And 'this book on life after death drove me deeply and in a new way into the Fourth Gospel'.

Jack Spong is now approaching 80 and although he has written his autobiography he has used his own life and experiences in this book to give a context and to illustrate some of the points he wishes to make. The death of his father when Jack was only twelve clearly had a dramatic impact upon him. He describes comforters coming to the family and that, 'many of them seemed compelled to describe how happy my father was now that he was no longer sick. The word "heaven" also entered the conversation frequently, being referred to as a place of ultimate bliss. It was, people said, the highest destiny for which one's life could hope, for there the presence of God could be constantly enjoyed. Something about this was amiss, however, even in my young mind, for if we really believed that, why were we so sad?'

His father's illness gave him the chance to taste and experience a very different kind of religion from that in which he was raised when his Aunt Laurie took him to another church. This provided the impetus to his long religious journey from Biblical Fundamentalism to his statement that, 'Christianity is for me no longer about an invasive deity; it is about a fully human one in whom God

becomes profoundly present and inherently visible.'

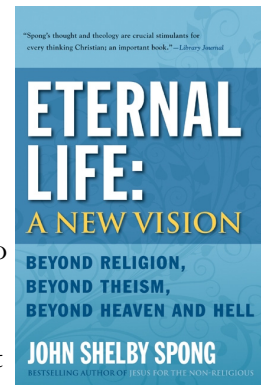
Much of the book will seem to cover ground that Jack Spong has written about before, such as

his attack on organised Christianity and its practices. He is greatly concerned with our relationship with God and in particular our desire to flatter God. He illustrates this in the way we address God and the hymns we sing, the posture and demeanour of people in church and that we are encouraged liturgically to say dreadful things about ourselves in a tactic to win favour.

In moving forward in this way it is not surprising that later he states, 'There is no supernatural God who lives above the sky or beyond the universe. There is no supernatural God who can be understood as animating spirit, Earth mother, masculine tribal deity or external monotheistic being. There is no parental deity watching over us from whom we can expect help. There is no deity whom we can flatter into acting favourably or manipulate by being good. There are no record books and no heavenly judge keeping them to serve as the basis on which human beings will be rewarded or punished.'

So after all this it may be found surprising that the last chapter of the book is entitled, 'I Believe in Life Beyond Death.' The key to this, I believe, is in his chapter on, 'The Approach of the Mystics'. In this chapter he identifies his own present view of religion and Christianity with that of the mystics and specifically, Meister Eckhart. He sees himself as being like the mystics in moving beyond the boundaries that are imposed by organised religion. This is why he sees that the mystics 'might turn out to be the means through which the essence of yesterday's religion can be transformed into tomorrow's spiritual understanding'.

I now look forward to the next final book where he sees John's Gospel through a mystical lens.

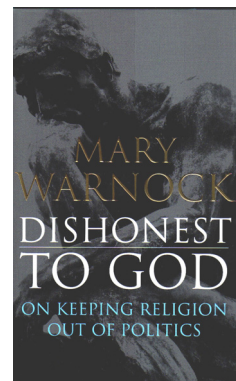


reviews

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Philip Feakin is a Day Chaplain at Southwark Cathedral and a keen, but fallible, student of New Testament Greek. He is a member of SOF.

# Morality as a Human Creation



reviews

## David Lee reviews *Dishonest to God – On Keeping Religion out of Politics*

by Mary Warnock

Continuum (London 2010). Hbk. 166 pages. £16.99.

There is much in this little book to interest and please readers of *Sofia*. 'Religion, it hardly needs to be said, is a construct, like morality itself, of the human imagination' (p.128).

Mary Warnock is a philosopher who has been much involved in the affairs of the world as a fellow of St Hugh's College, Oxford, Head Mistress of Oxford High School, Mistress of Girton College, Cambridge, chair person of a number of government committees and latterly as a member of the House of Lords. She belongs to that tradition of philosophers, like Bertrand Russell, who take a leading role in public affairs. The aim of her book is to separate morality from religion especially with regard to the enactment of new laws through the political process, at the same time reflecting upon the positive value of religion in modern society.

