



The Body of Christ

sfia

down to Earth

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Front cover image: *Nativity* by Master of Vyšší Brod, (Bohemia, c. 1350) en.wikipedia.org

Back cover image: Anti-racist demonstration in London, March 19th 2022. socialistworker.co.uk

sfia

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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 this life and humanity with its questing imagination and enabling dreams.

Sofia is for diggers and seekers in its own native radical tradition and everywhere.

The Body of Christ

Christmas is coming, which celebrates the story of God (the divine) becoming embodied in a human being, so potentially in the whole of humanity as a single body all sharing fullness of life. In the words of Charles Wesley's carol: 'Light and life to all he brings'. Unfortunately, at the moment the British government completely denies that vision and preaches an anti-gospel. At the Queen's funeral, prime minister Liz Truss read from John's Gospel: 'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life' almost as if she was talking about herself and her dogmatic neo-liberal ideology promoting a gospel of Growth, Growth, Growth – offering tax cuts to the richest people and bad news for the poor.

In the Christmas story Jesus is born in a stable 'because there was no room for them in the inn'. 'Mild he lays his glory by' and descends to associate with the excluded and the lowest in society in order to raise them up: 'Born to raise the sons of Earth'. That is the opposite of planning to send asylum seekers to Rwanda. Liz Truss has gone now but her successor, though less rigid and more competent, still pursues this far-right agenda. Pray that after thousands of Christmases we may one day get a government that sees the light and supports a decent life for all.

Avarice

George Herbert

Money thou bane of bliss, and source of woe,
Whence cam'st thou, that thou art so fresh and fine?
I know thy parentage is base and low;
Man found thee poor and dirty in a mine
Surely thou didst so little to contribute
To this great kingdom, which thou now hast got,
That he was fain, when thou wert destitute,
To dig thee out of thy dark cave and grot;
Then forcing thee by fire he made thee bright:
Nay, thou hast got the face of man; for we
Have with our stamp and seal transferred our right:
Thou art the man, and man but dross to thee.
Man calleth thee his wealth, who made thee rich;
And while he digs out thee, falls in the ditch.

If we believe that God is a poetic tale personifying real cosmic forces and actual or potential human capabilities (such as love), then we will not take the story of God coming down to Earth literally but as a way of offering a vision of humanity's fulfilment. We will not read the saying 'I am the Way the Truth and the Life' to adopt Jesus as our 'personal saviour' paying a ransom for our individual sins. We can take it as it developed in the reflection of the early Christian community into the ideal of 'Christ Jesus' as the new humanity in one body, permeated with 'the divine', where everyone is of equal moral worth, black or white, high or low, male and female.

In this *Sofia* issue, Stephen Mitchell has the first article on *The Body of Christ*, in which he opposes the reductionism of limiting the richness of the Christian tradition to the actual words of Jesus; as he points out, these are sometimes difficult to establish anyway. Edwin Salter discusses *The Good Chap and the Divine Saviour*. In his article *There is no such Person as an Individual*, criticising Margaret Thatcher's famous dictum 'there is no such thing as society', Grenville Gilbert writes: 'There is no such person as an abstract individual, i.e. a totally separate human being who can live solely by the market. We all live together on planet Earth.'

As William Morris's heroine Ellen says at the end of his utopian novel *News from Nowhere*: 'Go on living while you may, striving, with whatsoever pain and labour needs must be, to build up little by little the new day of fellowship, and rest, and happiness.' To which, as he wakes up, Guest replies, : 'Yes, surely! and if others can see it as I have seen it, then it may be called a vision rather than a dream.'

The Body of Christ

Stephen Mitchell

On Wednesday 30th May 1431, in the Old Market in Rouen, near the Church of Saint Saviour, a teenage girl was burnt to death. Over the four months, leading up to her execution, she'd been subjected to a long examination, during which she made this response:

About Jesus Christ and the Church, I simply know they are just one thing, and we shouldn't complicate the matter.

Joan of Arc's words are quoted in the Roman Catholic *Catechism* along with another saying by St Augustine:

Let us rejoice then and give thanks that we have become not only Christians, but Christ himself. Do you understand and grasp God's grace toward us? Marvel and rejoice: we have become Christ.

As Christians say in their communion services: 'We are the body of Christ'.

I'm not sure many of us would agree with Joan that this is something simply known and for many, the language is baffling. And if that isn't complicated enough, in their communion services, Christians receive a piece of bread and a sip of wine to the words 'the body of Christ'.

To add to the confusion, St Paul coined the phrase 'in Christ' to express the Christian hope and belief. Writing to the churches, he addresses their members, the saints, as those 'in Christ'. 'When we are baptised,' he writes, 'we are baptised into Christ.' 'In Christ all shall be made alive.' Indeed, 'to live is Christ,' says St Paul, because 'Christ lives in me'. 'In Christ there is neither slave nor free, neither male nor female but all are one in Christ. Christ is all and in all, for we are the body of Christ.'

Given this sort of language, it's not surprising that people should want to say, 'Let's keep it simple and get back the clear message of Jesus

which has been fatally confused by the likes of St Paul and the leaders of the church.'

In the many tributes to the author Hilary Mantel, who died in September of this year, the BBC repeated an episode of *Word of Mouth*, in which Michael Rosen asked her if Catholicism had been an early influence and whether, as a youngster, she'd read the Bible:

Oh Catholics didn't read the bible in my day. My grandmother thought it was a Protestant book, and that wasn't far off the way it was regarded. You didn't read the Bible; the priest told you what was in the Bible. What you had was the Catechism and you had prayers. And when I was a child, the Mass was in Latin. So you had your prayer book, with a parallel translation which was very florid, sonorous and rotund, not normal language at all – elevated language. And when I think of the prayers we used to say:

'Hail, Holy Queen, Mother of mercy,
our life, our sweetness and our hope.
To thee do we cry,
poor banished children of Eve.
To thee do we send up our
sighs, mourning and weeping
in this valley of tears.'

Well it's not your everyday chit-chat and it's not a big jump from there to the language of *Wolf Hall*.

In the church, there has been a reaction against the elevated, religious language that Hilary Mantel describes, and a return to everyday chit-chat. There's also been a desire to read the Bible for ourselves, without the help of a priest. So that whereas for St Paul and the church, the Christian journey begins with becoming a member of the body of Christ, now, for many, it begins with Jesus and his sayings as recorded in the Gospels, with the real, historical man who lived two thousand years ago.



Jesus on the beach by a charcoal fire (John 21: 1-14). [.cccchelmsford.org](http://cccchelmsford.org)

Over the past centuries, encouraged by Protestant reformers, scholars have attempted to discover the sources and events behind the biblical texts. At the same time, the books of the Bible have been examined as complete works of literature. These two approaches don't always sit very comfortably together. The more a text is treated as a whole, and details in the text given literary explanations, the harder it is to establish its historical accuracy.

To take one tiny example, in the last chapter of John's Gospel, not long after the resurrection, seven of Jesus' disciples spend a fruitless night fishing. In the morning, a stranger on the shore tells them to cast their net on the right side of the boat and they catch one hundred and fifty three fish. On hauling this enormous catch ashore, they see a charcoal fire with fish on it. The reader is immediately taken back to another charcoal fire, in front of which Peter warmed himself before his denial of Jesus.

John is the only New Testament writer to mention charcoal fires. Has he placed them there for literary effect, or is this a historical detail? We imagine that distinctive aroma of burning coals as Jesus, beside Lake Galilee, asks Peter three times whether he loves him, summoning up the memory of his anguish as the cock crowed thrice. And what of the 153 fish of which there have been many allegorical explanations? Is that historically accurate? These are trivial examples.

Dinah, in the September issue of *Sofia*, highlighted a more significant example in the Beatitudes. Matthew writes 'Blessed are the poor in spirit' while Luke has 'Blessed are the poor'. Have we to decide which (if any) came from the mouth of Jesus? If we remove any historically doubtful phrases from the texts, we are left with a very impoverished narrative. From a literary point of view, extracting a supposed historical backbone from the Bible leaves the texts gutted.

No doubt, in a similar way, people have pored over Hilary Mantel's trilogy to discover whether it is historically accurate. Unlike the Gospels, there are many outside sources that can be consulted. The later television adaptation of *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies* has also been scrutinised to see if it is faithful to her books and whether Mark Rylance's performance does justice to both her portrayal of Cromwell and the historical character. It's all very interesting and instructive. But in the end, whatever our success in separating fact from the fiction, we are enriched by her books and the subsequent film, discovering not only new insights into Tudor England, but also truths about the use of power in our own day.

If one could be absolutely certain what Jesus actually said and did, would we want to abandon the rest of the Gospels? I happen to agree with the scholar Michael Goulder that Matthew, rather than Jesus, composed the Beatitudes and the Lord's Prayer, which were then later adopted by Luke. It doesn't stop me using them in my prayers.

I happen to think that Luke composed the songs (like the *Magnificat* and *Nunc Dimittis*) that appear in the first few chapters of his Gospel, rather than the characters to whom they are attributed. I still happily sing them at Evensong. Most people believe the stories of Jesus' birth were written by Luke and Matthew. I also believe Luke, and not Jesus, wrote the parable of the Good Samaritan, but I remain convinced it can illuminate my life and my faith.

It isn't only a question of historical fact; it's a question of meaning. If I'm wrong, and Jesus did in fact tell the tale of the Good Samaritan, I don't feel bound to use it in the context in which it appears in his Gospel. Even if I could be certain of Jesus' words and what he meant by his words, I am not compelled to use the texts in the same way, any more than a director is compelled to follow a given interpretation of a Shakespeare play.

