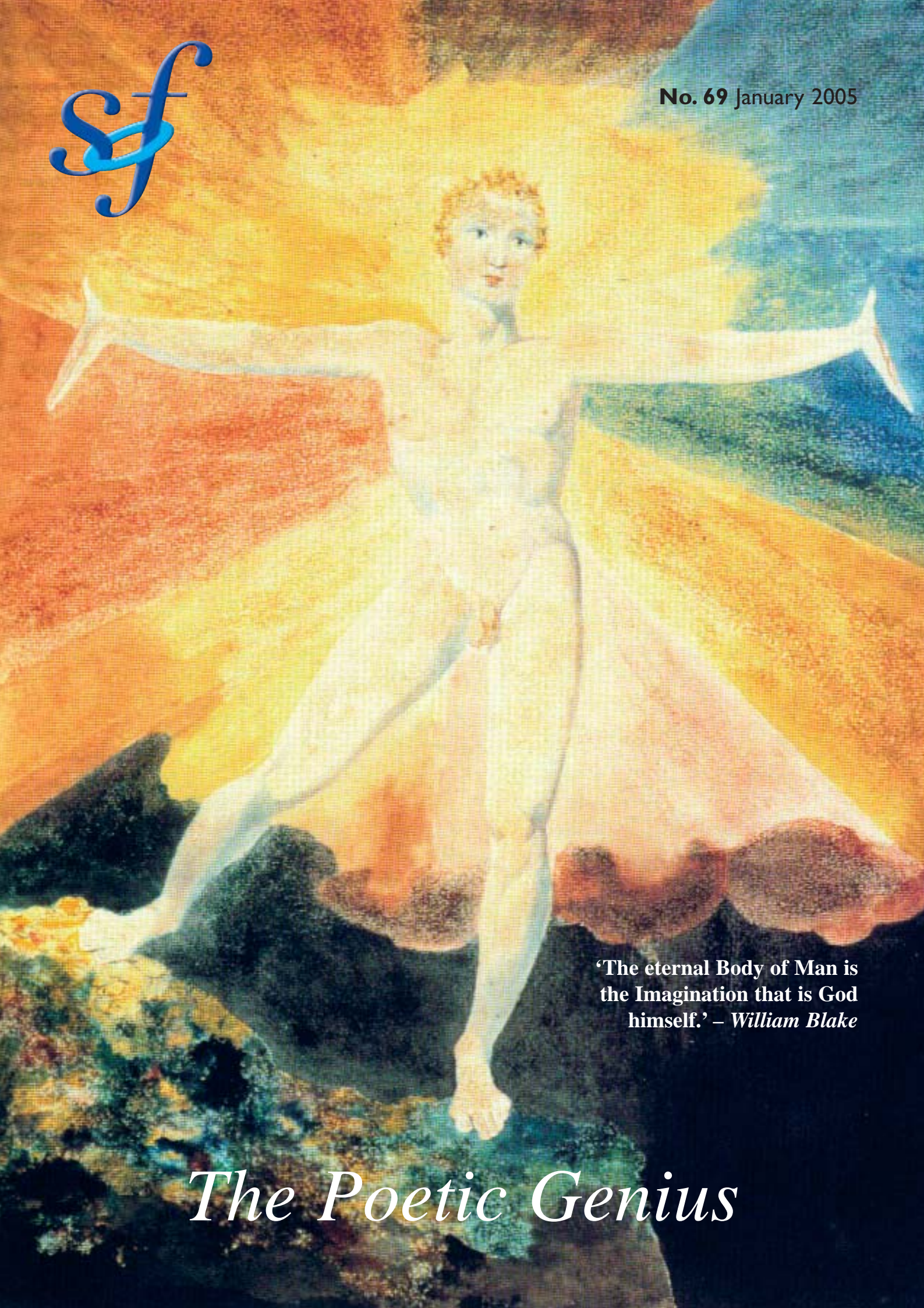


Sf

No. 69 January 2005



‘The eternal Body of Man is  
the Imagination that is God  
himself.’ – *William Blake*

# *The Poetic Genius*



**sof** is the magazine of the Sea of Faith Network (UK), an informal network of individuals and local groups 'exploring and promoting religious faith as a human creation'. It is published in January, March, May, July, September and November.

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Copy deadline is 40 days before the beginning of the month of publication. Contributions should preferably be emailed to the editor (in most formats) or posted as typewritten script.

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**sof** 69 January 2005

# Contents

## Editorial

- 3 The Poetic Genius

## Articles

- 5 *Matthew Arnold and the Seventeenth Century* by David Perman  
8 *Lorca and the Duende* by Alfredo Cordal  
11 *A Funny Thing Happened to me on the Way to the Forum* by Peter Lumsden  
13 *Is SoF a Cheshire Cat?* David Beverley replies to David Jenkins  
14 SoF Network News: *The Southampton Road Show.* Report by Mary Lloyd

## Poetry

- 10 *Song Wants to Become Light* by Federico Garcia Lorca  
12 *Moses* by Leah Fritz  
17 *Rug from the Atlas Mountains* by Jane Duran  
17 *It Haunts* by Peter Abbs  
23 *Summer by the Swale* by Lynne Wycherley

## Reviews

- 16 **Book:** David Rush reviews *Looking in the Distance: The Human Search for Meaning* by Richard Holloway  
19 **TV Series:** *Atheism at Half Cock* David Boulton reviews *Atheism: a Rough History of Disbelief* by Jonathan Miller  
20 **Book:** Ronald Pearse reviews *Is Christianity going anywhere?* by Lloyd Geering  
21 **Film:** Cicely Herbert reviews *The Motorcycle Diaries* directed by Walter Salles  
22 **Book:** Kathleen McPhilemy reviews Lynne Wycherley's poetry collection *At The Edge of Light*

## Regulars

- 15 News Forum  
15 Letters  
18 Mayday Notes

## Typographical Note:

To avoid confusion SoF (roman upper and lower case) is used to refer to the Sea of Faith Network and **sof** to the magazine. **sof** is the root of the Greek word for wisdom (*sofia*: also *sofe* (f), *sofos* (m): wise).

## Front Cover Image

*The Dance of Albion or Glad Day* by William Blake, c. 1793.

## Back Cover Image

Portrait of Mary Wollstonecraft by John Opie.

# The Poetic Genius

Is God actually an imaginative and poetic construction? William Blake says yes.

The title of this issue is *The Poetic Genius*, the human power of poetry which, according to William Blake, created the gods and all religions. In the two opening articles, David Perman looks at the English religious poetry of the revolutionary seventeenth century and Alfredo Cordal writes about the Spanish poet Lorca and the *duende*, 'the mysterious power that everyone feels but that no philosopher has explained'. Then Peter Lumsden reflects critically on the European Social Forum, whose purpose was first to imagine another possible world and then discuss how to bring it into being. Peter is a very long-standing member of the Sea of Faith network. Here I'd like to stress again that all members of the network are invited to send the editor proposals for articles and reviews.

In a short prose piece dated 1788, William Blake argues:

*Principle 2nd:* As all men are alike in outward form, so (and with the same infinite variety) all are alike in the Poetic Genius.

*Principle 5th:* The Religions of all Nations are derived from each Nation's different reception of the Poetic Genius, which is everywhere called the Spirit of Prophecy.

*Principle 6th:* The Jewish and Christian Testaments are an original derivation from the Poetic Genius; this is necessary from the confined nature of bodily sensation.

*Principle 7th:* As all men are alike (though infinitely various) so all Religions etc., as all similars, have one source. The true Man is the source, he being the Poetic Genius.

Like Wordsworth a few years later (in his *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*), Blake is praising *likeness in difference*, here the universal human capacity for poetry, together with the multiplicity of different poetries. He goes on to say that all religions have one source – the same Poetic Genius – although there are many religions, cultures, poetries, which are all human creations. The fact that there are many different 'receptions' of the Poetic Genius throughout the world enormously enriches the human treasury, but, as Blake says in his *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, religions have also been used for oppression:

The ancient Poets animated all sensible objects with Gods or Geniuses, calling them by the names and adorning them with the properties of woods, rivers, mountains, lakes, cities, nations, and whatever their large and numerous senses could perceive. And particularly they studied the genius of each city and country, placing it under its mental deity; till a system was formed, which some took advantage of, and enslaved the vulgar by attempting to realise or abstract the mental deities from their objects: thus began Priesthood; choosing forms of worship from poetic tales. And at length they pronounced that the Gods had ordered such things. Thus men forgot that all deities reside in the human breast.

Blake praises the many different 'receptions' of the Poetic Genius as human wealth and abundance and includes religions among the creations of the Poetic Genius. This abundance is not in itself dangerous but wonderful. The ancient poets did not invent but tried to *discern* what 'their large and numerous senses could perceive.' Animating 'all sensible objects' with Gods or Geniuses was a way of naming or *personifying* the nature and powers of these objects: natural objects, such as woods, rivers, mountains and lakes; and cultural entities, such as cities and nations. Woods, rivers, mountains and lakes are *real* natural resources, which people fight over. Cities and nations have *real* powers of life and death. So the poets were not just fantasising but trying to discern the forces that operate in and govern the world. Religion becomes a system of oppression to 'enslave the vulgar' when it attempts to 'realise or abstract the mental deities from their objects' – that is, set them up as idols, access to which is controlled by priests.

Blake's common term for an oppressive system that 'enslaves the vulgar', in order to maintain control in the hands of a few, is Mystery. 'Pity would be no more/if we did not make somebody poor' begins his frightening poem 'The Human Abstract'. It goes on to describe the process by which religion is used to gain control:

Soon spreads the dismal shade  
Of Mystery over his head:  
And the Catterpillar and Fly  
Feed on the Mystery.

Creating Mystery is the way in which ‘some took advantage’ by abstracting or supernaturalising (i.e. claiming that natural forces are actually supernatural) *real* natural and cultural forces in order to enslave others. ‘And at length they pronounced that the Gods had ordered such things. Thus men forgot that all deities reside in the human breast.’ The supernaturalising or alienation of these forces turned them into Nobodaddy, that is, an idol with powers of human sacrifice.

In an additional poem to his *Songs of Experience*, Blake describes the dark side of human nature as ‘A Divine Image’:

Cruelty has a Human Heart,  
And Jealousy a Human Face,  
Terror, the Human Form Divine  
And Secrecy, the Human Dress.

However, the pair to both ‘The Human Abstract’ and ‘A Divine Image’ in his *Songs of Experience* is ‘The Divine Image’ in his *Songs of Innocence* (and we note that this time Divine Image has a *definite* article), in which:

For Mercy has a human heart,  
Pity, a human face:  
And Love, the human form divine,  
And Peace, the human dress.

Blake is saying that human beings contain both the terrors of ‘The Human Abstract’ and the qualities of ‘The Divine Image’. There is a battle between them, just as in his poem *Jerusalem*, the beautiful city comes *down to Earth*, to real London. ‘Pancras and Kentish Town repose’ but the repose is threatened by ‘cruel patriarchal pride/planting thy family alone/destroying all the world beside.’

In his final piece on Radical Theology (SoF 66) Trevor Greenfield asked, ‘Is God actually an imaginative and poetic construction?’ In the above two passages Blake answers with a resounding ‘yes’ and I think they are illuminating for SoF’s ‘exploring and promoting religious faith as a human creation’.