The first two chapters discuss in some detail the legislative processes in recent times in which the laws concerning the abolition of the death penalty, homosexuality, abortion, *in vitro* fertilisation and stem cell research were changed, invariably in a liberalising direction. Observing the participation of the bishops in the House of Lords and representatives of other religions she noticed that once they had made their 'faith' declaration, such as 'Life is Sacred ...' they then used arguments about the practical effects of the proposed change without any further reference to its religious implications. The former Archbishop of York, John Hapgood, in the debate on limiting research on the human embryo to the first 14 days after fertilisation stated that Christian theology had no quarrel with the idea that the beginning of human life was a process rather than an event. Mary Warnock tells us that in that debate an aging cross-bench peer said to her that Christians could have nothing to do with these matters. She said, 'What about the Archbishop of York?' to which he replied, 'He's not a Christian!'

In the following chapters she discusses the gradual separation of morality from religion and argues that the development of morality is a human activity depending upon society's innate sense of fairness, compassion and imagination. She explains the

philosophical background of this with reference to the writings of Don Cupitt and others. She concludes with the assertion that while parliamentary democracy has its faults, we must do 'all we can to fend off the forces of theocracy' (p.166).

There are two areas of critical comment. Here and there in this book Mary Warnock reflects an understanding, shared by many, that faith is a set of absolute propositions to which some people give intellectual assent and on which they base all their moral beliefs and attitudes. Mary Warnock clearly thinks that many politicians and religious people hold to this definition of faith. This is a serious problem because, for example, it gives rise to some fanatical opposition to 'faith' schools. Such a position does not do justice to the meaning of faith. According to the Gospels faith is an act of the will, a decision to live and behave in a certain way, according to the teachings of Jesus. Slavish obedience to doctrinal orthodoxy cannot be regarded as the mark of true Christian discipleship. So the woman who touched Jesus's garment to be healed of her disease is told, 'Woman, your *faith* has made you well' (Mt 29: 22).

Again, it seems to me, Mary Warnock does not deal adequately with the moral teaching of the Bible. While it may be true that much of it is no longer comprehensible to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I would like to have seen a more nuanced understanding. Certainly the Bible teaches some moral principles to which few would object – love your neighbour etc – and what it does without equivocation is to call us to obedience to the moral law. Surely we regard that as true even if the **content** of the law is understood to be a human creation. Those who have to make careful arrangements to deal with minorities could learn a thing or two from St Paul, who deals with the issue of the weak consciences of those who cannot accept the freedom of Christians to eat what they like. (See 1 Cor chapter 8). I recommend this interesting and well-produced\* little book.

\* I could find only one editorial error. On page 163 there is a reference to canon Lucy Winker. This, of course, should read Canon Lucy Winkett.

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Paperback edition due October 2011 at £10.99.



## Dominic Kirkham reviews

### *A History of Christianity*

by Diarmaid MacCulloch

Penguin (London 2010). Pbk. 1216 pages. £14.99.

Warning: this is a 'bible' of a book! Weighing in at over one thousand, tightly printed, pages it's definitely not for the ordinary coffee table. My initial reaction was, do we need yet another History of Christianity? I have, for example, Paul Johnson's and Bamber Gascoyne's substantial works on the shelf. Having said that, one has only to dip into this work to realise this is different. One is swept along by the marvellously lucid text which bears a formidable scholarship with a lightness of touch and even humour.

One thing that makes this work immediately, and initially curiously, different is the subtitle: *The First Three Thousand Years*. Hasn't MacCulloch got his dates wrong here? The answer is no, for he sees Christianity as a product of its ancestry in the Classical and Biblical world: in the beginning was the *logos*, and this is a Greek word and concept. Beginning with Homer rather than Luke makes much clear about both Christianity's fundamental concepts and institutions. Like any living organism it has shown 'a remarkable capacity to mutate', to adapt and assimilate: though traditionalists always try to deny this.