Religions are complex and evolving cultural creations in which history, myth, liturgical performance, moral teaching and exhortation, come together to enrich, and give meaning, to a community of faith. As believers are plunged into

the waters of baptism at the start of their journey of faith, so they become immersed in that community, its worship and scriptures, its saints and its pursuit of justice and peace. For them, to believe in God *is* to practise their faith. To believe is to be a member of the body of Christ.

Like all institutions, faiths must evolve and adapt to the present but there are, I believe, two dangers for the Christian community (and perhaps other faith communities) in adopting a chit-chat language in its services and focussing its attention on a historical Jesus.

In her interview, Hilary Mantel described the importance of finding the right language and narrative style for her novels, not only to take us back to life in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but also to help us look on our own times with a new perspective. Her style isn't complex; for example, she only uses the present tense. But it isn't simple and it's far from ordinary chit chat.

We know that there are sacred poems (by John Donne, for example) which use very little religious vocabulary and Don Cupitt has shown how the word *life* has in many ways replaced the word God in our everyday speech. Language which portrays our deepest desires doesn't have to be florid or full of religious jargon but it needs to be poetic and packed with interpretive possibilities. We should also remind ourselves that there have been many successful projects introducing Shakespeare and Elizabethan language to youngsters who haven't found it a barrier to expressing insights into their world.

During the lockdown of the recent pandemic, churches offering services from the Book of Common Prayer were surprised at the number of people 'tuning in' to traditional services. One church, which usually sees as few as five people attending a 1662 service, reported online attendance in the hundreds. Many churches turned to the language of the BCP to mark the Queen's death.

The church, in its prescribed liturgies, hasn't always been successful in its attempts to bring services to contemporary congregations. Many begin with the greeting 'The Lord be with you' and its response 'And also with you'. It's certainly

better than 'Nice to see you; to see you nice', which I confess to once using in a Family Service. But the word 'Lord' leaves many feeling uncomfortable and wondering if the revision is any better than the original 'The Lord be with you; and with thy spirit.' Why not use 'God be with you' or one of the many other imaginative ways of opening a service in use today. The issue of finding a contemporary language for faith is important because reducing its message to the sayings of a long-dead prophet risks losing some of the important things we still want to say.

It's quite likely that Jesus, in an extraordinary act of daring creativity, did take the bread of the Passover and ask his followers to interpret the meal in the light of his life and death. But Paul, as we saw, took the image of the body of Christ further. And with him, we want to speak of a God in which we live and move and have our being. We still want to see in our neighbours the glory and the demands we think of as God's. We want our communities to be as God in the world. We want to see in the central act of our worship the challenge and responsibility of the death of God. We want to be able to say with St. Teresa of Avila: 'Christ has no body but ours, no hands, no feet on earth but ours.'

We do this because faith must be rooted in the reality of the present. It will soon be Christmas

(yes, not Jesusmas!) and those who see themselves as Christians and members of the body of Christ will again be reminded of what it is to be Christ in the world. Christ, in the shorthand of the carol, 'came down to Earth from heaven'. Paul describes Christ's journey in his letter to the Philippians:

The divine nature was his from the first;
yet he did not snatch at equality with God,
but bearing human likeness
accepted even death on a cross.

There are so many ways in which we act as God having near God-like powers, whether through our technology, our treatment of the environment, or our exercise of power. We are truly remarkable beings. But our journey is a constant letting go, being brought down to Earth, accepting death and in that journey in Christ, in the company of the body of Christ, we find life, we find ourselves in the presence of that which we call God.

Stephen Mitchell, a former chair of the SOF Steering Committee, is a retired vicar and occasional blogger, who enjoys making music. His *Agenda for Faith* is downloadable as a free pdf at: sofn.org.uk/pages/agendaforfaith.html. His *God in the Bath* was published by John Hunt Publishing in 2006.



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Pietà

Kathleen McPhilemy

She holds his body in her arms,
the body she holds is a man's body
beard still growing, skin leathered
toenails strong but chipped from walking
muscles and sinews even now defined
beautiful, rigid, withdrawing into marble.

There were harsh words between them
he grew up and away from her
intolerant of her not understanding;
she turned also, hid her hurt
stored it along with the joyful memories,
the innocence, all her service.

She can remember his boy's body
the child's face, clear, unblemished,
his smooth brown skin sparkling with water drops,
how she held him and dried him,
how he relaxed against her
when he was still hers.

This poem is reprinted with permission from Kathleen McPhilemy's new collection *Back Country* (Littoral Press, Sudbury 2022), reviewed on page 26. Her previous poetry collections include *Witness to Magic* (Hearing Eye, London 1990), *A Tented Peace* (Katabasis, London 1995) and *The Lion in the Forest* (Katabasis 2004). She is a retired FE teacher living in Oxford. She runs the online audio poetry magazine *Poetry Worth Hearing*: anchor.fm/kathleen-mcphilemy with texts and more information: www.poetryworthhearing.biz

The Good Chap and the Divine Saviour

Edwin Salter

Sofia 143 (March 2022), titled ‘Thank You, Life!’, had on its cover a lithe young man leaping with worshipping angels attendant. The biblical Jesus (an historical existence here assumed) is described both as an ordinary though admirable man and as attributed with divine assertions and accomplishments. The linking of natural approval with Christian theism is hugely persuasive and a guide to evangelism. The dichotomy of humane concern and authoritative power is apparent also in the institutions of religion.

It is to be noted that the Bible is a compilation of writings by authors varying in date, culture and intention, and that all of Jesus is recorded well after his life. The writings themselves have a chequered history of amendment, translation and selection for compatibility (as at Nicaea AD 325). As revelations inspired by an eternal all-knowing God, they are curiously determined by the circumstances of their origin (domination by men and customs of the time, errors of fact ...).

To begin simple-mindedly with familiar belief, a seemingly ordinary couple are obliged to travel even though she is pregnant. We are told, however, that she is virgin, and lodgings are a

problem. Astonishingly, Magi arrive after a star-guided journey with rich gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to honour the birth, which is followed by flight from Herod. The enduring tradition of celebrations (strikingly near pagan solstice) embraces homely gifts and re-enactments alongside holy ritual.

It is all puzzling. Why the Saviour for all humankind appears as a birth there and then, why this entourage that visits another realm but is not otherwise reported? And what happens to the gifts that might transform the wealth of the family? More plausibly, Matthew’s writing (the source, probably late 1st century), perhaps as a Jew concerned to reconcile an emerging faith with tradition, intends to create accord with prophecy. That is selected from a mass of utterance (much about the future of Israel, still Jewish!); the added myrrh (cf. Isaiah) is interesting, given what Matthew knows of the death of Jesus. At the crucifixion, the darkness (an Old Testament metaphor) and the words of the centurion may seem more theatrical than plausible.



Winter solstice, Stonehenge . english-heritage.org.uk

As described, the adult life of Jesus is a good example to us all. Incidents reported reveal him as forgiving and tolerant, fair and kindly. But he stands up boldly when confronted by what is offensive or wrong (temple money-changers, a stoning). He seems normally male even if without any sexual activity, works as a carpenter like his father (images of everyday life as well as of worshipped divinity), and has a bunch of mates generally well chosen. He is the sort of chap who helps by solving practical problems that arise (fishing, wine, food). When finally condemned as a trouble-maker, he remains brave and aware of others. But his doings are said to be miraculous and divinity claimed. The assertion (C.S. Lewis) that Jesus must be divine if not insane or evil gains force from his general goodness. But there is much space between these extremes (Empedocles an example, perhaps— brilliant, and ‘insane’ seems harsh).

If we do not believe in any such deity, explanation is required. The statements might be made by Jesus or be attributed to him. Most obviously, we all know only too well that some people will say anything that suits their belief or purpose – our world is full of those seeking fame, wealth or power. Knowing of God is an immense claim that controls adherents, both cynical and innocent, and attracts widening allegiance.

Offered is the greatest possible promise, eternal happiness that will be denied to all others (even by micro-faiths – and the Witnesses’ ‘End of Times’ quaintly exemplifies the accusation that ‘climate change is religion’). It is certainly better than our troubled mortality in this world, so often distressed and unfortunate. And the accompanying threat of eternal torment is to be evaded at all costs: what is to lose (Pascal’s wager) by accepting salvation? More immediate is the hope of forgiveness to relieve what may be very destructive feelings of guilt especially if reparation is impossible.

It is often asked (as an evangelical acquaintance reminds me), if Jesus is God, the concept ‘Son of God’ seems very difficult to elucidate (noting The Trinity). It might be taken in the weak sense that we humans are all ‘children of God’.

If we doubt claims of revelation guaranteeing texts, then how does the necessary initial concept of God originate? Suppose that our ancestors, understanding human intentionality well but little of the physical world, simply assumed purposeful agency as the most plausible explanation. The Sun is a god of immense power, the beautiful rainbow is created as a sign by deity, thunder is incidental to godly anger, and so on. Anthropomorphism and teleology modify explanation, and thorough-going mirroring can provide families of gods of varied status and preoccupation that cooperate or quarrel, their imperfection following logically.

Language is slippery, and misunderstandings easily arise, especially once figures of speech become available and modes such as humour and irony. (An early Sumerian teaser is: ‘Where do the blind enter to emerge with sight?’ with the answer ‘School’ – it could be ‘Church’.) Everyday speech includes that a wonderful job is done, that an escape is miraculous; and when seeing someone paddling through a shallow expanse (my local beach) it is easy to exclaim ‘Just like walking on the water’. Innocent retelling is a possible contribution. Even in faiths with a single primary author, there are usually enough inconsistencies to enable doubt or combative schism. And devotion to literal truth seems easily evaded when suits: ‘Thou shalt not kill’ has been no defence for those proposing other beliefs. Reminders for us the Northern Ireland Troubles, attack on Rushdie, and countries where ‘godless’ is fatal, legally so, in more than a dozen. In Britain over half identify as ‘nonreligious’ (though not synonymous with godless, and non-Christian faiths increase significantly).