A poetic way of looking at the world of ‘sensible objects’ is to personify them. You may think of your local river as ‘an old brown god’. Or if there is a beautiful tree outside your window that cheers you up and inspires you when you are sitting at your computer with a writer’s block, you may get to know it well and begin to feel it has a ‘personality’. You may give it a name and begin to think of it as a Spirit or God. This is a *poetic* way of thinking about it, via the poetic trope of personification. The tree is real; its supernatural Spirit or God is not. If you ‘attempt to realise or abstract the mental deity from its object’ and call it a God with supernatural power, this is false and, Blake suggests, the motives for doing so may be dubious, to say the least.

Poetic personification can also be applied to abstract nouns, such as being, life, love. There is no being except what is, there is no life except what lives, there is no love except people (and others who are capable of it, some

animals perhaps?) who love. But it is possible to think of Being as a divine person (Yahweh’s name was I AM). Again this is a poetic trope and should be taken as such. It is important both to reject the *supernatural existence* of such poetic personifications and to appreciate the poetry. The poetry of Earth is what gives zest to life, both Earth’s own superabundant variety of creatures, each with their own intractable particularity, and the vast common treasury of the human imagination. Theology is a sister art not only to philosophy, but also to poetry.

SoF has to engage in debate, on the one hand, with fundamentalist religious believers and, on the other, with old-fashioned rationalists, who have ‘no time for poetry’ – like Gradgrind, all they want are ‘facts, facts, facts’ – causing untold human deprivation. SoF also needs to explore religions as *political* forces. As we saw above, Blake pointed out that the *supernaturalisation* of the Gods created by the Poetic Genius, was for *political* reasons. Exploring religions means not only exploring them as part of humanity’s cultural and poetic treasure but also *discerning*, with the Spirit of Prophecy, how a supernaturalised God becomes oppressive and often murderous. This is extremely important in today’s fundamentalist climate.

In his poetry Blake embodies both the darkness of the ‘Human Abstract’, which is capable of great cruelty, often in the name of religion, and the huge *human* possibilities for good, which the *human* Poetic Genius has projected and personified as divine:

Then every man, of every clime,  
That prays in his distress,  
Prays to the human form divine,  
Love, Mercy, Pity, Peace.

Love, Mercy, Pity, Peace are qualities and names that have been ascribed to God. Blake’s term ‘the human form divine’ describes them as part of the *human potential*; they come into being when human beings create, enact or *do* them.

The same is true of Wisdom; it has been used as a divine name and is a quality to which we humans may aspire. The name of this magazine *sof* spells the root of *sofia* (or *sophia*), the Greek word for Wisdom. I’m writing this in Advent and I thought of the first of the Latin liturgy’s great ‘O’ Magnificat antiphons for Advent Vespers or Evensong:

O Wisdom,  
proceeding from the mouth of the Most High,  
reaching from end to end  
to look after everything strongly and sweetly,  
come and teach us carefulness.

Wisdom, here personified as divine, can also be regarded as part of the human potential. The Advent prayer is for *incarnation*, for Wisdom to become human, for it to *materialise*.

# Matthew Arnold and the Seventeenth Century

Standing on Dawlish Beach, David Perman reflects that the tide always comes in again, sometimes with a vengeance. In a world of harmful religious and ideological certitudes, as this surely is, can the returning tide also bring hope of something saner?

The Sea of Faith  
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore  
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd.  
But now I only hear  
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,  
Retreating, to the breath  
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear  
And naked shingles of the world.

Matthew Arnold's pessimism in *Dover Beach* – understandable in school inspectors in any age and especially one whose father was a public school headmaster – was based on an unfortunate metaphor. The tide will always come in. You can be sure of that: you only have to wait a matter of hours. If in October you were attempting to stand on the beach, not of Dover but at Dawlish in Devon, you will know that autumnal storms bring back the sea with a vengeance. That is not to say that what Arnold called the 'certitude' of religious faith (with 'peace' and 'help for pain') will return in the same way – with the exception, let us admit, of George W. Bush's second-term, born-again USA, or of most parts of the Islamic world, or the Hassidic quarters of Jerusalem,

**Men of all persuasions were fashioning their own metaphors in a heady blend of Christian doctrine, platonic philosophy and personal experience.**

---

Stamford Hill and Brooklyn. We certainly cannot blame Arnold for them. Instead, let us address ourselves to the post-Enlightenment West, which is the community that usually finds a resonance in *Dover Beach*.

Actually, I was in Devon for a literary festival where I took part with other poets and singers in a

presentation of seventeenth-century religious poetry. It struck me then how much more instructive to our present age are Donne, Herbert, Milton, Traherne and Vaughan than Arnold and the Victorians. No seventeenth-century poet – or even soldier or politician – thought of God as a palliative for individual pain and private doubt. For them the deity was neither an object nor an ointment, but a participant in their lives and struggles. This was a truly revolutionary age when old ideas of religion and politics (little distinction was made between them) were being upended. Men of all persuasions were fashioning their own metaphors in a heady blend of Christian doctrine, platonic philosophy and personal experience. John Donne (in the spirit of the *Song of Songs* and perhaps his own life) had no compunction in writing about God as a lover:



Take me to you, imprison me, for I,  
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free  
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

Gerrard Winstanley, leader of the Diggers, pleaded the case for popular use of common land before government officials like General Fairfax by invoking 'the great Creator Reason' and the 'Spirit that made the Globe [and] dwells in man to govern the Globe'. Winstanley's faith may have embraced a Quaker absence of dogma, but the point is that he saw God as standing at his elbow not confined to private consolation. It's reported that Cromwell's Ironsides sang the Old Hundredth ('O God our help in ages past') as they went into battle. Then there was the Royalist Jacob Astley and his prayer before the Battle of Edgehill: 'Oh Lord, thou knowest how busy I must be this day. If I forget thee, do not thou forget me'.

## Our seventeenth century religious poets wrote in an atmosphere of light and colour, rather than sinful monochrome.

The poet who portrayed most vividly the companionship of God, his everyday participation in daily living, was George Herbert. Almost anything – a key, the church floor, new windows ('brittle crazie glasse'), a bunch of grapes ('Who of the Law's sour juice sweet wine did make') – reminded the poet of the divine. 'Who sweeps a room, as for thy laws, makes that and the action fine' may sound like easy piety but think, not of Victorian cleanliness, but of seventeenth-century dirt and dust and one appreciates its force. 'Dust' is one of Herbert's favourite metaphors. But it is not in objects but in personal encounters that he most often celebrates the divine, as in his trio of poems on the theme of Love:

Love bade me welcome, yet my soul drew back,  
Guilty of dust and sin.  
But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack  
From my first entrance in,  
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning  
If I lack'd anything.

What gives additional edge to Herbert's religious verse is the knowledge that in earlier life he did not lack worldly ambition: he was an M.P. for a time and the Public Orator at Cambridge. His poetry influenced many other poets – Crashaw, Traherne, Vaughan – but the century as a whole made God an actor in its secular drama, even occasionally in its dramas.

Milton's *Paradise Lost* is as much drama as epic and happily sets his Puritan beliefs within the great cosmological and classical narrative, comparable with the *Iliad*. As Milton wrote to his father: 'Scorn not the poet's song, a work divine, which more than anything else reveals our ethereal origin and heavenly race. Nothing so dignifies the human mind as its origin, and it possesses yet some sacred traces of Promethean fire.' At the Restoration in 1660, Milton was excluded from public life. So too at first was another Puritan, Samuel Crossman, who like Donne finished his life as a cathedral dean. Crossman followed Herbert in celebrating his faith in terms of an intimate relationship – this time with Jesus:

He came from His blest throne,  
Salvation to bestow;  
But men made strange, and none  
The longed-for Christ would know:  
But O, my Friend, my Friend indeed,  
Who at my need His life did spend!

Superficially, this poem (*My Song is Love Unknown*) looks like the emotional 'witness' of an Evangelical

from one of the following centuries – and indeed, since it was made into a hymn, it has become popular with Evangelicals, particularly in the United States. But Crossman intended it as a meditation for young men and it was published in the company of other poems of strong educational and doctrinal content. Even so it is a happy poem. With a few exceptions (Crashaw for one), English poetry of the seventeenth century avoided the remorseful breast-beating of German contemporaries, like Paul Gerhardt. Our religious poets wrote in an atmosphere of light and colour, rather than sinful monochrome.

This mood of light is characteristic of two of the most individual of seventeenth-century religious poets.

Henry Vaughan appears to have been a Royalist who retired to his native Breconshire in despair after the Battle of Worcester and practised medicine.

His poetry wrestles with the problems of sickness and pain but also with the ideas, fairly new at the time, of infinity and space. Like Wordsworth, a century and a half later, he longs to return to the wonder and simple faith of his youth – the 'certitude' if you like, but there is none of Matthew Arnold's gloom here.

Vaughan's bright quest is finely expressed in his poem *Vanity of Spirit*:

Quite spent with thoughts, I left my cell, and lay  
Where a shrill spring tun'd to the early day.  
I begg'd here long, and groan'd to know  
Who gave the clouds so brave a bow,  
Who bent the spheres, and circled in  
Corruption with this glorious ring;  
What is His name, and how I might  
Descry some part of His great light.  
I summon'd Nature ; pierc'd through all her store;  
Broke up some seals, which none had touch'd before  
Her womb, her bosom, and her head,  
Where all her secrets lay abed,  
I rifled quite ; and having past  
Through all the creatures, came at last  
To search myself, where I did find  
Traces, and sounds of a strange kind.

Another of his poems, reminiscent of Wordsworth's *Prelude*, is 'The Retreat': 'Happy those early days, when I / Shin'd in my angel-infancy' when he recalls his familiarity with the bright face of God and 'When on some gilded cloud, or flow'r, / My gazing soul would dwell an hour'.



Herbert

Vaughan's 'angel-infancy' leads one on to Thomas Traherne and his celebration of the act of being born – many readers will know it best from Gerald Finzi's *Dies Natalis*, sung by Wilfred Brown. In the opening poem of his book, *The Salutation*, Traherne lays out his mood of wonder:

These little limbs, these eyes and hands which I  
here find  
 This panting heart wherewith my heart begins  
 Where have ye been?  
 Behind what curtain were ye hid from me so  
long?

It is a theme to which he returns with infectious joy in *Wonder* which I am almost tempted to quote in full, but it is eight stanzas long.

How like an angel came I down!  
 How bright are all things here!  
 When first among his works I did appear  
 O how their glory me did crown!  
 The world resembled his eternity,  
 In which my soul did walk;  
 And ev'ry thing that I did see  
 Did with me talk.

Traherne's poems are as simple in structure as they are in theme. One of the most delightful is entitled *Walking*: 'To walk abroad is, not with eyes, / But thoughts, the fields to see and prize.' Many of his poems are about *innocence*: indeed there is one called *Innocence*. In another entitled *Eden* there are none of the tired aphorisms that exude from Gray's *Ode on the Distant Prospect of Eton College*: 'Where ignorance is bliss / 'Tis folly to be wise'. Traherne sees childhood differently:

A learned and a happy ignorance  
 Divided me  
 From all the vanity,  
 From all the sloth, care, pain, and sorrow that  
advance  
 The madness and the misery  
 Of men. No error, no distraction I  
 Saw soil the earth, or overcloud the sky.