MacCulloch sees its twofold ancestry as one of the reasons for Christianity's instability, which underlies both the dynamism and conflicts of its history. Another reason is the early tripartite split between three cultural worlds, those of Greek and Latin and also of its Oriental origins. He explores equally the stories of these three worlds, between which there was little overlap for a thousand years, noting that the 'extraordinary accident of the irruption of Islam' was the chief reason for Christianity turning in another direction. In our own time we are witnessing the finale of Christianity in the Middle East as resurgent Islamic fundamentalists vow to 'put the sword to the neck of all unbelievers' who still inhabit these lands. Though MacCulloch notes that for most of its existence Christianity has been the most intolerant of world faiths, doing its best to eliminate all competitors, it is sobering to think that Jihad/Crusade still has a stronger resonance with many than ecumenism/fraternity.

As this history is presented as 'a personal view' one may wonder at MacCulloch's own position in the spectrum of belief. It is presented as that of 'a candid friend', who appreciates the seriousness of a religious mentality – he grew up in a vicarage – but who remains puzzled at 'how something so apparently crazy can be so captivating to millions'. He makes no pronouncement as to whether Christianity, or indeed any religious belief, is 'true', remaining respectful but critical. As to the key event at the heart of Christianity,

the story of Easter Resurrection, he writes that 'this is not a matter which historians can authenticate; it is a different sort of truth.' In this he reveals his stance as fundamentally one of liberal Protestantism, and indeed he writes at his best and most authoritatively on the protestant era – the subject of his previously award winning book, *Reformation*.

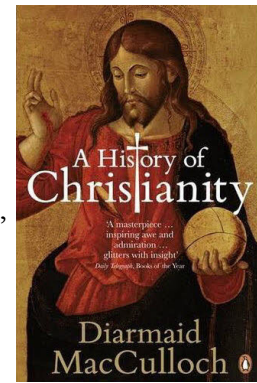
The history culminates in the 'Culture Wars' of the present, which have led Christianity into new, uncharted territory resulting from the collapse of Christendom – that 'fifteen-hundred-year-old adventure' of alliance between emperors and bishops – which was one of the casualties of the First World War: A War That Killed Christendom. What replaced it was epitomised by 'the fugitive observations' of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, indicating the beginnings of a radically new, deracinated era. Despite the consequent turbulence, the emergence of charismatic and traditionalist movements has indicated that 'old time religion is not quite so old-time as it seems' – though history is probably the last thing on their minds. Ironically, whilst MacCulloch's liberalism is for the Church the halfway house to extinction, intolerant fundamentalism is now resurgent. Which leaves him pondering the future of Christianity in relation to secularism. He concludes that, even for those who see the Christian story as just that – a series of stories – its great quality is the ability to excite 'the experience of wonder: the ability to listen and contemplate'. Without these qualities humanity has no future.

Each section of this work is almost a book in itself, enabling one to easily dip in for reference, and perhaps that is the way most people will read this book. Even so, despite its monumental scope there will always be room for more, or queries as to interpretations and emphases, a deeper delving for connections and causes. But, in the end, keeping the momentum of the narrative flowing is MacCulloch's great achievement.

The history of Christianity is not a particularly edifying one, even if the lives of some of its practitioners are. Rather, it is the story of man (and invariably it is about men) fallible and flawed, pursuing ambitions all the more dangerous for their utopian and apocalyptic intent. MacCulloch's narrative is testimony to all of this. If not exactly for the coffee table, his work would grace any library shelf. Indeed, no library will be complete without it.

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Dominic Kirkham is an interested follower of SOF. He now works for a Home Improvement Agency providing services for older people.



reviews

Mary Lloyd reviews

*First Sixty:*

*The Acumen Anthology*

edited by Patricia Oxley

Acumen Publications (Brixham, Devon 2010) Pbk.