Psychological accounts include both unconscious and considered motives. Freud suggested our intense early experiences are of being helplessly dependent on uncomprehended others clarifying to an internalisation of parental agency, the super-ego: God is ‘the Father’ restraining disorder and so enabling society. The mind finds defences, ways of resolving and evading unacceptable desires. A violent wish for dominance or revenge may be displaced onto enemies who can therefore be punished, or be projected into stories with self-righteousness victorious (Old Testament examples obligingly endorsed by God). A quite different psychology

(Merton) simply places self-actualisation at the top of a hierarchy of needs. In Britain a humane emphasis supported child-centred education and expression later politically replaced by an instrumental/traditional 'subjects' curriculum.

Thought might contribute an embodiment of ethics, the ideals of hope and charity, and a basis for justice. What brings survival and well-being acquires divine authority. Candide found El Dorado uniquely good, its people praying their thanks for life – rather as the *Sofia* title. Intellectualisation carries description to the extremity of perfection (on geometry, Xenophanes described God as spherical as well as eternal) as of complete knowledge and power, existence unlimited by space or time. Priesthood and ritual consciously imitate (difficult aspirations that can corrupt) as by glorious lofty churches with celibate 'father' priests and persuasive images.

Christian visual imagery is in human terms (sceptically, and noting Spinoza's remark about triangles, how else can we picture deity?). The alternative is a prohibition on picturing because particular, imperfect, and likely absurd (seeing an elderly God flying about and some contemporary Christ images, very Hollywood hunk, the Islamic rule has prudence). The dualism of our minds tied to physicality presents many problems, not least for resurrection (how old ourselves and others etc. – an imaginable heaven not lithe togetherness but personal dreaming?).

Institutional belief develops, with accompanying practicalities for success, and the status of leaders may be bolstered by layers of authority. 'Faithfulness' commands loyalty that can override apparent defects, and it is vital that dispute be eliminated: blasphemy and apostasy are to be fiercely punished, heresies and rival faiths vanquished.

On the constructive side, to build the enduring community, rules are needed for its general health and well-being, and many matters from hygiene to boundaries for stability (the ghetto, which may be an entire country, if necessary) are addressed. To grow requires being fruitful and multiplying (fertility promoted and

homosexuality forbidden), and that parents will instruct children and require conformity – so 'honour thy parents': religious groups control more than a third of English state schools and many private/informal.

Evangelism is likely to be added, unless restrained because a faith is tied to the identity of a pre-existing community, its special merit recognised as God's choice. That claim continues in current times as cultural, ethnic and nationalist identities are asserted (found in Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and the Russian assault on Ukraine, among many examples) and can add an almost intractable intensity that is easily exploited.

Management packages often mix the ruthless authority, with sensible benefit. Intermediary examples include confession, an exercise in authority perhaps also therapeutic, and the life of religious communities, ordered in both senses. Endorsing those greater can lend a sense of power (from sympathetic magic to identifying with – as the poor voting for the rich?) and generates belonging, as do fan clubs. Trolling provides a contrast of separateness. Since writing this article I am aware of a talk on identity for Norwich SOF group by John Fellows, that began with reference to the Trinity and noted identity as a combination of the collective same and the uniquely apart, of sharing and guarding.

The present emphasis is that the great appeal of Jesus is the ascribed duality of human and divine aspects. We are drawn to the man and so to faith; and how happy the thought that we may find loving acceptance if we declare love. To assist this, religion may provide beautiful and splendid images, perhaps personifications, together with rituals that instil and reinforce commitment, whereby we become assured of the divine. It may well be suggested that the dominant religious attitude in this country now inclines to the kindly Christ, but that comes after centuries of conflict and the development of secular civic values.

Edwin Alan Salter, married and living in King's Lynn, has diverse interests including climate and well-being, education and expression

There is no such Person as an Individual

Grenville Gilbert

Margaret Thatcher famously said that there was no such thing as society, by which, to be fair, she meant society in abstraction, i.e. as an idea. I agree with her with regard to society as an abstraction but not, in any way, as society in reality. For me, society exists. Unfortunately, what Mrs Thatcher said gave a green light to heightened individualism and egoism. Her policy was the establishment of a free economy with as few rules and regulations as possible.

The resultant market is a perfect place for those concerned solely with self-interest; it enables people to get the most for themselves and to give the least to others. It inevitably produces winners and losers; just look at the stock market. Much of what takes place is informed gambling. They call it supply and demand but against the true world picture, it cannot possibly be so. How, on Earth, can you measure such ideas with so little overall knowledge of the state of things?

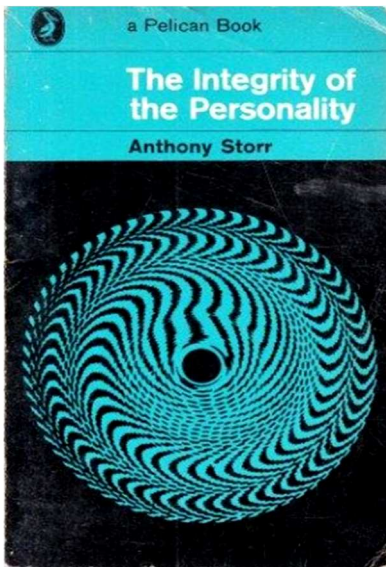
The world of human beings is not made to be that way; a better and fairer outcome is possible. There are those human beings who, through place of birth, ill-health, lack of power, wealth and mobility, colour, race and creed, are not in a good place from which to start playing the market game. They have much to contribute. There are untapped and still to be discovered resources available (witness the unexplored ocean depths). And so, a great number of people are disadvantaged in the ironically named and somewhat absurd, free market economy. Sadly, it is anything but free, for the simple reason that so many people are far from free to participate. For, just as there is no such thing as abstract society, there is similarly no such person as an abstract individual, i.e. a totally separate human being who can live solely by the market. We all live together on planet Earth.

Not just as human beings but alongside billions of other living creatures. We are so obviously inter-dependent and inter-related. The problem is seeing it; just witness the absurd responses of denial to the ongoing process and product of climate change. The great paradox is that human beings are at their most individual when most in relation with other human beings. They are least of all individual human beings when detached from other human beings.

Human beings destroy themselves when trying to incorporate or annihilate others or when allowing themselves to be absorbed by the will or power of others. There can only be one way for human beings to fully be themselves and that is in relationship with other human beings, as well as with all life around them. That is the true nature of society; the sacred nature of things. Our task is neither to encourage selfish individualism nor to impose a rational ordered society by design. We need one another in order to be ourselves.

Capitalism and communism are both destructive political systems. So what is the way forward? It is clear that individualism and collectivism need to develop, not separately, but alongside one another. Individuals within society. There needs to be an international political system that allows for human beings to grow and to develop *pari passu* with one another, and not through any person having any advantage over another. Freedom has never meant licence; it must always be the same freedom for all.

Because of the ways of the natural world, there can never be total freedom. Natural disasters happen. The problem with Mrs Thatcher's political philosophy was that she encouraged the notion of looking after number one first and *then* one's neighbour. It is a great shame that her Sunday School teacher never taught her what Jesus is reputed to have actually



Grenville Gilbert: For many years now, I have been indebted to the late Anthony Storr's ideas in his book *The Integrity of the Personality* (Penguin 1960).

said: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' Neighbour means not crumbs for one from under the table but food for all at the table. It includes enemies. All traditional religions teach the golden rule and are based on compassion.

From a Christian point of view, it would have been useful if Jesus had clarified that in loving your neighbour, you actually become yourself, for that is what he was all about, sufficient to the point of self extinction. In that way, he rose from the dead in the lives of others. St Paul tried to clarify things in his letter to the Christians in Galatia (Galatians 5: 13-15 and 22-26). I think that there is still a future for the human race, but looking around the world, and especially at the politics in our own country at this moment, I am far from certain that anyone has a clue as to what to do. I fear that the human race is most likely to go the way of the dinosaurs; the only difference being that we shall annihilate ourselves!

Grenville Gilbert is a retired lawyer, and a former churchwarden. He lives live in Ottery St Mary, Devon. He has been a member of SOF Network almost since its inception.

NEW SOF BOOK

As I Please by John Pearson

A collection of pieces John Pearson has written for his regular *As I Please* column in *Sofia* over the last eight years, together with some longer articles and reviews he has contributed to the magazine since he joined SOF Network in 1992. See review on page 23.

HOW TO ORDER

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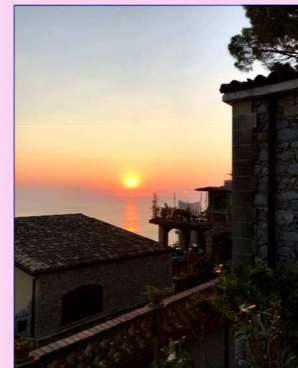
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As I Please

John Pearson

Notebook

Three extracts from Kit Widdows' 1998 Notebook

1. Sea of Faith

Last week I went to the Sea of Faith conference. This week I read *God of Reality* (edited by Colin Crowder, 1966), a series of essays on Christian non-realism. I first encountered Don Cupitt as my Director of Studies in Cambridge (1967-9) and he preached at Gillian's and my wedding (a mystical sermon!). I returned to him in 1985 for a term's sabbatical, and recently chaired a lecture he gave in Newcastle University (1997). I have as church warden, John Pearson, treasurer of the Sea of Faith Network, and a thoughtful contributor to the life of the church. It was high time to go and taste.

I find Don Cupitt one of the most profound and provocative theologians writing today, although the competition is not what it was, as there seems to be retreat in the air – retreat into evangelical dogma, liberal dogma and even merely traditional dogma.