Yet Traherne was no simpleton. He spent his graduate years at Oxford writing his polemical *Roman Forgeries* and, after the Restoration, became chaplain to the Lord Privy Seal. As with George Herbert's book, *The Temple*, this seemingly simple, pious poetry was written by a man whose fingers were as much on the pulse of his time as many a politician's.

If this short tour around the seventeenth century inspires readers of *SoF* to sample the religious poetry of the period, it will have fulfilled its purpose. All of the writers mentioned are still in print and, if your library or bookshop is deficient, there is always the internet, well served by US university schools of



Milton

English. But, in closing, let me offer a thought and a quotation. The thought is that in a world of harmful religious and ideological certitudes, as this surely is, it may be more useful to oppose the odious contagion with beliefs that spring from an optimistic view of religion and personal relationships (as did the seventeenth-century poets) rather than with philosophies that downsize belief in the divine. Matthew Arnold (*St. Paul and Protestantism*, page 8) wrote that God is 'the stream of tendency by which all things strive to fulfill the laws of their being'. His seventeenth-century predecessors would have found that statement preposterous in someone who called himself a poet.

My closing quotation is from John Donne's sermon XXIII, preached in old St. Paul's on Easter Day 1628:

For our sight of God here, our theatre, the place where we sit and see him, is the whole world, the whole house and frame of nature, and our medium, our glass, is the book of creatures, and our light, by which we see him, is the light of natural reason. And then for our knowledge of God here, our place, our academy, our university is the church, our medium is the ordinance of God in his church, preaching and sacraments; and our light is the light of faith.

David Perman used to work for the BBC and now runs the Rockingham Press, which publishes poetry and Hertfordshire local history. His biography of the 18th century social reformer Scott of Amwell: *Dr. Johnson's Quaker Critic*, was published in 2001 and his own poetry collection *A Wasp on the Stair* in 2004.

# Lorca and the *Duende*

Alfredo Cordal writes about the great Spanish poet Federico García Lorca and the *duende*, 'the mysterious power that everyone feels but that no philosopher has explained', particularly in the arts which have a living body as interpreter: music, dance, song and spoken poetry.

If there is a poet who has embodied the *duende*, 'the spirit of the Earth', causing it to flourish from the deep taproot of Spanish culture, that poet was García Lorca, who was without any doubt the greatest Spanish poet and playwright of the twentieth century. In his life, which was both happy and tragic, we see how the Andalusian poet identifies his fate with both the brightness and the darkness of the *duende*. That is the only way to explain the force of his Poetic Genius. In the lecture on the *duende* that Lorca gave in Havana and Buenos Aires, he distinguished between the 'angel', the 'muse' and the '*duende*' and declared: 'The *duende* is a power and not a behaviour; it is a struggle and not a concept. I have heard an old master-guitarist say: "The *duende* is not in the throat; the *duende* surges up from the soles of the feet." For Lorca, in his life and in his death: 'The real struggle is with the *duende*.' He seeks:

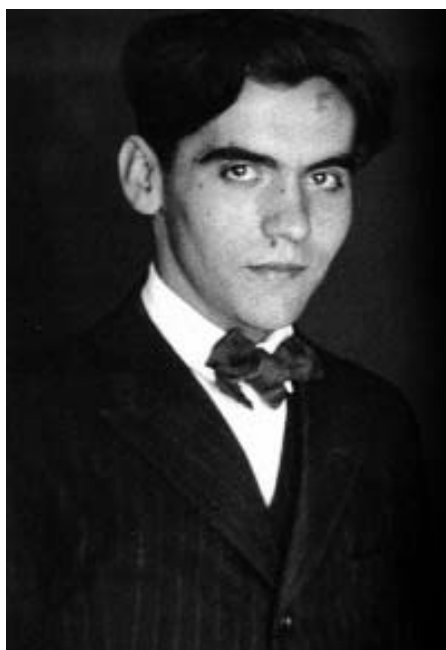
A song reaching the spirit of things  
and the winds' spirit,  
that comes to rest at last in joy  
of the everlasting heart.

If there is a poet who constantly announces his own death in his poems and accepts his destiny with great clarity (as did Cesar Vallejo, John Keats, John Lennon), that poet is Lorca. His Poetic Genius enabled him to foresee his future in the Spain of his day and embrace it

**In all Arabic music, dance or song, the appearance of the *duende*, the spirit of the Earth, is greeted with vociferous shouts of 'Alá! Alá!' ('God! God!').**

with the sense of fatality of one who knows he cannot escape the inevitable. When his friends warned him not to go to Granada to celebrate his father's birthday,

because the Spanish Civil War was about to break out, and in fact did break out the day after he arrived home, on July 18th 1936, Lorca replied serenely: 'No one murders poets.' He was right. But that act of lucidity, doubtless inspired by the *duende*, cost him his life.



He was quickly arrested by the 'black-shirt' militia, a paramilitary fascist organisation in support of Franco in his rebellion against the government of the Republic. He was shot on the outskirts of Granada (Viznar). Not that Lorca was planning the fulfilment of his own prophecies (as Keats said about his own life). Up to the end, Lorca claimed that he was 'a good Catholic' and pointed to his friendship with Luis Rosales, a Falangist who supported Franco, in whose house Lorca took refuge and from which he was forcibly removed when Rosales was absent. He asked his friend, the composer Manuel de Falla who also supported Franco's insurrection, to intercede for him with the provisional fascist government in Granada. But none of this helped him at all. Then the *duende* took hold of the reins of his destiny, regardless of all Lorca's attempts to stop it. The poet had dreamed of a dark fate, and as he had already

prophesied: 'Everything that has dark sounds has *duende*'.

Long before his tragic ending, he had written about it in his poetry collection, *Poet in New York*, perhaps one of the most important volumes of poetry published in the twentieth century. In it, he not only speaks about his own death, but also about the 'disappearances' of thousands of Spaniards during the Civil War and, prophetically, the hundreds of thousands 'disappeared' under the Military Juntas in Latin America during the 1970s and 1980s, especially in Central America during the presidency of Ronald Reagan. The poet tells us:

When the pure shapes sank  
under the twittering of daisies  
I knew they had murdered me.  
They combed the cafés, graveyards, churches for me,  
pried open casks and cabinets...

But they couldn't find me.  
Couldn't they?  
No. They couldn't find me.



Here we reach the very root of Spanish and Latin American history, both yesterday and today: 'death or the tragic sense of life', not only in the political and social sphere, but also the 'existential being' of a culture and way of looking at life itself. For the Spanish soul, life and death are two sides of the same coin, that is, of living on Earth, on a planet where we know that we are only temporary, although we may aspire to immortality or eternal life, because of our ability to feel that we are infinite, at the same time being fully aware of our finiteness or mortality.

Lorca tells us: 'In every country death has finality,' (and we understand that well in Anglo-Saxon countries where Puritanism has turned death into something taboo, dirty and untouchable, something we have to resign ourselves to or forget about). He continues, 'It arrives and the blinds are drawn. Not in Spain. In Spain they are opened. Many Spaniards live between walls until the day they die, when they are taken out into the sun. A dead person in Spain is more alive when dead than is the case anywhere else.' We may say that at the root of Spanish culture, and thus in the *duende*, there is an appetite for death that can become a paroxysm of religious fervour, expressed so well in the mystical writings of Saint Teresa of Avila: 'I die because I do not die.'

But beyond or before a Christian culture in radically Catholic Spain, there is an oriental culture that flourished from the seventh to the fifteenth century in Lorca's Andalucía: the deeply sensory and sensual Arab culture, which also has a strong sense of fatality and death. Lorca was faithful to that Arab root more than any other Spanish poet, through his celebration of the *Cante Jondo* (deep song), the *Gipsy Ballads* and his final collection of poems based on oriental poetic forms, the *ghazals* of the Persian poet Hafiz – short lyric poems – and the Arabic *casidas* – medium-length poems whose intricate internal structure makes them sound almost liturgical. Lorca transforms them into quatrains with a slow, drawn-out rhythm. Here are the first two quatrains of the *Casida of the Dark Pigeons*:

In the branches of the bay-tree  
sit two dark pigeons.  
One was the sun,  
the other the moon.

I asked them, 'Little neighbours,  
where is my grave?'  
'In my tail,' said the sun.  
'In my throat,' said the moon.

In all of these, Love contests with Death (the eternal struggle between Eros and Thanatos so essential to Arab poetry). For Lorca, love and death are the two faces of the same *duende*, which loves life as much as it loves death. As he puts it in his lecture: 'In all Arabic music, dance or song, the appearance of the *duende*, the spirit of the Earth, is greeted with vociferous shouts of "Alá! Alá!" ("God! God!"), which are not far from the Olé! of bullfighting. And in the singing of Southern Spain, the presence of the *duende* is accompanied by shouts of

"Viva Dios!" ("Long live God!"), a profound, human and tender cry of communion with God through the five senses.'

The other appearance of the *duende* that Lorca notes, alluded to in the above quotation, is in bullfighting. Once again, no other poet has written better about this bloody ritual (a 'brutal sport', the English would call it). 'It is in bullfighting,' says Lorca, 'that the *duende* attains its most impressive character, because, on the one

## And in the singing of Southern Spain, the presence of the *duende* is accompanied by shouts of 'Viva Dios!' ('Long live God!')

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hand, it has to fight with death, and on the other, with geometry. The bull has its orbit, the bullfighter his, and between orbit and orbit there exists a point of danger, which is the apex of the terrible game.' A terrible game indeed, and although I'm not English, I am indeed 'haemophobic' and I personally loathe this sacrifice for its cruelty and bloodthirstiness. Many sociologists and historians see in this bloody Spanish custom or festival from post-medieval times the roots of the bloody Civil War (blood calls to blood) with more than two and a half million dead – thus even more than in the brutal US Civil War, which is saying a lot.

Certainly, in bullfighting there is a sense of sacrifice ('making sacred') and therefore something religious, even mystical. Lorca adds: 'Spain is the only country where death is a natural spectacle.' Later in his lecture he says, 'In Spain (as in the East, where dance is a religious expression), the *duende* has a boundless field in the bodies of the dancing girls of Cádiz, in the breasts of singers and the whole liturgy of bullfighting, a true religious drama where, as in the Mass, there is adoration and a God is sacrificed.' Lorca's comparison of bullfighting with the Mass is apt. Fortunately, in the Mass Christ's sacrifice (he also foresaw his death) is bloodless and mystical through the bread and wine.

In more than one of my own poems I have compared Lorca in a Spain at the outset of civil war with this 'liturgy' or 'religious drama', in which the poet is the 'bull' challenging fanatical, hypocritical and macho Spain, oppressive and medieval in its relation to women and sexual love. This is characteristic of all Lorca's work, especially his plays. At the same time, the poet is the bullfighter confronting the blind, brutal bull, that was the Spain of that time. In both cases he is a sacrificial victim.

Lorca was born under the sign of Gemini. When the *duende* takes possession of an artist and identifies with him, it never leaves him, even when they are both dying.