332 pages. £9.99

Unknown poets rub shoulders with famous names in this marvellous anthology, published in 2010, selected by editor Patricia Oxley from sixty issues of *Acumen* and spanning twenty-five years. The collection, perceptively referred to as 'Palgrave for our times' by one reviewer, will be eagerly grasped by readers already familiar with the magazine and could open doors for those who normally tend to avoid 'Poetry' with a capital 'P'. As Oxley points out in her excellent and pithy introduction, we are treated to a wide range of poetic forms, from 'sprawling free verse' to the re-appreciation of 'stricter form and rhyme'.

Reflections on relationships, family and the changing attitude to children and 'youths' frequently chime with the reader's own thoughts and experiences. Among my immediate favourites were poems focussing on individuals, tenderly pondering the vulnerability of those whose age or handicap renders them outcast or relegated to the margins of society; or sometimes simply remembering and celebrating a long-dead relative or friend. For example, Graham Mort's 'The Herb Grower,' (somewhat reminiscent of Gerard Manley Hopkins' 'Felix Randal') gives us a portrait of a working man and the decline of a proud tradition.

Sometimes nostalgia for lost landscapes and lovers leaves the poet pondering his own mortality, as in John Burnside's 'Old West Fife': 'an arm's length away from the dead/ or a mile from home.' And A.C. Clarke recalls in 'Last Glimpse' an old love before dementia took hold: 'The last time I saw you .../and not the shell that sickness burned you to...'

Several poets express anger at the 'counterfeit childhood' we have made to keep our children 'safe' and contain their high spirits, memorably Alan Hester in 'You Never Walk Alone,' and Michael Croshaw's 'Prayer for Playing Children' or Heather Buck's 'To the Unborn' – both drawing on a similar inspiration to that of Louis MacNeice's familiar 'Prayer Before Birth'.

Religious faith – and the loss of it – along with a still-fresh appreciation of 'Nature' in our increasingly urban lives, draw on contemporary fears. Such insights are matched by recognition that the natural world,

threatened by urbanisation and humanity's drive to destruction, survives and sustains despite our efforts to exclude it. While Rick Wilkinson can still thrill and scare us with his evocation of 'Blackbird' and 'Night Owl,' Keith McFarlane (in 'From the Window')

reminds us that, on a misty night, 'even in the city's neon heart/ a moment can become eternal,' while Dinah Livingstone in 'October 2001' knows that, amid fears for nearest and dearest from possible attacks on London, it is the 'fresh brilliance in the grass' and the 'waving leaves/ becoming radiant before they fall' which best express our common knowledge that: 'Life's sweetness aches the urgency of peace.'

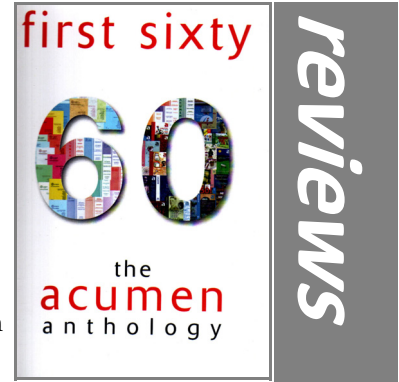
Social and political perspectives, personal and satirical, from the broad and historical to the local and contemporary, often painful and sometimes humorous, spur many poets in this collection. From Ursula Fanthorpe's childhood recognition in the school uniform shop that her brother inhabited a world of power closed to her, and Kathleen McPhilemy's 'Redundancies', where pity and anger drive our empathy, as she questions: 'What have we done to the boys?' on through sadness at the perceived loss of personal freedom which pervades Alison Chisholm's 'Directives', who comments ironically: 'Thank God / I live in a free country.' And to Stella Davis's realisation, following her enjoyment of 'Coffee in Weimar' that Buchenwald was next on the itinerary: 'How could we have come to this?' we find poets who express our own despair better than we can do ourselves. Then I was unable to resist the joy of Duncan Forbes's:

'My name is Moggie Thatcher,  
I'm a biter and a scratcher...'

ending with a bitter reminder, in this cold coalition winter, that we've seen it all before:

'The unemployed can be employed as slaves!'