Theology at the end of over a century of ferment seems battered and bruised and looking for a rest. And 'yet there are 7000 in Israel who have not bowed the knee', and who are seeking and demanding inside and beyond the church that we use our finest and highest endeavours to encounter the things of God. The Sea of Faith is one (and a major) focus of this endeavour. So I went as an individual observer, and this essay is the first fruits of my involvement and observation.

2. The Sea of Faith Conference

Sea of Faith says it is a network. It is supposedly free of dogma, although it has its own foundation documents, and especially the belief in 'religion as a human creation', and to a lesser degree 'God as non-real'. Most members would assent to these, but more as a position that they are willing to argue than as a fundament.

Sociologically, the conference members exhibited quite a lot of the behaviour of a sect. SOF has its fundamentalists, its heretics (especially, and affectionately, Bishop Jack Spong, the propounder of 'sliverism' (the belief that there is still a sliver of reality about God), its power struggles (e.g. a fascinating coded argument about editorship of the magazine – vital position in an organisation committed to the importance of language).

Don Cupitt himself is not a leader in the way of cults. He is always moving on (which annoys his

opponents no end!). And at times one feels that SOF members are trying to create an idealised Cupitt to be their leader, guru and founding father; all of which sits un-

easily with the real Don. He is not a proselytiser and nor is he a controversialist, despite the controversy he has stirred up in his journeyings and writings.

On many lips of committed members at the conference is the question 'where is SOF going?' And they *want* to go somewhere – to become a movement, which in some respects it already is. Some of them see it as 'the true church of the future' – the belief of every new sect or cult. Others see it as having a mission to liberate the masses of ordinary Christians, who 'really believe as they do', from the tyranny of realist priests and bishops. As a 'new church', it has its first martyrs in Anthony Freeman, with a mythology (a martyrology) surrounding his dismissal by a prince bishop who stands for the repressive spirit of organised religion. That bishops are an unrepresentative throw-back to an earlier age, long overdue for retirement but still there because of a legal untidiness, is not told. Nor is the dissociation from his deed by the bulk of the C.of E.

As a sect, SOF runs true to type in as far as it spends a lot of time defining itself by means of caricature of its opponents, real and imagined. Don Cupitt is also guilty of this; allowing his trenchant pen, and mastery as a wordsmith, to paint pictures of church present and religion past that are often partial and even distorted. Neither church nor Christianity have ever been other than a coalition of a great variety of believers, faith positions, and every dogma has had its doubters and opponents. So, in fairness, does the Sea of Faith itself – more than most! Many in the Sea of Faith do not fit the sociology of cult or sect as described above, and they are fascinating people. It is with them especially that the ferment of ideas continues and, indeed, has its flow and pattern: but whether they know it or not (many do) they are a marginalised element, among them, I suspect one Don Cupitt.



3. Getting the metaphors right

Another insight of the Sea of Faith is the need for a radical break with the past, but (like Daphne Hampson in the best and most robust attack in *God and Reality*) I am not sure they are breaking in the right area. Daphne Hampson, from a feminist critique of the church and its history, looks for a radical break with Christianity itself, as being hopelessly compromised by patriarchy and male chauvinism. I think that much of what she says is true, but that again she fails to recognise the variety that has been the hallmark of Christianity, producing another caricature.

The Christian faith, being a human creation, has an infinite capacity to reinvent itself and indeed has done so in the past. New visions arise, are decried by the orthodox, but gradually become orthodoxy, only to perish in turn, as the time comes and goes. At any one time the church contains people who are loyal to old orthodoxies, very old orthodoxies, the old new one and a whole load of heresies (I take a heresy to be a good idea held too single-mindedly). Sadly, the preferred behaviour is for the holders of all these positions to spend their time caricaturing each other and then slagging off the caricatures, while complaining bitterly that they are themselves misunderstood.

I think that the radical break with the past that is now needed is in the realm of metaphor and description. I have never liked the Creed, not so much because of its content, but because of its nature – a statement devised to divide Christians according to what they can and cannot affirm. It is for me a symbol (an ancient word for ‘creed’) of the unpleasant behaviour outlined in the last paragraph. I would like to see creedal definitions of this sort go altogether. Some of my colleagues manage to say the Creed (as I do myself, reluctantly and on rare occasions) not as a statement of personal belief but as an act of solidarity with our Christian inheritance. I am not at all sure I want to identify with that part of our inheritance.

We need to look urgently at the doctrine of the Trinity, not so much its content, more its form. The actual heart of the Trinity I find supremely important, namely that God is herself community and interconnected. This is a vital idea that we mustn’t lose. I have written elsewhere about the form of ‘threeness’. But it is high time that the Father/Son fit is consigned to where it belongs, the now-past age of patriarchal understandings. It is a human creation; a male creation; and in part due to the historical fact of Jesus’s maleness, something which we understand differently from our forebears. We need new metaphors here – and I do not mean just new words, but some new ways of describing the interrelationship of God as we encounter her. (I use the pronoun ‘her’

both as a necessary corrective and also slightly tongue-in-cheek).

We need to look urgently at liturgies (and I, for one, am very disappointed with the proposals for the Alternative Service Book. Again, I don’t just mean the words. Like others, I already use inclusive language when I celebrate, but that does little to alter the liturgy that still feels patriarchal, that links us too closely to the model of the Byzantine court. The way we do things needs to change. It can so often be that we worship God’s power from a position of weakness; that we are clients, children, dependants in the monarch’s court. The last supper was not like that.

Simple things like putting the altar (altar? table?) in the middle, not seating people in a hierarchy and excluding some (e.g. children) from the ‘mystery’ too deep for them, could move us quickly to rediscovering and re-writing the Communion that again is all about interconnectedness. Look at the word itself!

We need to look urgently at our ministry. We need new metaphors for the range of ways the people of God are called to serve the world and love each other. Bishops are often humble men devoted to service, but they don’t look like it in the hierarchy of the church. Whatever we *say* about the new laity, the metaphors we use put clergy in a privileged position. They are servants of their ‘flock’ – what a metaphor! And don’t blame Jesus if we have taken his vibrant shifting parables and discourses and reapplied them in a different context. His way of presiding included the foot-washing. Again new words won’t do; we need new images, new metaphors for our interconnectedness.

We need to look urgently at our prayers. In common with other faiths, we have a long and lively mystical tradition, taught only occasionally and to a few as an extra. Too often we teach about prayer in terms of dependency, petition, propitiation of an angry monarch. We need new metaphors for this most vital of human modes of being; metaphors that recognise how rich and varied we are in relationships and how infinite the ways of encountering God.

Conclusion: There isn’t one. Just thoughts provoked and distilled by the challenge of the Sea of Faith. For that I am deeply grateful. And the Sea of Faith will understand when I say that I am grateful both to them and God.

Kit Widdows was Master of the Church of St Thomas the Martyr in Newcastle upon Tyne. He joined SOF Network and became Vice Chair of its Board of Trustees. He died in 2007. These extracts from his 1998 Notebook were transcribed by David Lambourn.

New Testament Poems and Proclamations 4

The Prologue to the Gospel of John (1:1-18)

Dinah Livingstone

The Prologue to the Gospel of John begins by alluding to the beginning of Genesis with the words: 'In the beginning...' The Prologue develops the creation theme of being and becoming with its contrasting use of 'was' (ἦν [*en*] in Greek) and 'became' (ἐγένετο: *egeneto*). In the Genesis creation story the first thing God creates is light: 'Let there be light' and John's Prologue also picks this up by developing the themes of light and life. Here is the text:

The Poem's Shape

1. In the beginning was the Word and the Word was towards God, and the Word was God.
2. He was in the beginning towards God.
3. All things became through him, and nothing that has become became without him.
4. In him was life and the life was the light of humans.
5. And the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not grasp it.
6. A man appeared sent from God, his name was John.
7. He came as a witness, to bear witness to the light, so that all might believe through him.
8. He was not the light but to bear witness to the light.
9. The true light, which lights everyone, was coming into the world.
10. He was in the world and the world came to be* through him and the world did not know him.
11. He came to what was his own and his own people did not accept him.

12. But to those who accepted him he gave power to become God's children, those who believed in his name,
13. who were not born of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man but of God.

14. And the Word became flesh and lived among us. And we saw his glory, glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

15. John witnessed to him and cried out: 'This was the one of whom I said: He who comes after me is ahead of me because he was before me.'

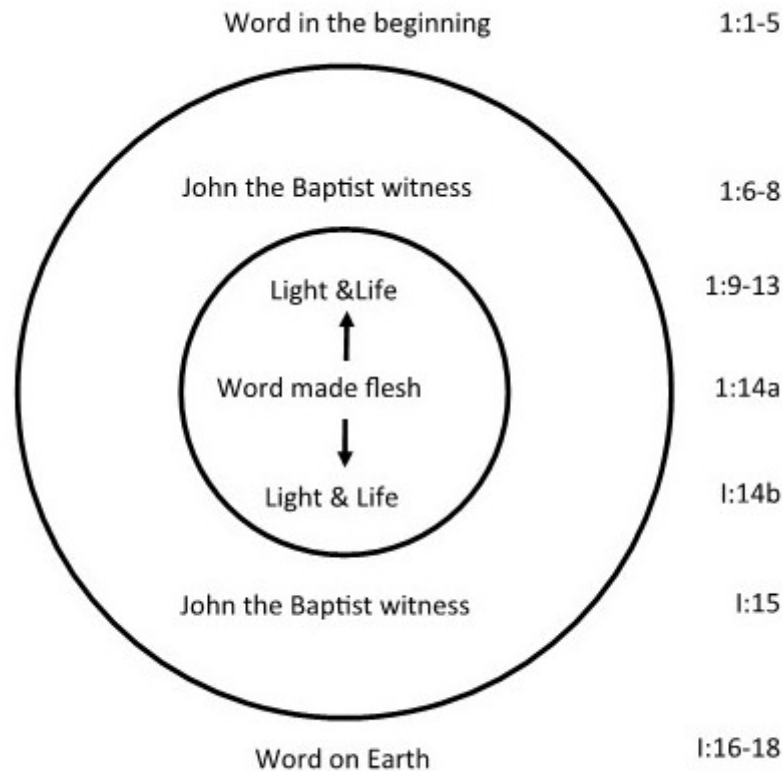
16. From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.

17. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

18. No one has ever seen God. God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart has made him known.

It is a highly structured, concentrated prose poem with a central assertion or crux in verse 14: 'The Word became flesh and lived among us', This crux or heart of the poem – 'the Word became flesh' – is like a candle throwing out concentric circles of light, first to the witness of John the Baptist on either side of this core statement, then back to the first line, 'in the beginning was the Word', in whom 'was light', and out to the end in 'fullness' and our enlightenment. The poem's shape shines as an expanding cosmic circle and the light that shines in the darkness early in the poem becomes glory at its heart when the Word becomes human, and enlightenment at the end. The facing page has a diagram of this shape:

*ἐγένετο [*egeneto*]



Comments on the text

As well as alluding to the Genesis creation story, the first verse uses the term *logos*, meaning word or reason. The Hellenistic Jew Philo of Alexandria (30 BC -50 AD) used the term *logos* for the mediator or *demiurge* between the transcendent God and the world. It can be compared with the divine emanation Wisdom in the Old Testament books of Wisdom and Proverbs, but she is feminine and *logos* is masculine. Verse 1 of the Prologue states firmly that the Logos, Word, was ‘in the beginning’ and not merely an emanation but ‘was God’. Jehovah’s witnesses, among others, have translated the third clause of this verse as ‘The Word was a god’ but this is a misunderstanding of the Greek.

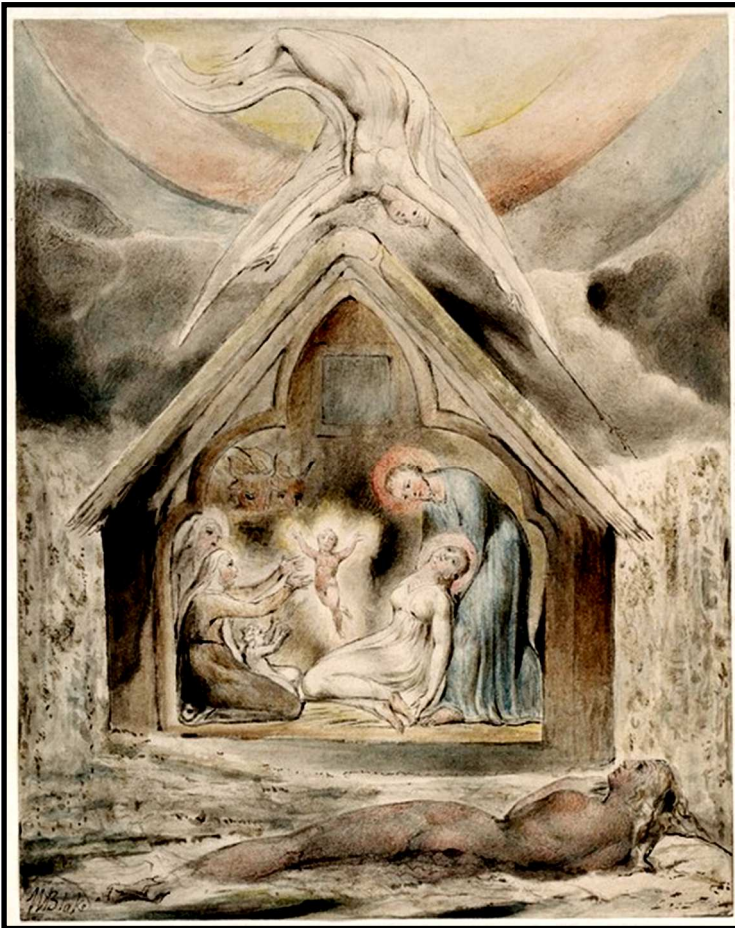
The second clause of verse 1 is usually translated ‘the Word was with God’. In the Greek that is *προς τον θεον* (*pros ton theon*) but a more common translation of the word *pros* is ‘towards’. So we could translate it as ‘the Word was towards God’. The background image is of reclining at table and leaning towards your friend sitting beside you (like the beloved disciple at the Last Supper). Or we could think of ‘towards’ in

the sense of ‘directed towards’, ‘concerning’ or ‘about God’, God’s total self-expression for which, as he told Moses in the story of the Burning Bush, his word is: I AM.

The word ‘was’ (ἦν: *en*) occurs three times in verse 1. In verse 3 the word ‘became’: (ἐγένετο: *egeneto*) occurs twice, plus once in the perfect form ‘has become’ (γεγονεν: *gegonen*); everything ‘became’ – was made – through the Word. In the Genesis creation story we have the repeated ‘God said...’ The Hebrew word *dabhar* can mean both word and deed: ‘He spoke and they were made’. In the Genesis story, light is the first thing God creates. ‘And God said “Let there be light”’.

The themes of light and life are also picked up in John’s Prologue. In a key metaphor (v. 5) the Word is the light shining in the darkness and the darkness cannot ‘grasp’ it (*κατελαβεν*: *katelaben*) with the double meaning of seize/overcome and understand.

Then we have John the Baptist, who has come as a witness to this Word who is light. John ‘was not the light, but to bear witness to the light,’



William Blake, *The Descent of Peace*. Illustration to John Milton's poem 'On the Morning of Christ's Nativity'. en.wikipedia.org

because 'the Word, the true light, was coming into the world'. His own people reject him but he enables those who accept him to become God's children, share the life that is in him.

At the crux of the poem (verse 14) the word ἐγένετο (*egeneto*: became) occurs again: 'The Word *became* flesh'. The Word, that was in the beginning, that was God, enters the world of becoming. He becomes Incarnate Word, the divine poem translated into human language. Now it is made clear that the Word is a person, he is 'a father's only son'. The Word became one of us, 'lived among us and we saw his glory' – shining light like the Hebrew *shekinah*, the glory of God. (Our word 'divine' derives from the Proto-Indo European *div/diu* meaning 'shining'.)

The personal pronoun now changes from third to first person: 'we saw his glory', because the Word has become visible as one of us. This is in sharp contrast to Philo's *logos* or demiurge, which, following the Platonic tradition, would never have become flesh with a material body. In

the Prologue the Word is not a *demiurge* intermediary but wholly God and becomes wholly human. That is a major impulse towards Christian humanism. The *whole* divine essence comes down to Earth, becomes human.

Then again comes John the Baptist, who thus appears on either side of the poem's crux and situates the Incarnate Word in a story of events on Earth.

In the last section of the poem, 'from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace', the Word spreads and fills 'us all'. And here at last we are given his name: 'Grace and truth came (ἐγένετο: *egeneto*) through Jesus Christ.' In verse 18 the poem concludes:

No one has ever seen God.
God the only Son,
who is close to the Father's heart
has made him known.

For the words translated 'close to the Father's heart' the original Greek has ὁ ὢν εἰς τον κολπον του πατρος [*ho on eis ton kolpon tou patros*]. Literally, this means 'the one being [leaning] onto the Father's breast', so the image of intimately reclining at table that we had at the beginning of the poem with the words 'towards God' recurs here.

Light and life are closely linked throughout the poem and enlightenment, 'fullness' of 'grace and truth', is not only receiving the Word by hearing it, but also sharing the divine life of 'God the only Son'. God becomes human and, as it were, spreads – disperses – through humanity.

The Prologue introduces the Gospel in which Jesus repeatedly claims for himself the divine 'I AM' and is also human. Everyone is invited to become 'incorporated' into this human form divine. The Prologue's theme of the divine dispersing through humanity, when they embody it, is also a prologue towards the Christian humanist insight that a supernatural God was always an imagined poetic vision – an idea (or an ideal). 'Oh, that he would rend the heavens and come down!' In this great opening poem to John's Gospel, he does.

Remembering Simon Mapp

Geraldine Mapp

It is a year since I lost Simon. He would have been celebrating his 50th on 9th November. To celebrate his birth, we will scatter his ashes. Not the celebration we had planned but I like the nice, neat, cyclical nature of the timing and I know Simon would appreciate that too. It is impossible to summarise the essence of someone. How do I do that for his 50th? Wish me luck. His deepest Christian beliefs however, have been easier to curate. I found a marvellous discovery in my files earlier this year, whilst doing some computer spring cleaning. I found Simon's content for his book *The Key to the Door*, which he wrote in May 2020 during the first Covid lockdown.

I had completely forgotten it was there, so with great joy I posthumously published it in July 2022 and have made it available for download on his legacy website simonmappawards.com (more on that later). It is such a gift to find his voice speaking again, from a distance now, about the things that made him who he was. It is not a book offered for constructive criticism. It is not for review or challenge. It is Simon's love letter to his top five greatest thinkers and philosophers that influenced him personally, as a Christian, and love letters are immune from deconstruction. Whether you concur with Simon's love affair with his fab five or not, is not important. It is a personal reflection – nothing more. If you knew Simon, you will find this book a great comfort. I do. It is a chance to continue to converse with him from the beyond and be possibly inspired to check out some of these works for yourself.