Here I remember the wonderful ballet, *Cruel Garden* by Christopher Bruce, danced by the Ballet Rambert. Interpreting Lorca, Bruce keeps on dancing till the end, when the gunfire can already be heard. He nearly falls to the ground and gets up, again and again, as if expressing with his choreography the final struggles of the poet's agony. At the end, he embraces the Earth he loved so much and falls with the full weight of his Poetic Genius.

And speaking of endings, I want to finish by touching on an aspect which Lorca would doubtless have mentioned, had he lived longer. It is something I discovered by pure 'intuition', through my dramatic poem, *A Night of A Thousand Years*, in which García Lorca and Pablo Neruda meet after their deaths, in spirit, in Cuba to celebrate the centenary of the Chilean poet's birth.

Everything happens round one of Havana's battered, out-of-tune pianos, which Lorca is playing, although it sounds 'moribund', for lack of spare parts due to the US blockade. I was faced with the problem of reducing a work lasting an hour and a half to a 40-minute play, and I did not want to leave out metaphors and images about Cuban pianos. So I invented a character who turned out to be a sort of *duende*, to bring the two poets together. This *duende* begins the play by referring to the 'spirits of the Sky', characters I took from the *Popol Vuh*, the Central American Mayan creation story. The *duende*, the 'spirit of the Earth', is a messenger from the spirits of the Sky. The concordance of the Spanish-Arabic and the pre-Columbian culture of the Americas turned out very harmonious. Both cultures have an essentially cosmic dimension that speaks of the 'music of the spheres in the universe', from which the Earth is inseparable. It was

here that I discovered the Poetic Genius is born out of the Earth, because it comes from the cosmos and returns to the cosmos. The spirit of the Earth is born from the womb of Mother Earth, fertilised by star dust.

It is interesting to see how such similar cultures have had the same historical destiny. The Christians who expelled the Moors from Granada in 1492 were the same who discovered America in that same year, and then went on to destroy the ancient cultures of both Americas. These same Christians invaded the Middle East during the crusades and lately invaded Afghanistan and Iraq. This conflict, caused by the 'lust for power', is ancient and continues.

Nevertheless, all these cultures – Arab, Persian, Muslim, Judaeo-Christian, together with the pre-Columbian American – also have a humanism in common, revealing the true root from which grew the richness and diversity of our present civilisation in crisis. Perhaps that conflict is also the source of the Universal Poetic Genius, the *duende* or spirit of the Earth, that cries to heaven today and which, according to Lorca, appears once again 'announcing the constant baptism of newly created things'.

*Translated from Spanish by the Editor*

Chilean poet and playwright Alfredo Cordal came to London after he was exiled by Pinochet's coup that overthrew President Allende in 1973. His play, *A Passion in Buenos Aires*, was on in London in 2001, and in 2004, his play *A Night of a Thousand Years* to celebrate the centenary of the poet Pablo Neruda's birth. His most recent selection of poems is published in the bilingual *Latin American Literary Anthology* (Pablo Neruda Literary Workshop, London 2003).

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## Song Wants to Become Light

Song wants to become light.  
In the dark song holds  
threads of phosphorus and moon.  
Light does not know what it wants.  
At its opal limits  
it meets itself  
and turns.

Federico García Lorca



# A Funny Thing Happened to me on the Way to the Forum

The European Social Forum met in London in October 2004 to discuss: 'Another world is possible'. Peter Lumsden has a radical suggestion to make.

The Forum was the European Social Forum, convened to promote the idea that 'another world is possible'. It was a successor to the World Social Forum meeting in Porto Alegre in Brazil in 2001, which in turn was convened in opposition to the World Economic Forum meeting in Davos the previous year. The disturbance I experienced was a dream that this other world had become a reality and in this world the Christian symbol of the cross or crucifix – which now I seem to see around every other woman's neck – had become as abhorrent as the swastika is today. Proposing such an idea to the Forum as an essential part of the world to come would be seen by the participants to be absurd and so, after this road-to-Damascus type incident, I retraced my steps. Had they given my idea a second thought, they would have said no big deal; doubtless Stalin thought the same. Hearing that I believed that a cross-less Christianity might have a role to play in bringing another world into being, they would have said that such an idea was an oxymoron.

There was, during the Forum, another debate proceeding in the Anglican church. The Forum was raising issues that affect most people on the planet, while in the other debate a tiny minority was discussing an irrelevance. Yet it received vast coverage in the press, while I saw nothing in it about the Forum's proceedings. How is it that that in which so few participate is of concern to so many? Most of us never darken a church's door and yet it seems religious issues are of intense interest. We like to think that in the capitalistic society in which we live, only money or economics could interest us so much, that this is the 'base', or basic to our lives. Maybe Marx and Weber are both right, there is a base and a superstructure to human society. Marx thought the



the cause of most of our problems,' that would really be momentous. It would demonstrate that there had been that marriage of religious and political radicalism I have long hoped for. Full-spectrum dominance, to coin a phrase. But the Forum has no idea that their slogan 'another world is possible' owes its origin to biblical thinking, that such thinking is the root of Western culture. Were they able to grasp this root, they could cut off the flow of legitimacy to capitalism and divert it to vivify their own vision. The very idea of religious radicalism – in Western terms, a new Reformation – has no place on the Social Forum's agenda.

Unfortunately, our opponents, Christian fundamentalism and neo-conservative politics, have consummated their union. This was illustrated superbly by Jonathan Raban's article on 'Pastor Bush' (*Guardian* 7/10/04), in which he showed that this union is so strong because it speaks to the heart of Western culture, the Bible. Laying no claim to biblical inspiration, the European Social Forum has tacitly conceded the possession of the central icon of our society to the enemy, and thus enabled it to occupy our heartland. Compare this with the United Nations, which has written across its headquarters in New York the great words into ploughshares quotation from the prophet Micah, thus acknowledging its biblical inspiration.

I have been associated with the Sea of Faith since its first conference, but it was clear from the start that I came with a very different agenda. I saw it as an opportunity to deepen the shallow emancipatory politics of the 1960s. Others were – as I described them in a letter to Noam Chomsky – a bunch of clergy fed up with saying one thing and believing another (yes, he did reply, shortly but warmly!) SoF and I were like two strangers travelling to different destinations colliding in the dark, though I must admit Cupitt's neo-liberalism did come as something of a shock. Clearly there was no necessary connection between political and religious radicalism, but this only mirrored the reformers of the sixteenth century, Calvin and Luther, who were fiercely reactionary in their politics. My efforts to radicalise SoF's politics bore little fruit.

I have had no better luck convincing my political friends of the necessity of religious radicalism. These, in the main, were members of the peace movement, Christian and secular, here and in the USA. It was a step too far for them. They were already marginalized for their political beliefs by their faith communities, and only tolerated by their avowals of religious orthodoxy. I'm afraid I teased them by saying that their religious

## That marriage of religious and political radicalism I have long hoped for

base was economics and religion the superstructure, Weber the opposite. We turned out in our millions against the Iraq war to no avail; my thesis is that we need to hit the religious buttons to see action.

Were the Forum capable of pointing the finger at the Christian religion of the cross and saying, 'You're

observance on Sundays supported the status quo, which they sought to overthrow during the week. The anarchists, always glad to have a go at the Christians, gave some hospitality to this idea, but of course religion to them, like the traditional left, is irreformable and to be destroyed.

In the recent US election a book entitled *Whatever Happened to Kansas* showed how the people of Kansas in supporting Bush, voted against their economic interests (wages, employment, health care) in favour of their cultural values (against gay marriage, abortion, flag burning). One reviewer showed his cloven hoof by using the Marxist term 'false consciousness' in this connection, implying these people were deluded. I think they simply acted as Weber said they could, faith overrode wealth. Marx may have been a non-realist in his theology but his ethics were certainly realist! Were the Christian left to take note of Marx's idea of base and superstructure, they could see the error of their ways. They are trying to

## Unfortunately, our opponents, Christian fundamentalism and neo-conservative politics, have consummated their union.

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build a humanist superstructure on a theistic base. It can't be done. Either God or humanity is the measure of all things. I don't see how any compromise is possible. What my dream showed me was how profound the change in our culture I have envisaged would have to be. Such a change – if it occurs at all – is decades away. I doubt if I will see any sign of it in my lifetime.

It could be objected that I need to be more positive in my outlook. It is not enough, it could be said, simply to oppose 'Crossanity' – as Bernard Shaw called it. There needs to be a symbol to replace the cross, one for a humanised Christianity, one for a faith based on the historical Jesus. What could stand for peace on earth in fulfilment of human needs? There is an evangelical group which uses the fish as their sign of faith, certainly an improvement. But this is just spin, they are impeccably orthodox! For a long time I have felt that the cup or chalice could be the symbol for a New Reformation. Representing, as it does, both satisfaction and enjoyment, it would be the ideal icon. It was used by the Utraquists, a Hussite sect in Bohemia in the fifteenth century. They advocated communion for the laity of both kinds, bread and wine (Latin *utraque*: both) – now seven hundred years later, orthodox Catholic practice! – and were, like Jesus, revolting peasants. But at other times I feel we should imitate the modesty of the Quakers, avoid symbols and show our beliefs by our way of life.

Peter Lumsden is a member of Sea of Faith Network.

# Moses

The end is satisfactory, that he believed but did not see the Promised Land created out of wilderness by hands that built the Pyramids: What quiet vineyards, shade of olive groves - *abundance* - there would be...

Up on the mountain in his ivory tower, alone with dreams that seemed to come from heaven, he fancied how wrongs could be righted, given simple laws: a perfect order, perfect in form. It takes seconds to conceive, but hours

and weeks and months before a birth, and all that time, unseen, the embryo inside, the ego in the egg he fertilised, transcends from one-celled creature to a fish caught in a swirl of fate; becomes a whole small law

unto itself, an individual whose hungry mouth and hands reach out beyond fragility, find worlds to orbit round its tears, protect its innocence, its infant pride. The dreamer's spared those growth scenarios

by dying on the mountainside, his ten-line poem smashed, though memorised (thou shalt and thou shalt not); spared knowing his assault on stone metastasised to such malignant idols. The best was on the mountain, in the end.

Leah Fritz

Leah Fritz is a poet who believes that even politically inspired poems mean both more and less than their apparent topical context, and thinks that Moses might have agreed with her – or might not. Originally from New York, she has been living in London for almost 20 years.

'Moses' previously appeared in *Acumen*.

# Is SoF a Cheshire Cat?

David Beverley questions this accusation made by David Jenkins in his book, *The Calling of a Cuckoo*.

In the penultimate chapter of *The Calling of a Cuckoo*, in one of his wonderful characteristic sweeps of language, David Jenkins dismisses the Sea of Faith Movement, likening its theology to the Cheshire Cat whose 'fading smile or grin remains when the body has utterly evaporated.' (p.159) I would suggest that this is an unfortunate caricature of a theology of vital importance to the church, and worthy of more than a paragraph's dismissal.

The essential tenet of the Sea of Faith approach to theology, as I understand it, is that faith is a human creation. The essence of faith for Sea of Faith is not, as he jibes, a fading illusion, but a dynamic act of creativity. This opens the way to a plurality that is at the same time susceptible of critique on the grounds of our recognition of its human origin. There is implicit too in the approach of the Sea of Faith that faith, like language, arises out of the human situation and is shaped by culture, history, experience, story and circumstance. This helps us to face up to the possibility that we can create bad faith as well as good, and thus gives a coherent clue as to why faith is implicated in so much violence and oppression, a question with which David Jenkins struggled in his book. It may go some way to explaining why fundamentalist groups who insist on an all-good external deity have in effect to create also a strong external devil to accompany it!