This book is keeping me alive through these hard times. It might do the same for you.



# Evolving English

Cicely Herbert visits the huge exhibition on the English language at the British Library.

*Sofia* editor Dinah Livingstone has written, 'It is one of life's great pleasures, in a city like London ... to walk about and listen to the sound patterns of ordinary, everyday speech.' Curated by David Crystal at the British Library, *Evolving English* traces the development of our language from its earliest recorded times (around 5<sup>th</sup> century AD) through many stages over the centuries, to the present day when it is spoken, or read, by roughly one third of the world's population. Along the way, the visitor can see (and hear) how the English language has been influenced by kings and scholars, poets, refugees, invaders, toffs and beggars: the whole spectrum of human beings.

In his introduction to the exhibition catalogue, Crystal writes that it took some 400 years, from approximately 1400-1800 AD, for 'a clear notion of a unified, national standard English to emerge' and, 'as soon as it arrived it began to fragment' until, 'today world English presents us with a number of different standards reflecting the identities of the countries that have adopted the language as a *lingua franca*.'

One of the earliest known examples of an artefact on which are etched old English words, is a gold medallion recently discovered in Suffolk and dating from 450-80 AD. Inscriptions in the Germanic languages were known as runes, which means 'hidden' or 'secret' and reflect writing as a mysterious, magical creation. One such rune was discovered in Norfolk, etched on the bone of a deer.

For a taste of how the early English language would have sounded, one can listen to a recording of David Crystal reading from the great poem *Beowulf* in which, among other memorable expressions, the sea is 'the whale road.' At this time the alphabet was pronounced phonetically and the poem would have been chanted to a musical accompaniment. One of the many treasures on view is a 13<sup>th</sup> century manuscript. of *Sumer is Icumen in*, a Round for 6 voices which is still sung in schools and by choirs today.

By the 1300s, an Anglo Saxon language had evolved, which, as the Scandinavian influence ebbed away, took vocabulary from the French, especially during the 'Middle English' period and on formal occasions. However, in 1362, Parliament opened with a speech in English and Henry V, whose wife Katherine was French, always used English for his written orders.

We are reminded of how phrases and expressions from the text of the King James Bible have entered common usage. Listed are 250 phrases that are part of everyday speech: 'salt of the earth'; taking an 'eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'; hiding 'one's light

under a bushel'; 'pearls before swine'; the 'millstone' around one's neck, and that old excuse about the spirit being 'willing, but the flesh weak'.

We learn that the 18<sup>th</sup> century English Dictionary, the work of the great Dr Johnson, contains 42,773 entries and took eight years of research, and that Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* contains the earliest published examples of the African-American dialect. The word 'Yank' was regarded as derogatory, and probably came from Janke (little John, a doughboy.) If it is hard to find the exact origin of expressions used in the past, it is fascinating to be reminded of the garish tabloid-inspired expressions of twenty-first century Britain. Headlines in the newspapers have produced many sensational expressions, 'Gotcha!' in wartime, being one such.

*Evolving English* at the British Library is a treasure trove of language, of soundbites and symbols, golden words, dark threats and oaths, cant slang, pure poetry, word play, riddles, music and mumblings. It is difficult to encapsulate all the riches of this exhibition into a short report. One comes away from the British Library determined to go on exploring the scope and boundless possibilities of our native tongue, the 'moveable feast' that is our language.

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Note: It should be recorded, with gratitude, that this exhibition is open to all, without charge. Free entry to the great museums and libraries of our capital is one of life's wonders and a great joy. Long may it continue to be so!

## Hail, Mary!

A Latin pun for Lady Day from the ancient hymn *Ave Maris Stella*



*Sumens illud AVE  
Gabrielis ore,  
funda nos in pace  
mutans EVAe nomen.*

Taking up that AVE  
from the mouth of Gabriel,  
give us solid peace by  
EVA's name reversal.

The pun and the succinct trochaic trimeter rhythmically render the 'divine economy'. For the theology, see Anthony Freeman's *Eden Project*, pages 5-10.