In *The Key to the Door* Simon reflects on the works of Søren Kierkegaard, Ludwig Wittgenstein, the Methodist preacher Leslie Weatherhead, Irish mystic John Moriarty and Tom Wright. Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida are also high up on his list but he concedes that their study requires deeper delving. These thinkers influenced Simon as a Christian, in different ways. There is no common thread. In his concluding remarks he says:



'For Kierkegaard it is the simplicity that leads to the cross of Christ, whereas for Wittgenstein it is in the silence, when language can do no more work. Within Weatherhead it is understanding more fully the ultimate will of God over the intended will of God. In the writings of Moriarty the Christian must begin to appreciate the beauty of the Earth as God's creation – which links seamlessly to Wright's teachings on the meaning of the Cross as the coming together of Heaven and Earth.'

If you like reading other people's love letters, this is a 120 page treat. You can find it to download simonmappawards.com in the section entitled MORE and the sub section of Simon Mapp Library. Happy reading. Any book

from the Simon Mapp Library is also available as a free gift. Just check out the Simon Mapp Library catalogue from the same website. Choose a book or two (or more) and I will send it in the post as a gift (free).

Finally, a quick word about the Simon Mapp awards. In memory of my darling Simon, we need to raise £1000 every year for the next 10 years until 2032, to fund books for undergraduates from Department of Theology and Religion at Birmingham University. Students can apply for help to fund the purchase of their chosen specialist books in preparation for their third-year dissertation.

Visit simonmappawards.com to find out more. Five lucky recipients per academic year will receive £200 in book tokens as part of the scheme. Every penny raised on this Just Giving page goes direct to Birmingham University to fund the Simon Mapp Awards justgiving.com/simonmappawards. As a theology graduate himself from Birmingham University, this is Simon's legacy, to fulfil his wish that knowledge and discovery should be available to all.

Simon Mapp was a member of the SOF Board of Trustees and Vice-Chair of the Board for several years. Geraldine Mapp is his widow.

Please send your letters to:
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London NW1 0HR
editor@sofn.org.uk



Sofia 145: Was Jesus Racist?

I am intrigued by your challenge to come up with an explanation for the rather puzzling passage of Mark 7:24-28 concerning the request of the Syro-Phoenician (Canaanite? Greek?) woman with regards to her daughter.

The point that Mark makes surely reflects the creedal statement of first post-resurrection communities that preceded his composition that there is no longer Jew or Gentile, male or female (Gal 3:28). But how the Gospel teaching gets to this radically inclusive position is slightly enigmatic. We are used to having the teachings of Jesus presented as whole and entire from the outset. But were they? Or is this a retrospective literary construction from a later date? Perhaps his understanding evolved, as is so often the case, through challenging encounters, such as that which Mark records. Perhaps the male dominated world of which he was a part was challenged above all by women, still an ongoing issue for traditionalists.

Dominic Kirkham
Manchester

As one of Jewish descent, whose Grandfather never spoke my Mother's name again after she married out of the faith, I am qualified to assert that Jesus, a Jew, was racist in his remark to the Canaanite woman. It may be that he later changed his view, but the story of the Good Samaritan suggests that he was not prepared to stick his neck out: the story tells what it is to be a good neighbour, which doesn't answer the question.

Jewish History, Jewish Religion by Israel Shahak, the late Israeli scientist, shows how Jews have no more regard for non-Jews than Muslims

have for infidels - not that the history of Christianity shows less racism than these. You did ask!

Michael Hell
Birmingham

In the editorial of September's edition you asked for comments on the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman. Specifically: 'Is Jesus being racist in what he says to her?' Much has been written about the incident, and there is not much I can add to that. Matthews's account (15.24) adds to Mark's: 'He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel".'

Was Jesus being racist? Well – no. But it all depends (as philosophers always say) on what you mean by 'racist'. Racism has specific roots in specific social conditions of oppression. Racism is about power. The very idea of 'race' was not around in ancient times. The concept of race is a direct product of colonialism, empire and slavery.

Back to Jesus and the Gentile of Syro-phoenician origin. I am inclined to believe that this is a true story, as it sits uncomfortably in the Gospels. Matthew added the bit about the sheep of the house of Israel, presumably as a sort of explanation. And Luke left out the whole story. Certainly Jesus is at first rude and shows disdain at being interrupted by a Gentile. But racist? In order to avoid trivialising the concept of racism, my answer is no.

David Rhodes
Charminster, Dorset

Gorbachev and Pope John XXIII

I was deeply saddened by the news of the death of Mikhail Gorbachev one of the two great men of the times through which I have lived; the other was Pope John XXIII. Though it might not at first seem obvious, the parallel between the work and outcome of the lives of these two great men is both revealing and salutary. Both were genial and charismatic figures who responded to popular acclaim in attempting to 'open up' and 'restructure' (*glasnost* and *perestroika/aggiornamento* and *approfondimento*) a staid and sclerotic mega-structure (the Soviet state and Catholic Church). Both wanted to bring down the walls of division (literally in Berlin) that kept people apart with a new global ecumenism and fraternalism.

But after the initial euphoria, their work became frustrated by the same fatal flaw in their assumptions: that the agency they governed could be the instrument of change – either the Communist Party or Vatican Curia (two secretive bodies that have more in common than many may think!). After a period of turbulence a similar figure would appear from within their ranks to restore order and repackage a version of past orthodoxy: Pope John-Paul II and Vladimir Putin, two very different men from their predecessors, deeply committed to a traditionalism of past glory and with a gift for subtle deception. The outcome is the very different world in which we now live and which is shaped perhaps more than anything else by the failed dreams of two great men. Perhaps the possibility of renewal will always be an illusion!

*Dominic Kirkam
Manchester*

Mikhail Gorbachev died on 30th August 2022. The 60th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council was on 11th October 2022.

Sacred Mountains

I am writing to recommend Adrian Cooper's book *Sacred Mountains: Ancient Wisdom and Modern Meanings* (Floris Books, 1997. See Cooper's article in *Sofia* 124, June 2017). It has been a favourite book for me since its pub-

lication. It should be better known to SOF readers because it discusses in detail a wide variety of religious responses to mountain journeying, including those from Christian non-realist perspectives.

Cooper interviewed 144 pilgrims from many backgrounds to learn of their motivations, experiences and reflections concerning their walks through high places. Alongside the interviews with the pilgrims, he includes extracts from the poetry and prose which inspired their journeys. Ultimately, the book is a rich text of many voices, all of whom are captivated by wilderness at altitude.

I'm particularly interested in the way mountain journeying has brought healing and transformation to many of these pilgrims. They talk openly and disarmingly of how mountain walks helped them through depression, anxiety, alcoholism, drug abuse and much else. Far from any distractions in the world's high places, these individuals found themselves stripped of all (or most) of their familiar support systems, as well as their distractions from recovery.

In those high places of isolation, the seeds of recovery were discovered and then allowed to grow. Cooper avoids any romanticism about these journeys of healing. Instead, there are stories of honest struggle, mistakes, progress, failures, and refusals to allow short-term defeats to persist in the long term. All the pilgrims that Cooper interviewed returned from the mountains changed in positive ways.

It is also interesting to learn about the additional consequences of mountain journeying when these interviewed pilgrims returned home. Very few of them seemed satisfied to return to their former ways of religious being. Instead, the majority began to engage in 'Solar Ethics' as Cupitt would say. That is, they used their mountain pilgrimages as motivations for community-work of many kinds. Community-based conservation and citizen science seem to be a rich theme of work.

*Dawn Holden
Scarborough*

Down to Earth

Dinah Livingstone

1

Yahweh was the supernatural lord
who had his enemies and favourites,
a jealous god who ordered genocide
and loved the smell of offered roasting meat.
He laid down the law and was the male
who dominated an unequal marriage
and if she disobeyed she was chastised;
he reigned supreme and she could not disparage.
Later he improved in gentleness
and asked his people to improve as well:
'I want kindness and not sacrifice.'
Jesus saw him as a loving dad,
his *Abba* who took care of each of us
and every sparrow in this world he made.

2

Then Christ is God come down to us,
become a common man
and also head and figurehead
of the human form divine.

A social body finally
including everyone
with all of equal moral worth,
sharing bread and wine.

A commonwealth that reigns in peace,
a kindly world and fair,
where all are free to be themselves
and good news for the poor.

The city new Jerusalem
is where stands the tree
of multifarious life for each
and tears are wiped away.

3

The gods of Greece were supernatural too
and favoured mortals at their will or whim.
They had no pretensions to be moral
and simply did what suited her or him.
Some Greek philosophers, dissatisfied
with those old stories, said supremely real
had to be the idea of the good,
an abstract form above, beyond it all.
Still their beyond, like the gods' home on high,
are both imagined by the human brain,
as is the Christ and so was Lord Yahweh.
They may personify, be metaphors.
Imagination is the way in which we try
to see what might be, picture hopes or fears.

4

This is a common treasury
which should not be lost.
It feeds the fabric of the mind
and must not go to waste.

Human poetic genius
is what did create
these overarching mythic tales,
a breadth to celebrate.

In the stories sifted critically
for wisdom they contain
the insistent splendid vision shines
that quashed will rise again.

With a great cloud of witnesses
and seekers to belong
to the fullness and the working word
the struggle carries on.

Dave Francis reviews

As I Please

by John Pearson

Sea Faith Network (Newcastle, 2022). Pbk. 160 pages. £12.

This attractively produced book, the latest publication from the SOF Network, comprises a collection of some 39 of John Pearson's submissions to *Sofia* magazine, four short poems and four reviews of other works. It's enhanced with several of the author's own photographs of places in Britain and abroad that feature in the writings.

Rather than being arranged in chronological order, the shorter pieces are grouped under themes of 'Travels at Home and Abroad' and 'In our Time', with longer pieces on 'Self and Faith'. The reviews contain John's insightful remarks on four very different books: Chris Howson's *A Just Church* ('an inspirational collection of experiences'); R and E Skidelsky's *How Much is Enough?* ('scholarly and genuinely interesting analysis of wealth and happiness'); Maggie Butt's *Ally Pally Prison Camp* ('a fascinating taster of a lost world'); and Katherine Tiernan's *Cuthbert of Farne* ('beautiful and moving... a wonderful find').