The Sea of Faith option opens a way of understanding the complexity of faith, and yet at the same time renders it susceptible of rational critique. This open approach offers a way to avoid both dogmatic atheism and religious fundamentalism, which is a position for which David Jenkins strongly argues in his book. The SoF approach to theology, rather than leaving a passing shadow, firmly places responsibility on humans to create faith and meaning, and for those within the Christian Tradition, presumably this means creating theology, liturgy and practice that encourages this process. It would seem that there are traditional Christian symbols, stories and insights that can be used creatively in this respect; and especially in my view, aspects of Jesus' teaching concerning the 'realm of God'.

This has a widespread knock-on effect particularly, for instance, for the Eucharist. Here there is a need to move to a theology of the banquet as a gathering-in in love and festivity of people seeking a new inclusive society, rather than on redemption and anticipation of the second coming! In the Anglican tradition, 'Common Worship' offers choices of many words, but few real theological choices.

Sea of Faith recognises the importance of rejecting the notion of an after-life, in contrast to thinkers like Jack Spong and John Hick. The removal of the other realm, which faith as a human creation entails, brings the focus back onto life now, the need to find fulfilment in it, and the imperative to work for justice and right for all. It brings the chilling realisation that we live on

for better or worse in others and the communities and world we have sought to create. This is an insight that in bereavement removes the focus from absence of a loved one to the awareness of their continued presence and influence in our lives.

In reacting to David Jenkins' statement, I asked myself if I was one of his 'certainty

wallahs' who was trapped in a secular view of life. On reflection I feel that this cannot be said of followers of the Sea of Faith movement, since to posit faith as a human creation is to affirm that it is subject to development and modification, susceptible of both creative and destructive influences, and indeed glorious and yet fallible.

I share these few reasons as to why the Sea of Faith offers a theology that is realistic, rooted in the present with its eye to the future, and profoundly committed, as is David Jenkins, to justice and re-shaping human life. I conclude by saying that while there is much I admire in the man, in his theological openness, in his commitment to justice and right, I feel impelled to suggest that David Jenkins is mistaken in likening the Sea of Faith Movement to the fading grin of the Cheshire Cat!

David Beverley is a priest who lives in Scunthorpe. *The Calling of a Cuckoo* by David Jenkins (reviewed in *sof* 60) is published by Continuum (London, 2002).



# Network News

## The SoF Southampton Roadshow

Most Network News is reported in *Portholes* but longer reports of salient events will be published in this magazine. Here Mary Lloyd reports on the Southampton Roadshow, which took place on 16th October 2004.

The Hampshire and Isle of Wight Roadshow on 16 October 2004 saw some 80 people crowding into the Dining Hall of King Edward VI School, Southampton. We enjoyed a day packed with intellectual challenge, a questioning of 'received wisdom' from varied standpoints, a good deal of humour – and an excellent lunch.

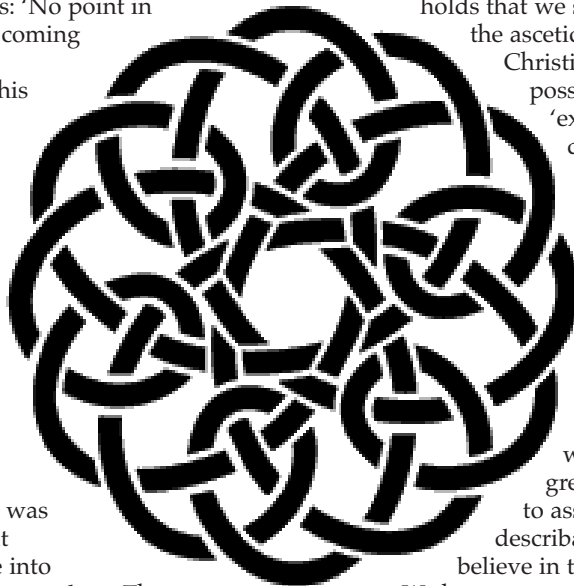
**David Boulton** kicked off with reminiscences of boyhood among the Exclusive Brethren, eliciting wry laughter as he recalled his parents' dilemma in the face of the adolescent logic that there was: 'No point in doing homework if the Lord was coming back next week.' With a glancing reference to the old certainties in his assertion that, 'a journalist will always find a place in heaven for the despised and rejected,' David moved smoothly on to the real substance of his talk. Pointing to Islam's fundamentalist revival which has seen it double its world membership since 1970, at the same time as the TV evangelists have moved in to control vast tracts of Africa, South America and the former Communist bloc, he reminded us that it is no longer possible – as it was only 20 years ago – to assume that Christianity will gradually evolve into 'something' humanitarian and post-modern. The need for new thinking is imperative!

Asking us to consider 'What on earth is religion for?' he moved on to the need for rigorous definition of what we mean by 'spirituality'; a recognition that the Bible, as one mythology amongst many, can still be seen as a way of telling truths about what we need; and a telling account of a Hindu scholar who had reached the point where he could assert: 'I believe passionately in every aspect of Ganesh – except his existence.' Urging us to recast our understanding of the word God as the embodiment of Blake's 'Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love' – and adding a fifth: Justice – David provided us with a telling piece of theatre to drive this point home as it applies in the real world – the only world we have. Numbering his audience from 1 to 75 to represent the global population, he made 58 of us stand: we represent those who are actively polluting the environment. Only 21 were identified as 'white' – the rest, of course, being labelled as ethnic 'minorities'. Finally, asking just 3 people to stand, he pointed out that these 3 own 40% of the world's wealth and resources.

**Elizabeth Stuart**, who describes herself as orthodox in belief but radical in practice, had been invited to challenge us out of any risk of complacency. A professor at University College, Winchester, a bishop of the Catholic Episcopal Church and the author of *Religion is a Queer Thing*, she drew our attention to the radical de-stabilising of gender identities offered by Queer Theory. Arguing that the church has handed over its real, radical position to the conservatives, and has only recently idealised marriage and family life – 'in Christ there is no male or female' – she holds that we shall return to a sexless state, of which the ascetic life is the precursor. She suggested that Christianity needs again to discover the possibilities offered by parody, defined as 'extended repetition with a critical difference'. Perhaps one of the most memorable moments of the day came with her reference to angels as agents of self-help who 'just make our world easier to bear'.

Unsurprisingly, **Don Cupitt** cut acerbically across this mood in interrogating us on the central issue of 'Where have we got to?' He reflected that if God, the Author, is gone, the world is not guaranteed to have its own great unifying story. How can we continue to assume the unity, intelligibility and describability of 'creation'? We have no right to believe in truth out there, underlying everything. We have no way of checking *our* language, *our* world-view, against any absolute, objective vision of the world. There is *only* the human. We must content ourselves with what we make – our world, our language, our common human life. There may have been those in the audience for whom this message seems too bleak to bear. However, Don went on to remind us that religion does not *have* to be based on metaphysical beliefs about unseen powers. We can embark on the religion of life, in which the love of life largely replaces traditional, credal, institutional religion.

**Richard Hall**, who brought wit and urbanity to his role as anchorman, left us with final food for thought. He recounted his horror when, as a theology student more than 30 years ago, he was instructed by his tutor, 'You have to divide your brain into two halves: one for thinking and studying with – and the other for preaching.' More than 20 of those who attended the conference (including a few clerics!) showed their commitment to continue thinking and questing by attending the inaugural meetings of the Hampshire Sea of Faith group in the second week of November.



# News Forum

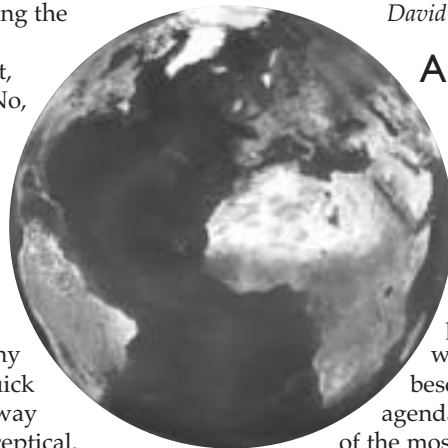
## Is Foxhunting a Religion?

A group of hunting enthusiasts is setting up its own 'church' in an attempt to stop the government from banning its favourite sport, reported *The Daily Telegraph*. The founders of the Free Church of Country Sports, whose supporters include a barrister, a publisher and several business men, claim that fox-hunting is part of their religion and that banning it would be an infringement of their rights as a religious minority.

The hunting ban will come into force in February 2005. After it was voted through Parliament, using the Parliament Act in November 2004, Julian Barnfield, huntsman of the Cotswold Hunt, told *The Guardian*, 'I won't obey this law. No, no way. This is my life. Of course we'll keep hunting. Well, we have to, don't we? Nothing else to do.'

## Bush Back

Those of us who found the first Bush administration a distressingly retrograde experience are in a state of numbness. Many critics of the Democratic persuasion are quick to conclude that 'if Kerry had done it my way etc', he would have won easily but I am sceptical. Many people in the red states left the polls saying their most important issue was 'moral values'. An Op-Ed in the *New York Times* cited disaffection around the four Gs: Guns, Gays, God and Grizzlies (the last referring to caring more about bears than those on the economic margin needing money to put food on the table). The radical ('conservative' they are not) right and Christian fundamentalists have convinced Joe and Jane six-pack that we bi-coastal Democrats are rich, uncaring snobs and contemptuous of them. Thus they seemed to vote more to assert their dignity, as defined by the right, than their economic well-being. In 2000 I thought Bush would govern cautiously, after losing



the popular vote and being anointed by the five dwarfs on the Supreme Court. Was I wrong! Now he tells us he has a mandate: hold on to your hats!

The one bright spot follows from the observation of Barney Frank, a local gay, liberal and whip-smart congressman: angry people are angrier than grateful people are grateful. After *Roe v. Wade* is overturned, and abortion is once again illegal, a lot of the electorate may wake up to the demons we have put in high places. We hope.

David Rush, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA

## A Real God

On December 6th 2004 Max Hastings writes in *The Guardian*: 'A week in the United States, such as I have just spent, is enough to make anybody feel a trifle fed up with God, or rather with the relentless invocation of the deity by American politicians, led by their president. No public occasion would be complete without the blessing of the Almighty being besought for whatever endeavour tops their agenda, most prominently the war in Iraq... One of the most grotesque landmarks of the Bush presidency was established this time last year, when the *Los Angeles Times* revealed that a top general was touring Christian fundamentalist churches assuring congregations that he knew "our side" would prevail in the struggle with Muslim extremism "because our God is a real God" and the other side's is a phoney.'

## Peace on Earth

In the Madame Tussauds Christmas waxwork tableau Mary and Joseph are Posh and Becks. Bush, Blair and Prince Philip are the three wise men. Unwise, surely? The originals may have come from Baghdad.

## Please send your letters to:

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Congratulations on *sof* 68. For myself the accent on the creative as the primary mode of spiritual endeavour, together with the prominence afforded to this world and all that dwell therein – all that is extremely congenial.