Essentially, this is a book of delights and provocations. Refreshing descriptions abound, and there are historical tidbits in every piece, adding definition and context to the places John has featured. Some of this constitutes fascinating new learning and some is stuff that might just come in handy one day. Who knew that you get a great view of Times Square, New York, from Bubba Gump's Shrimp Restaurant?

The first section reveals a love of nature and, occasionally, of the built environment. John is a highly observant traveller, relishing the sights, sounds and smells of a recognisable range of cities, towns and nature reserves, providing the reader with a kaleidoscope of feelings and impressions that usually offer encouragement to the would-be visitor. Should you find yourself in any of these places, a quick read of John's reflections will be rewarding, particularly in the way he has set them in nature and in history.

In this first section of the book, there is also a little space for reflection on 'religion as a human creation'. On attending a Newcastle United football match, for example, if football may be likened to religion for many people, tribalism and 'experience' are to the fore, alongside a sceptical remark about the value for money of a premier league player's wages. And in

India, there are telling notes on the disparities of wealth and poverty and on the varying appropriateness of charitable work in some of the villages. John made the trip to

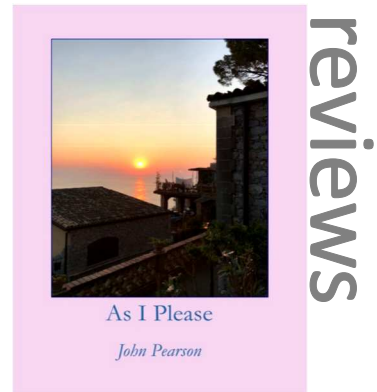
India with the since departed and greatly missed SOF stalwart, David Paterson, who loved to expose his teams of study-tourists to an experience of India. John was never going to 'find God' or a new spiritual path in India (or elsewhere). Rather, he grew in his depth of understanding that it was 'Good' rather than 'God' that was worth believing in and acting upon.

The second section, equally diverting, but more provocative in places, offers a set of not altogether curmudgeonly opinions on political policy-making, the apparent priorities of the Church of England's General Synod, Christmas, zero-hour contracts, same-sex weddings and revisionist approaches to history. There's a stirring reflection on going to the cinema and a personal, moving and amusing tribute to David Paterson. I found much to agree and to disagree with in this part of the book, but then again, much to challenge pre-existing thoughts or perhaps prejudices.

The longer pieces on 'self and faith' are in fact musings on a number of issues such as grappling with the consequences of not believing in 'God' within the context of a 'Christian' family – a topic many Sea of Faithers will be familiar with. There are some interesting insights provided here, but no attempt really to address the question of who or what, exactly, might be meant by the word 'God'.

If there's a thread that runs through the book; its musings, travelogues, reflections and so on, it is that of the tragedy of war. It's a theme returned to from time to time, perhaps as befits a child of the 1950s. But throughout, the writing is suffused with wit, with compassion, insight and much wisdom. I have to say, the writing is very good; sometimes spare and pointed, sometimes discursive and instructive. It's a good read. Each article takes only a few minutes to read, so you may think of a room in your house where the book might be most judiciously placed, for the entertainment of the curious visitor.

Dave Francis is an education consultant, a trustee of the SOF Network and editor of the SOF Philosophy and Religion Clubs website: www.solarity.org.uk



John Pearson reviews

The Picardy Third

by A. J. McRobb

Amakar Press (Haverhill, 2021). Pbk. 278 pages. £12.

My previous reviews have been of non-fiction creations, or novels based closely on historical fact. So I made notes along the way to keep me focussed and awake. *The Picardy Third* proclaims itself to be 'entirely a work of fiction the names, characters and incidents portrayed the work of the author's imagination'. So, I read it as a story, without writing anything, though making a mental note of certain things.

We follow four relationships; one from the past, one falling apart as we read, one newly forming and another born of some of the fall-out from the first two. These are played out on a global stage – well, in Britain, France, Spain and various parts of India.

Through the ups and downs in the life of Elise Allenby, 33, Cambridge music graduate and Parisian business woman as we join the story, we learn of her mother's death, her strong ties to her brother Gil, and of a past love, Kiran, from a former time in India. Joining a prep school in Suffolk, her home county, she meets Edwin, music teacher, 50 something, his childless marriage to Sheila already pretty much 'on the rocks'. An initial friendship develops into a love affair.

The couple first meet by chance at a cheap hotel in France, awaiting the ferry, meeting again when Elise unwittingly takes up a job at Edwin's school. Gil grows gradually closer to Vicky, hospital chaplain, who helps them with their mother's death and related matters, first becoming family friend and subsequently Gil's wife. Later Elise and Edwin encounter one another by surprise, in locations in France and again in India. These might be interpreted as unlikely coincidences, Thomas Hardy style, but we are told early on by Elise that all such meetings are in fact driven by the law of Karma – a nod to her Indian past, ever present via her beloved statue of Saraswati, Hindu goddess.

The Indian influence on the lives of the players is strengthened by the year-long stay of the Indian children, Suraj and Amrita, son and daughter of Kiran, sent to Elise for safe-keeping from Canada whilst he, Kiran, establishes his academic career. Indian traditions and beliefs are compared and contrasted with ours as the children prepare to join their father and his new wife. Somehow a satisfactory balance is achieved, as when the children, Hindus, are

baptised into the Christian faith by Vicky during their stay. The book is rich in cultural references to Indian religion, literature and music.

As can be a feature of affairs, Edwin suffers a serious mental breakdown, faced with juggling various loyalties, past and present. His tribulations and treatment are openly and realistically addressed. Assisted by the ongoing support of Elise, he makes a strong recovery. One other character is the ever-present Sandy, a teenage piano pupil of Edwin's. He acts throughout rather like Shakespeare's Puck – facilitating Edwin's and Elise's 'surprise' meetings and watching over the children from time to time.

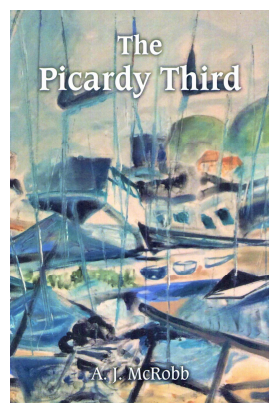
Places are described in enticing detail, clearly from experience rather than a brochure. As a sometime traveller to India myself, I was strongly drawn to chapters relating to Elise's return there, chaperoning the two children as they take their first steps in their father's land. The Indian people, the auto rickshaws, the elephant and the gradual modernisation all seem very true.

I would query only two things in the narrative: Judging by a reference to 'the new millennium', I am guessing we must be in at least 2005. By 1994, Bombay had become Mumbai (though I too still prefer Bombay). And I was quite surprised that Vicky's priest friend Kate (vehicle for a brief plug for *Sea of Faith*) still suffers such gender-based prejudice.

Surely there must be something at least of the writer in so detailed an account as *The Picardy Third*? How can so much imagination be fired up out of nowhere at all? And so, despite the author's disclaimer I am left wondering where/who is the real A.J. McRobb in all this? Who are all the others? It doesn't really matter, but it is fascinating to speculate.

How does it all end? I leave you to read the novel for yourself. The places feel very real, the people feel very real and their lives feel very real. What a magnificent read!

John Pearson is a retired lecturer in Quantity Surveying at the University of Northumbria and current chair of SOF Network Board of Trustees.



reviews

Dominic Kirkham reviews *Evolution of a Post-Christian Theology*

By Maynard Kaufman

Helianthus Press (2021) .Pbk 178 pages. £10.90.

Though theology has been a significant part of the career of Dr Maynard Kaufman he does not regard himself as a professional theologian, but rather an explorer of the ‘theological possibilities appropriate for our time of environmental crisis.’ This is reflected in this selection of essays that are both diverse and profound. They also reflect the evolution of the author’s own life from its beginnings in a traditional Mennonite community in the 1930s that had become increasingly fundamentalist: he recalls that as a child his greatest fear was that he would wake up in the morning and find that his parents had been ‘raptured’ up to heaven by Jesus, leaving him behind.

His spiritual journey is one that takes him from a ‘Christocentric Unitarianism’ focused on personal salvation to a rejection of a belief in personal salvation. This reflects an alignment with the thinking of Bonhoeffer on the inadequacy of the theology of redemption in a world come of age. Rather he sees, ‘religion is no longer a process of redemption in which man is saved, but a process of creative activity in which the human spirit is in reciprocal relation to the Holy Spirit.’

For Kaufman the Holy Spirit is a cosmic power not limited to humanity or a particular religious tradition; it is a transcultural and ‘independent cosmic power quite beyond the historical particularity of Christianity’: *Ruach* (Hebrew), *Mana* (Melanesian), *Wakan* (Dakota Indian), *Shi* (Chinese), and so on. Such beliefs are an expression of the sense of the living spirit of Mother Earth, what Hildegard of Bingen called the ‘greening power in motion, making all things grow.’ Such belief provides the basis for a sense of the sanctity of nature.

Formative influences in Kaufman’s discovery of an earthbound spirituality – he no longer believes in personal salvation from this world – were the powerful eco-feminist works that began to appear in the 1970s. These not only challenged male dominance in society but the religious legitimisation of this dominance that ‘made the church sacred as it desecrated nature.’ For Kaufman a significant moment in this story was the addition to the creed of Western Christianity of the word *filioque* – that the Spirit proceeds from the Father ‘and the Son’. This emphasised the male monopoly of divinity and ‘virtually ignored the Holy Spirit as a divine power’

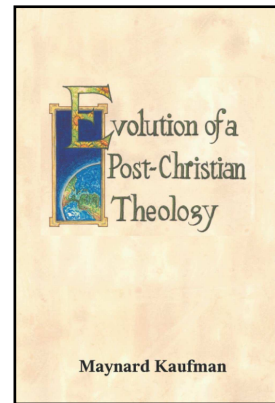
distinct from Christ.

But this history had deeper biblical roots in the distinctive nature of Judaism that defined its God, unlike other religions of the Middle East, in opposition to the pagan gods of nature who were ‘merely earthly’. Earth and natural fertility were seen as something feminine and to be exploited. The ultimate expression of this mentality, for Kaufman, is the Faust legend that has given the West its defining myth: ‘Faust is the culture hero of Western civilisation, as Prometheus was for the ancient Greeks.’ It is this Faustian striving ‘that is the demonic dimension that forever denies contentment or satisfaction’ and through which ‘the biosphere is replaced by a man-made technosphere.’ This mentality is now at the core of our environmental crisis.

If we are to break free from this mind-set of destructive anthropocentrism and reconnect with the Earth, Kaufman advocates a reconsideration of paganism. Whilst recognising what a charged word this is, he argues that it takes us to a consideration of the crucial issue: the understanding of time in Judeo-Christianity. As a student he was constantly reminded that the God of Israel ‘is active in history’ and that it is within history, as a linear and teleological process, that revelation occurs. It is the secularised version of this linear process that has given us the ideology of progress, ‘which is now measured by economic growth.’

In contrast, the cyclical understanding of the cosmic and Earth rhythms implicit in the primal spiritualities of humanity grows from respect for particular places and creatures. It is this that will help us ‘to move beyond our cultural paralysis and to cope with the crisis of climate change.’ With such views it comes as no surprise to learn that much of Kaufman’s life has been spent in promoting agrarian revival and environmentalism. He also calls for a new overarching myth that binds us both together and to the Earth. Evolution seems to provide a good basis for this.

Dominic Kirkham’s first book *From Monk to Modernity* was published in Britain by SOF in 2015. This was followed by *Our Shadowed World* (2019) and *Horror and Hope* (2021), both published in the USA.



reviews

Kathryn Southworth reviews

Back Country

by Kathleen McPhilemy.

Littoral Press (Lavenham 2022). Pbk 92 pages £9.

Back Country is Kathleen McPhilemy's fourth collection of poetry, a distillation of twelve years of writing. Born and brought up in Belfast the author has also lived in London and Oxford where, retired from teaching, she now runs online poetry readings and produces a poetry blog and podcasts, a recent example featuring *Sofia's* own editor as poet and translator.

In a recent review McPhilemy explored the suggestion that young Northern Irish poets might be regressive, if not exploitative, in continuing to write about the Troubles. On the contrary, she concludes that the province is so steeped in the experience, so conscious of being 'not safe', that for poets to turn their backs on the subject would constitute 'bad faith'. Certainly this book does not shrink from that sense of darkness and vulnerability where questions of perceived identity become matters of life and death. 'How long does it take', she asks in the opening poem, 'till history settles/like old tombstones in a grey landscape?' There is little romanticism here: hills have their secrets but, she says, starkly, 'so do the abattoirs'. The 'bright abstractions of ancient tales/occlude the festering histories inside' says the poem 'Truth and Reconciliation' and the title poem, 'Back Country' calls out the hard men of 'the later darkness', their few words and 'what they leave behind/under the tarpaulin'.

For McPhilemy identity is problematic and not abstract but personal: she has been 'gone too long', 'never from here' in the minds of some who 'know who you are (even if you don't)'. She identifies with those who are displaced, although for her such a lost identity might be only the loss of vowel sounds rather than trying to survive 'reduced/to the status of a slowwitted child' in a foreign-speaking country. 'Coming or going' explores the sense of otherness, of those 'not like us' from images of exhausted mothers on the beach to girls plotting to join Isis ('why not heroic?' in their epic journey of misplaced idealism). We cannot penetrate their inner lives, will never fully understand. 'Half way' treats the refugee experience in the language of the perennial travelling child's question 'When will we get there?' With reference, presumably, to refugees stranded in places like the Calais camps, the poet asks with compassion, 'What kind of answer is 'Half Way'?

Those who are victims of injustice and suffering are damaged by their experiences: anyone who 'learns the language of darkness/becomes a creature of darkness'. 'Orestes' takes this further:

'a day of light and trust' becomes 'just sentimental'. Dread, including the dread of complete loss of language, is never far away. Will language fail us, or we fail language 'like some terrible exam/that passes us as human'? We look after such people 'with careful terror' for our own potential futures. Living in existential dread of dementia and of other lurking terrors, like rogue viruses or catastrophic climate change, security is only 'uncomfortably/perched on the moment'.

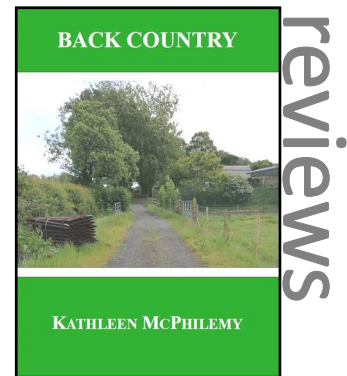
Nevertheless, life, vivacity and kindness make their way through. In 'Catching our Breath' the poet rails against the lies of government and 'engines of capitalism' during the pandemic but also sees the goodness of people and acts of kindness everywhere, including the opportunity to bring social justice for the carers, packers, drivers and cleaners who saw us through. Will recognition for these people happen? 'Probably not', is the conclusion.

In the natural world, too, creatures are threatened by human development but find ways to survive, occasionally with human assistance to these 'blameless collaterals', be it tunnels for toads or safety corridors for hedgehogs. The right to survive, to belong somewhere, extends to non-native species like the green parakeet. In 'Noisy Squawkers', a delightful parallel with the more serious exploration of what it is to be a refugee, the poet yearns for rarer native species like the corncrake or kingfisher. However, despite her sense that they are out of place with their 'raucous blather', she wishes for these birds, too, the right to remain and belong:

Let them stay
like the rabbit and grey squirrel
configure our landscape
become unremarkable.

Such wise and sympathetic empathy exemplifies this accessible and accomplished collection.

Kathryn Southworth is a former vice-principal of Newman University College in Birmingham. Recent publications are her poetry collection *Someone was Here* (Indigo Dreams, Beaworthy, 2018) and her pamphlet, *A Pure Bead*, a sequence on Virginia Woolf (Paekakariki Press, London 2021).



As I Please

John Pearson asks: Off with their heads?

Well, maybe not.. but upon the death of the late Queen (a living Saint in many people's eyes) the resultant sycophancy was overwhelming. It focussed my ire. And so, what next for the monarchy? At the time this question was largely drowned out (negative answers certainly were) by a positive tsunami of extravagant national admiration of the late 96 year old, and a grief which beggars belief – given that less than 1% of the population had ever met her in person and far less than that ever benefitted from anything she ever said, (or, more likely, had written for her). As I grow older I face another 'coming out'. Many years ago there was the No God issue – now I 'bite the bullet' again, and must admit that I am a closet republican. This flies in the face of 60 years of admiring state occasions, (we do them well) but never really questioning the need for all the deference to this branch of the Establishment.

One part of me relishes the popular accounts of the suggested inbred idleness of certain elements of the monarchy: with a wry smile I hear of eggs specially boiled and of toothpaste squeezed by ever-attentive flunkies. Another part, if any of it is true, is quite repulsed. I have seen countless flowerbeds tarted up ahead of a Royal Visit. Are these dignitaries really so stupid as to suppose that every town looks this pretty all the time? No comment. Will Prince Harry's memoirs denounce this unchallenged high life – this entitled attitude? Will they change anything, or will the key members of 'The Firm' continue in their absurdly pampered lifestyles regardless.

We, the taxpayers, fund the Royals' lifestyle - Cosseted living, cosseted travel and so on, for what? On one side of the balance sheet there is tourism; hoards flock to London and elsewhere, to drink in the palaces and the pageantry. Set against this the enormous personal wealth of sovereign and other members of our royal family (cash, possessions and real estate) all unearned in any serious nine to five sense, passing from generation to generation, distancing them surely from the realities of daily life for most of their subjects? Set against it the elevated status of the monarchy, not just the flower beds, but the free meals, the ludicrous choreographed deference (codes of etiquette when meeting a royal personage: 'You must not speak until spoken to', and so on!). Set against it the privileged legal status of the monarchy. And here I don't just mean the sovereign's exemption from the requirement to hold a driving licence (and doubtless many more areas of special treatment) but the many everyday laws from which he/she has exemption. Most will be aware of the (purely cos-



King Charles I by Anthony van Dyck

Charles I was beheaded in 1649. commons.wikimedia.org

metic) royal assent to any new Act of Parliament. How many know of what might be called the royal dissent/ At a recent count there were over 160 UK laws from which the Queen or (then) Prince Charles gained exemption through their lawyers. And these are in serious areas, such as Landlord and Tenant Law, Labour Relations, Sex and Race Discrimination and so on. So, royal employees are retained under far less favourable terms than others; a number were summarily dismissed, it is said, upon Charles's accession – surplus to requirements as he moved home. Tenants in royal properties are denied the right to escape from potentially crippling leases. Environmental and conservation measures are evaded. The list goes on.

To his credit, it is said that the new king seeks a less extravagant coronation than his immediate forbears, in keeping with the straitened times in which most of his citizens live. However, I doubt whether King Charles III will be the last monarch to be cosseted, raised above the rest of us, perhaps not even William V, or George VII. But questions must be asked in a modern democracy as to how long this should go on. Just a point – the £101 million spent annually on royal security is more public money wasted but I have no real intention of actually harming any of them – and I doubt there's any real point in anyone else doing it either.



Anti-racist demonstration in London, March 19th 2022