William I. Brown  
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Congratulations on your first issue! I loved Nezahualcōyotl and found Mike Phipps' article (*Terror and Resistance in Occupied Iraq, sof* 68) engrossing. Keep up the good work.

Anne Ashworth  
anne-ashworth2@virgin.net

I was profoundly shocked by the hubristic 'denial of possibility', if not overt sacrilege, implicit in the editorial of *sof* 68. The sublime is, in fact, a negation of atheism: it is an act of God, and confirmation of the existence of God. It is totally impossible for the sublime and atheism to meet; they are mutually exclusive. The suggestion, on page two of the Editorial, that one can even contemplate living well whilst denying the supernatural is a sin against Planet Earth, embodying as it does both the natural and the overarching supernatural. There is no such thing as 'a vanishing point'.

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letters

David Rush reviews

## Looking in the Distance The Human Search for Meaning

by Richard Holloway.

Canongate, Edinburgh 2004. 215 pages. £12.99. ISBN 1841955353.

*Looking in the Distance: The Human Search for Meaning* is the companion volume to Bishop Richard Holloway's *Godless Morality*. In that book he described an ethical framework constructed from our human experience on this Earth (as far as most of us understand, the only one we have). In this book he addresses a related concern: whether a coherent spirituality is possible without reference to supernatural forces.

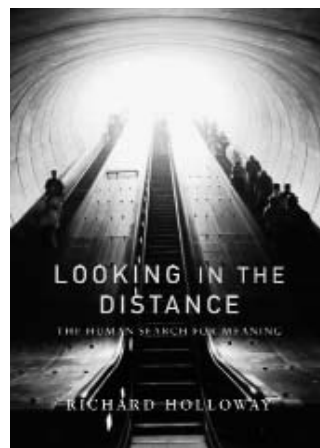
For this reviewer he has succeeded admirably, especially considering that this is a short book (215 pages of text, on small pages). The book has a minimum of references and endnotes, but many germane quotations, including a large number of poems. I found them very well chosen, and often moving.

The four sections are entitled Looking, Speaking, Listening, and what was for me the best of all, Leaving. In 'Looking', Bishop Holloway meditates on the amazing world in which we are all immersed, and describes how he now takes the world full on, without any urge to explain what cannot be explained, especially by traditional religion. He quotes the poet Hafiz that:

The Great Religions are the Ships  
Poets the life Boats.  
Every sane person I know has jumped  
Overboard...

Holloway says 'we may be no closer to understanding why there is a world, but we are now able to accept the fact that the world itself is the source of the values and meanings we prize most, not some hypothetical transcendent reality which did none of the work yet claims all the credit. One way to express this is to say that the spirit is now engendered by and encountered in the world in which we find ourselves. Rather than positing an external force to account for our most cherished experiences, we begin to understand how they were generated within us in response to the life process itself.'

In 'Speaking', subtitled 'Telling Tales', Holloway looks to literature to express the truths of the human condition,



and begins to formulate an active and creative response to the reality he finds in which we are immersed. He says, 'The fact that we are now on our own makes it all the more imperative that we reach out to one another 'sometimes hand to hand'.

'Listening' is provocatively subtitled 'Playing it by Ear'. In this section he explores what our religious traditions have to tell us, and says we must go beyond what has been given us by the past if we are to meet the urgent challenges of our moment. For a flavour of what you will find in this rich meditation, one section is entitled 'We confuse preferences with morality'.

The last section was for me the richest, and alone worth the price of the book. 'Leaving' is subtitled 'After all'. In it Holloway talks about how an old man considers his death. There is nothing formulaic in his thoughts, and for this reviewer, who is just about his age, his thinking about how we might approach death is wonderfully clear, honest, and unflinching.

You have probably already surmised that I am deeply grateful to Holloway for writing this book. It is very much a practitioner's book, one that would probably not pass scholarly muster. But his practice is that of a wise and compassionate priest and minister, someone who has lived long, and has much to say. I think any local Sea of Faith group would find much value in reading this book together; you will be in the presence of a wise, loving and compassionate sceptic. I find this a landmark book for religious humanists.

David Rush is a US American, and a retired professor of Paediatrics and Epidemiology. He is an active participant in the SoF email group and has given workshops on non-theism among Quakers in the US and UK.

Dinah Livingstone faces a huge task in turning this magazine into a vibrant voice of the Sea of Faith Network. A glance at her first edition reveals the desperate state into which it has fallen. Out of 24 pages (2 of which are taken up by the front cover and contents page) no fewer than eleven are taken up with articles by writers who don't appear to have any connection with, or interest in Sea of Faith. Contrast this 68th edition with, for example, one of Spring 1990. Out of 20 pages, one is taken up with a list of contributors. The remaining 19 are written by 12 members of the network.

But perhaps the greatest obstacle to the magazine becoming a lively, radical, religious publication is the

seeming lack of interest in religious communities and the problems they face. That is where most religious activity takes place. We ought to be very concerned with how change can happen in religious communities. Yet I understand that within the network, this is sidelined into the activities of a mere interest group. Those who see no future for faith communities should be concerned as to how to bring them to an end and what will replace them.

Peter Tassell  
PTassell@aol.com



# Rug from the Atlas Mountains

*for Redha*

On our knees we examine the weaving:  
the folded-in birds, turtles with wayward steps,  
horse-figures, and butterflies wide as farms,  
girls holding hands in a row, faded here and there,  
camel-shadows – burdened, a grey teapot.

A tree of banners. My mother gave this to us years ago.  
The long and tangled threads of wool  
under the rug are dark blue and plenty,  
white and yellow, brilliant red, bound together  
and sticking out like plums, knotted for the duration.  
Sometimes we turn the rug over, and it is all still there,  
just as it always was, still perfectly made –  
we are reminded of those intenser hidden colours  
that bind, the intricate warmth,  
sun fading the surface forms –  
how little it takes for you to move me.

Jane Duran

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## It Haunts

It haunts the far edge of the adapted brain –  
Is all but unsayable in the words that remain –  
Would be as elemental as the owl's flight –  
Lifting its wings through the narcosis of night –  
As compelling as a blind man's hand  
Touching the face of a shell-shocked child –  
Would be the hand ringing the monastic bell –  
The bronzed circles humming all is still well  
In the archaic beat of the juddering heart –  
An epic in each cell – an epiphany in each part –  
Would be the Paraclete – the descent of fire –  
Hovering bird – open mouth – glossolalia –  
Would be over a severed world bleeding –  
An arching noun of care, a participle of healing.

Peter Abbs

Jane Duran's latest poetry collection was *Silences from the Spanish Civil War* (Enitharmon, London 2002). 'Rug from the Atlas Mountains' was previously published in *thetallighthouse review*.

Peter Abbs is Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Sussex. His poetry collections include *Personae and other Selected Poems* (Skoob Books, 1995) and his prose work *Against the Flow: Education, the arts and postmodern culture* was published by Routledge Falmer in 2003.

# Mayday Notes

## Why ravest thou or art thou right drunk? Personification

In *Piers Plowman* book 18, which describes the crucifixion and the harrowing of Hell, Mercy and Truth, Righteousness and Peace are four free-speaking, quarrelsome women who argue with comic ferocity about what has been going on that Good Friday. Peace says that 'Jesus jousted well, joy beginneth to dawn' because God has ordained: 'Mercy, my sister and I mankind should save.' Righteousness rudely interrupts her: 'Why ravest thou? Or art thou right drunk?' Peace and Mercy, you think too much of yourselves! What about me, Righteousness? They continue to argue until Mercy and Truth agree and Righteousness and Peace kiss and make up (as in Psalm 85).

In George Herbert's poem 'Love', quoted by David Perman in his article on page 6, Love is personified as a gracious host treating an unworthy-feeling guest with great kindness and courtesy. The poem describes in very concrete terms how Love *behaves*; its power and grace come from the *particular details* with which Love is shown in *action*. The guest feels fit only to serve at the table. Love replies:

'You must sit down,' says Love, 'and taste my meat.'  
So I did sit and eat.

I was thinking some more about the first Advent 'O' antiphon, quoted in the editorial, in which Wisdom is personified:

O Wisdom,  
proceeding from the mouth of the Most High,  
reaching from end to end  
to look after everything strongly and sweetly,  
come and teach us carefulness.

The antiphon is based on the great Wisdom poem in the Old Testament apocryphal book, *Wisdom of Solomon*, and its lines 2-3 are taken directly from that book's chapter 8 verse 1. Fascinatingly for a patriarchal religion, in this poem Wisdom is a woman and divine. She is 'a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty'. The poet is 'enamoured of her beauty'. Of course, in John the Evangelist's poem on the incarnation, with which his Gospel opens, the feminine *Sophia* becomes the masculine *Logos*: Jesus was a man.

I was pondering why in the original poem Wisdom was a woman and whether it had something to do with 'carefulness'. I don't think that women are 'naturally' more careful than men. But carefulness is the hard lesson every new mother has to acquire fast, when, possibly after years of careless student days or jolly nights out, she becomes responsible for the minutiae of a hugely vulnerable newborn life and has constantly to look after small material details.

## The Rug is Real

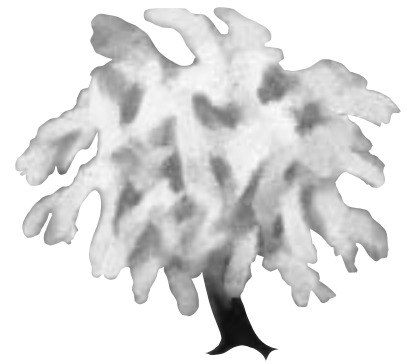
In Jane Duran's poem 'Rug from the Atlas Mountains' on page 17 dedicated *for Redha*, the two of them carefully examine a rug, the beautiful pictures woven into it, the skilful workmanship, the unfaded colours at the back. The rug's lovingly evoked *reality* is what gives poetic force to her final line: 'how little it takes for you to move me'. She has put her feelings 'for Redha' into the rug, so that it becomes a metaphor (metaphor = 'carry over') for those feelings. It is only in the last line that we realise this is a love poem. Similarly, although a very different poem, 'Summer by the Swale' on page 23, dedicated *for Ian*, has a brisk walking rhythm with many local words and place names, which graphically evoke a walk they go on together in Swaledale. The limestone landscape with its rushing waters becomes a metaphor for the poet's own body and feelings:

where water dives  
through limestone  
bone by bone  
into the heart's four caves.

This poetic charging of physical experience with feeling and imagination is very close to the religious impulse to 'animate' or personify 'deep encounters' as spirits or gods. Both express the spiritual richness of human life dealing with the material world.

Poetry is made of very concrete things that we can see, hear, taste, smell and feel. A poem is itself also an articulated *body* of words in a particular order, with its own rhythm, sound and shape. We respond to rhythm because our own hearts beat and may beat faster. Supernatural beings don't exist; God is not real. But the Earth and its inhabitants are real. The poet Hopkins, who wrote 'Binsey Poplars' said he felt a terrible physical pain when the trees were cut down. What I find disagreeable about calling the Earth and its inhabitants 'non-real' is the *carelessness* of their physical particularity, which in poetry is to miss the point (and in politics 100,000 dead Iraqi civilians can become 'collateral damage' – just words). A 'non-realist' attitude to a poem is to discount all the physical particularities it possesses or conveys, because the 'non-realist' philosopher merely wants to extract a philosophical point from it, rather like that beef essence we were given as children.

At the end of William Morris's *News from Nowhere* the heroine, Ellen gives her great cry: 'How I love the Earth, and the seasons and weather, and all things that deal with it, and all that grows out of it!' It is the *physical reality* of the Earth and its creatures (including ourselves), that sustains, gives life, body and thisness to all the feelings, imaginings and creations of the poetic genius with which we load them.



# Atheism at half cock

David Boulton is critical of Jonathan Miller's series *Atheism: a Rough History of Disbelief*.

Twenty years after Don Cupitt's *Sea of Faith* series, which described the gradual transformation of Christianity into radical humanism, the BBC gave us Jonathan Miller's series, *Atheism: a Rough History of Disbelief*, charting atheism's evolution from Enlightenment Unitarianism and Deism to the post-Darwinian twilight of the gods and the collapse of supernaturalism. Where Cupitt had bagged some prime BBC2 slots, reaching millions, Miller had to content himself in today's more competitive and commercial world with digital BBC4, reaching mere thousands. I doubt that we'll see the emergence of a Sea of unFaith network from this series.

But it had its moments. In particular, we were reminded that the brave and principled pioneers who led the historic campaigns for freedom from religion faced imprisonment, transportation and death at the hands of Church and State, no less than the Quaker, Unitarian and nonconformist martyrs who fought for freedom of religion. Official Christianity treated those who preached a godless morality with the same fearful ferocity it unleashed on those whose take on God was different from its own. The noble army of martyrs includes bolshie atheists as well as dissident theists.

But I found the series disappointing, not least in that I expected rather more from Miller, whom I greatly admire. Some years ago I commissioned for Granada a TV series called *My God!* which I persuaded Miller to present. In a series of half-hour studio interviews, describing himself as a 'devout sceptic', he questioned radical theologians, philosophers and historians of religion (including Don Cupitt). I think he got closer to the heart of his subject matter as an interrogator, engaging with other minds of equal calibre, than he ever managed to get when he only had a camera to talk to, which could only give back his own reflection.

The biggest weakness of the series was that it remained stuck, from opening titles to closing credits, with the simplistic 'Does God exist?' question. Religion for Miller was simply about believing that God exists and intervenes in human affairs. Science had eroded and finally exploded that belief. All that was left for anyone with any intelligence was Miller's atheism, defined as not believing in God, or just 'disbelief'. Simple.

At no time in the entire four and a half hours of the series was there so much as a nod in the direction of those thinkers who, from the early 19th century on, tried to shift the question from 'Does God exist?' to 'What do we mean by 'God'? No Feuerbach or Strauss, no Wittgenstein, no Cupitt. De-supernaturalised religion? God as a symbol of human ideals? God as the fictional protagonist of our human mythologies, stories, poems, dramas? God as Winstanley's Reason? God as Blake's Imagination? None of this for Miller: just 'Does this super-person exist or doesn't he?'. A literalistic theism or a literalistic atheism: take it or leave it, tick the yes or no box.



I wonder what Jonathan Miller the opera and drama director would say to all that? Suppose, when he is preparing a production of *The Magic Flute*, some lean and hungry literalist takes him aside and says 'But Jonathan, how can you do this when you know there are no magic flutes or bells, no dancing animals, that the Queen of the Night doesn't exist?' Or, when the curtain is about to go up on his *Midsummer Night's Dream*, 'But Jonathan, there are no fairies! Science has proved that Bottom could never be an ass!'

I think Dr Miller might assume his best bedside manner, produce that look of brainy, puzzled exasperation which is his trade-mark, and tell the poor fellow he was spectacularly missing the point. In the world of the imagination, of the heart, of art, of *mythos*, you don't take things so literally! Fairies and magic flutes don't exist in the world of touch and taste and microscope, but they are alive and well in the mythologies and stories which help us unravel the complexities of what it means to be human. Titania's fairy sprites, Pullman's daemons, the ancient world's gods, goddesses, devils and heavenly hosts are projections of ourselves, and help us understand something of who, what and why we are.

The world of magic and the supernatural does indeed have no place in the world of factual reporting, logical deduction, evidential science. In that world, God is as dead as the fairies, as non-real as the ghost of Hamlet's father. But there's another world, where what it is to be human, to love, to live, to hurt, to heal, to die, is explored by *mythos*, by creative imagination and symbolism. It is in that world that God can still have meaning as the imagined personification of the values we long to be able to live by; and here neither 'theism' nor 'atheism' is adequate as a defining label. Which is why a four and a half hour series on not believing in a personal God, which never strays from *logos* literalism, tells only half the story. So which broadcaster will commission a series from Karen Armstrong to tell the other half?

*Atheism: a Rough History of Disbelief* was broadcast on BBC4 on October 18th, 25th and November 1st 2004.

Ronald Pearse reviews

## Is Christianity going anywhere?

by Lloyd Geering

2004, St Andrew's Trust for the Study of Religion and Society,  
56 pp; ISBN 0-9583645-8-3.

It is unusual for a book review to start by looking at its publishers and their premises. I find it rewarding, however, in the case of this latest offering from Lloyd Geering and the St Andrew's Trust. The first ships of European settlers arrived in what is now Wellington, the capital city of New Zealand, in 1840. A Presbyterian minister from Scotland conducted the settlers' first service on the foreshore there and from that service the present church of St Andrew's on the Terrace eventually developed, in the middle of the present city, surrounded by government offices and near Parliament. The church is an integral part of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand, but has its own statement of mission:

To create a lively, open Christian faith community, to act for a just and peaceful world, and to be catalysts for discovery, compassion and celebration in the capital.

Its congregational statement says:

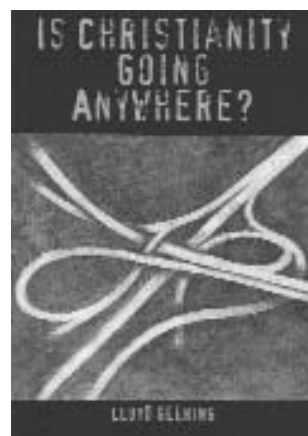
We are supportive of theological and biblical scholarship and our ministers have reflected this in their preaching. The liberal nature of the congregation does not mean that all within it think alike; indeed we value our diversity and see that as part of our community's strength and attraction to newcomers. ... [We] represent a wide spectrum of religious and spiritual perspectives: from those with a traditional belief in a personal God, through to post-Christians who conceive of God as the symbolic way of describing the highest of universal and human consciousness and creativity.

Would that there were many churches in the UK which could not only hold such a position but also publicly proclaim it! I think the Anglican Church of St Mark, Broomhill, Sheffield may be our closest example.

St Andrew's on the Terrace has set up Trusts, including that for the Study of Religion and Society, which has arranged series of four lunch-time lectures (often to a full house) on specific themes, with speakers including Paul Oestreicher, Don Cupitt and Lloyd Geering. Often the lectures have been published in an affordable small book form for use across the world.

Lloyd's latest lectures, *Is Christianity going anywhere?*, answer their own question positively, but with qualification – and do so in a way to stimulate uncomfortable thinking on the part of both Christians and those who have made a deliberate or tacit break from the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

In contrast to Cupitt in his *Solar Ethics* (1995, SCM Press) but, in my opinion, in tune with the latter's historical approach in *The Sea of Faith* BBC TV series and book in 1984, Geering stresses the need to know our roots. Although 'solar ethics' offers an heroic spirituality of burning out and burning up in a selfless, unknowing way, living solely in the present, I have been worried that by its



reviews

very impersonality, without history, it could be adopted and adapted dangerously by a totalitarian society (such as the Imperial Japanese kamikaze culture of up to 1945?) or by individuals who are not aware of their own emotional histories.

Geering urges both Christians and Western non-Christians to consider their roots. Christians need to understand their faith tradition as one with an evolutionary history. It grew out of Judaism (which had its own history of growth and of taking in ideas from outside its borders). At what some see as its best, the cumulative Christian tradition has shown awareness in recent centuries of the limitations of believing in a divine personal being that have been exposed by the scientific approach and the historical method of understanding phenomena.

Geering maintains that the modern secular world originated in the Christian West. Western culture had, of course, been enriched *inter alia* by classical learning and by Moorish medicine and arithmetic. I can see that love of truth and the seeking of it, which are the mainsprings of scientific thought, are, in the West, products of the West's developed religious faith, even if scientific ideas have sometimes met with opposition in the Church. Christians and Western non-Christians alike need to examine their origins. Without roots, cultures die. Without knowledge of our own self-history we can be vulnerable to neurosis.

Christian history is the story of the Jesus movement. Geering offers an interesting approach to examining it – 'excavating Jesus'. This archaeological way of understanding Christian evolution contradicts Schweitzer by working backwards from later dogmatic ideas about Jesus, stripping away nine layers, until we are left with what current scholarship suggests may be convincing voiceprints and footprints of him. These enable us to try to recover Jesus' teaching.

Geering sees Christian orthodoxy as standing still, not going anywhere. But he maintains that Christianity *can* have a convincing future if it takes a secular path, which can be seen as its legitimate continuation. This small book is well packed with stimulating ideas. I commend it warmly.

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In the UK copies are available by remittance of £5.75 (inc. p&p) to Sea of Faith, All Saints' Vicarage, The Street, Gazeley, Newmarket CB8 8RB; elsewhere for about NZ\$29.00 (inc. p&p) by credit card from SATRS, PO Box 5203, Wellington, NZ or [satrs@standrews.org.nz](mailto:satrs@standrews.org.nz).

Note: Professor Geering delivered a sermon on the Trinity on Trinity Sunday 2004 in St Andrew's on the Terrace. His script can be accessed on <http://standrews.org.nz>

# The Motorcycle Diaries

Cicely Herbert reviews Walter Salles' film about Che Guevara's epic journey on his not-so-trusty steed, the motorcycle *La Ponderosa*.



Ernesto 'Che' Guevara, one of five children, was born in 1928 into a comfortable upper class family in Argentina. Throughout his life he suffered from asthma and as a small boy was taught at home by a mother he clearly adored. Though he doesn't seem to have been rebellious, the ruthless determination that characterised his later years may have developed during his struggle to combat an ailment that often threatened his life.

In December 1951 Guevara deferred his final year as a medical student and set off from Buenos Aires with his friend Alberto Granado on a journey of discovery which was to transform him into the revolutionary hero, who would attain mythic status after his assassination in Bolivia 16 years later.

Guevara later expanded notes he had taken on the journey, which, with the letters he wrote to his mother are published as *The Motorcycle Diaries* and form the basis of the film made by Brazilian director Walter Salles. What began as a light-hearted exploit undertaken by two young men on the brink of entering the medical profession became for Ernesto a rite of passage that profoundly influenced his life and way of thinking.

Riding an old 500c motorcycle *La Ponderosa* (the Mighty One) the friends took eight months to cover thousands of miles through Argentina to Chile, Peru, Colombia and finally to Caracas in Venezuela where they parted. In Chile they stopped for a few days to visit a girlfriend of Che's, the comforts of her wealthy background a striking contrast to the poverty they were to encounter later. At some stage during the ensuing entertaining adventures *La Ponderosa* gave up the ghost and the pair had to continue the journey by foot. It is at this point, when they were forced to walk or hitch lifts, that they began to witness the hardships endured by many of the people they met. Ernesto wrote, 'We had come to a new phase in our adventure ... now we were just two hitchhikers with backpacks...shadows of our former aristocratic selves.' In Valparaiso Ernesto visited a dying woman: 'It is at times like this, when a doctor realises his complete powerlessness, that he longs for change: a chance to prevent the injustice of a system in which individuals in poor families who can't pay their way become a purely

negative factor in the struggle for life and a source of bitterness for the healthy members of the community.'

Later the pair met a communist couple who had been dispossessed under the Chilean 'Law for the Defence of Democracy' and were living without shelter. The young men gave the couple one of their blankets and they spent a bitterly cold night together. The next day the communists set off in search of work in the mines where conditions were so bad that no questions would be asked. Of the copper mine in Chuquicamata Guevara wrote, 'Chile produces 20 percent of the world's copper, and in these uncertain times of potential conflict copper has become vitally important because it is an essential component of various types of weapons of destruction.' And later: 'The biggest effort Chile should make is to shake its uncomfortable Yankee friend from its back.'

A key section of the film shows the time the two men spent working in a leper colony in the Amazon rainforest. Playing football with the patients, refusing to wear the unnecessary protective gloves issued to them or to attend the obligatory celebration of Mass, Ernesto and Alberto endeared themselves to those whose living quarters were separated from the healthy workers' by the great river. At a party to celebrate his 24th birthday Che made a speech in which he looked forward to a time when all America should be united. In the film he then plunges into the dangerous night waters of the Amazon in a symbolic gesture to join the people of the leper colony.

On the whole the film has stayed faithful to Che's diaries. It is epic in scale, the performances are excellent and the landscape stunning. At certain key moments the director uses sepia shots of people posed as if in still photographs, to underline the poverty and hopelessness of living conditions of the exploited indigenous people.

At a special showing of *The Motorcycle Diaries* given during the week of the European Social Forum 2004, Che's daughter Dr Aleida Guevara March – a paediatrician in Cuba – told the audience that her father did indeed make the heroic two hour swim across the Amazon, but that he did it during the afternoon! (Che had written to his mother that he never quite overcame his fear of water at night.) Dr Guevara March also said she regarded the film as a song of love for her beautiful country, a view I fully endorse.

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*The Motorcycle Diaries* starring Gael García Bernal as Che Guevara and Rodrigo de la Sema as Alberto Granado. Director Walter Salles. On general release 2004.

*The Motorcycle Diaries (Notes on a Latin American Journey)* by Ernesto Guevara, translated by Alexandra Keeble with a preface by Aleida Guevara March and an Introduction by Cintio Vitier is published by Harper Perennial.

# Luminous, liminous, numinous

Kathleen McPhilemy reviews

## At the Edge of Light

by Lynne Wycherley

Shoestring Press. 2003. 58pp. £7.95. ISBN 1899549897.

As I tried to identify the quality of the poems in Lynne Wycherley's *At The Edge of Light*, I found myself searching for a word which would somehow combine the ideas of *numinous* and *luminous*. At the same time, I realised that if there were such a word, Wycherley would probably have used it. Her poetry is described as sensual and scrupulously observed and while this is true, it does not go far enough. The scrupulosity of observation is united to a precision of language, which ensures that detail is rendered exactly, resulting in a poetry that is taut and controlled. Wycherley does not so much indulge in sensuality as anatomise it.

From dreaming depths you peered at me,  
Fawn barbules silking your body

In these two lines from *Tawny Owl*, we can see Wycherley's technique at work. The 'dreaming depths' of the owl's lair hovers on the edge of subjectivity with the hypnotic use of alliteration and the transferred epithet of 'dreaming' which more properly applies to the poet. However, this is countered by the precision of 'peered' and the evocative sensuality of 'silking'. But the truly distinctive word in this line is 'barbules'; specific and technical, it sends us scurrying to the dictionary and inhibits any easy reading of the poem.

Wycherley does this over and over again. Her poetry resists us by its insistence on using words, which are unfamiliar but specific, often drawn from the technical vocabulary of a particular discipline. The delight in physical detail is reflected in the delight in specific language. Sometimes, we feel she is teasing us. In *The Mary Rose Ship Hall* she tells us of 'the drowned notes of a douciane' and generously footnotes 'douciane' as a type of 'shawm'. However, I found 'shawm' equally opaque and needed the dictionary to tell me it was an 'obsolete musical instrument with a reed'.

The book is divided into four sections, but opens and closes with two poems which complement each other beautifully and emphasise the poet's concern with the quality of light. *Bewick Swans Arrive At Ouse Washes* is a poem which successfully conveys the emergence of hope out of threat and struggle without any surrender to facile optimism. In a startling and effective image, she describes the triumph of winter, 'the darkness sways on its haunches/ like an impatient bear' and its interruption by the arrival of the swans, who have the whiteness and brightness of light as they 'crash-land on the water/ star after star after star'. The isolation of the final line forces us to ponder exactly what the swans are bringing us. The stars carry the connotations of the Christmas star which is confirmed by the season in which the poem is set. The colloquial meaning of 'star' as someone outstanding also carries weight. At the same

time, we know that stars are remote and that their light is hard and intensely bright, and gains its quality from the surrounding darkness. The promise of the poem is not an easy one.

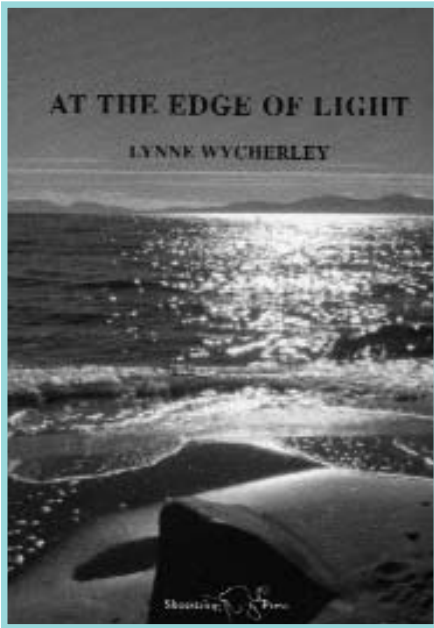
The final poem, *Solstice*, includes the title of the volume in its last line, 'to somewhere at the edge of light'. This is a poem of thresholds, another of Wycherley's preoccupations. It is set between night and day, between seasons, between the seen and the unseen, between the understood and the unknown, as 'it hovers at the lych-gate' between this book and the next. *Three Days in Fermanagh* announces this theme in its first line, 'We were stopped at the border', before moving on to the 'janiform sculptures/ on Boa Island.' This poem skilfully combines topical allusion with a meditation on love, 'two personalities joined at the hip,/ eyes fixed on opposite horizons' and death:

If there's an otherworld, send back  
an apple. Something to capture this beauty  
and terror: no postcards, please.

I find the density of this poem particularly satisfying. Immediate experience and personal emotions are supported by classical and literary allusion. The last two lines, in their oblique reference to Yeats' 'terrible beauty' remind us of the political and topical realities with which the poem opened. It is when Wycherley allows us to explore the implications and resonances of her work for ourselves that she is most successful.

Occasionally, she tells us what she means which has a slightly limiting or disappointing effect. Two poems which have this, for me, too worked-out, slightly didactic quality are *Bachelor of Science* and *In the Forge*. The first poem, a sonnet which exhibits the poet's technical virtuosity, is perhaps constrained by its form. It is also, I feel, rather surprising in its negative view of science in the context of so many other poems, where the poet seems to delight in the knowledge and precision of understanding of the natural world which science affords.

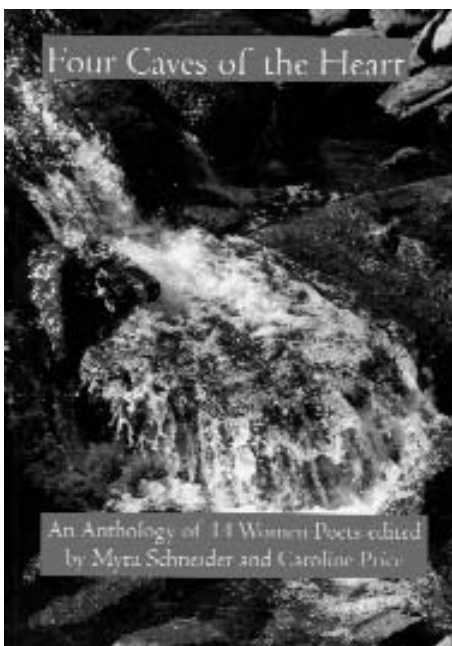
In the second section of the book, the poet shows how her concern with borders originates in her own history. The first poem, another sonnet, places her between 'hill and fen. / Child of both and neither. Amphibian.' The sense of contraries is developed in moving portraits of her parents, both set in the fens, between land and water. In *Ely Cathedral*, again a celebration of this landscape, she explores the boundaries of earth and water, solid and vapour, physical and spiritual. The poet explores the *limen* in pursuit of the *numen*.



### luminous, liminous, numinous

Repeatedly, in Wycherley's poetry we sense a reaching out to a reality which transcends the individual and the moment, but which eschews the conventions of religion. In her poems about figures of the past, especially women of the past, such as *The Woman of the Rocks* or *A Pasaryk Burial*, she seems to point to an integrity and continuity of human experience which extends past death. In *William Blake and the Dulwich Hill Angel* she pursues a cosmic vision which is at once the ultimate goal of physics and the immanent divinity in which Blake believed. It is from this almost unbearable light, 'god's lightning' that these poems derive their sense of *lumen*, *limen* and *numen*.

Kathleen McPhilemy's most recent poetry collection is *The Lion in the Forest* (Katabasis, London 2004).



## Summer by the Swale

For Ian

Today we will walk  
with the shearlings and ewes,  
the gimmers and hoggets,  
on gritstone slopes  
where weathers brawl

and the Swale untwists  
its brown story,  
peat-stained water  
plunging from the rocks,  
swinging a cold, curved blade.

The sounds of Old Norse  
tangle with the river,  
Gunnar's-side, Muker,  
Thwaite and Keld. We speak  
each name and taste stone.

The old men watch us  
from the eaves of their caps,  
the lintels of their faces,  
knowing the hidden  
vehemence of the dale

knowing the river  
can break its bonds,  
the bridge of our hands,  
the coracles of sunlight  
love would build.

This leaf I press,  
this bright film spooling  
in a black recess,  
I store for us  
under ling and moor,

under Tan Hill and Oxnop Scar,  
where water dives  
through limestone  
bone by bone  
into the heart's four caves.

Lynne Wycherley

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Mary Wollstonecraft, author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), supporter and critic of the French Revolution, lived in Paris and elsewhere in France from 1792 until April 1795. In Paris she met the American Gilbert Imlay, father of her daughter Fanny. Mary wrote to Imlay in 1795: 'Imagination is the true fire, stolen from heaven, to animate this cold creature of clay – producing all those fine sympathies that lead to rapture, rendering men social by expanding their hearts.'



Graffiti on the walls of the Sorbonne,  
Paris May 1968:  
***L'IMAGINATION AU POUVOIR!***  
**POWER TO THE IMAGINATION!**