



The poet John Milton meets Galileo under House Arrest

Solomon Alexander Hart (1847):

Speaking for Myself

sfia

down to Earth

Sofia is the magazine of the SOF (Sea of Faith) Network, published quarterly in March, June, September and December. **Sofia Editor:** Dinah Livingstone, 10 St Martin's Close, London NW1 0HR. editor@sofn.org.uk

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Front cover image: *The poet John Milton meets Galileo under House Arrest* by Solomon Alexander Hart (1847).

Image: wellcomecollection.org

Back cover image: *Elizabeth I addresses the troops at Tilbury* by Alfred Kingsley Lawrence (1893–1975)

Image: Essex County Council



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Sofia does not think wisdom is dispensed supernaturally from on high, but that it can only be sought by humans at home on Earth, and is inseparable from human kindness.

Sofia regards religion as a human creation and, in rejecting the supernatural, is for this life and humanity with its questing imagination and enabling dreams.

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

Speaking for Myself

Following the SOF Network March meeting in London, whose title was *Speaking for Myself*, that is also the title of this *Sofia* issue. The first article, which was the main talk at the meeting, is Edward Nickell ‘speaking for myself’ on ‘The Inessentials of Faith.’ Robert Boucnik follows with his piece ‘Creative with our Faith’. Bobbie Stephens-Wright speaks for herself about her struggle with spiritualism. Then, as Pentecost and the feast of Corpus Christi come in June, Stephen Mitchell, an Anglican priest, gives his take on ‘Real Presence and the Spirit’.

The front and back cover pictures both show famous examples of ‘speaking for myself’. The front cover shows the young poet John Milton on his 1638 travels in Europe meeting the astronomer Galileo, who was under house arrest for saying the Earth moves round the sun. Galileo was forced to recant at his trial by the Inquisition but afterwards famously declared ‘*Eppur si muove: It does move.*’ Milton mentions him in *Paradise Lost*.

Milton later also spoke out bravely for himself and for liberty in his February 1660 pamphlet opposing the restoration of the King – Charles II – whose father Charles I had proclaimed the divine right to rule absolutely. Milton wrote: ‘What I have spoken is that which is not called amiss the Good Old Cause.’

Historically, it has been harder for women to speak for ourselves. The Epistle to the Corinthians declared: ‘Let your women keep silence in the churches: for they are not permitted to speak’ (1 Cor. 14:34). But as shown on our back cover, Queen Elizabeth I gave her brave example when she addressed the troops assembled at Tilbury to resist invasion by the approaching Spanish Armada – ‘when that great fleet invincible against the bore in vain/ the richest spoils of Mexico, the stoutest hearts of Spain.’

King Philip II of Spain had first proposed marriage to her and she had refused him. So then he tried to invade her (and England) by force of arms. Elizabeth rallied her troops: ‘I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and a king of England too. I think foul scorn that Parma or Spain or any prince of Europe should dare to invade the borders of my realm: to which rather than any dishonour shall grow by me, I myself will take up arms, I myself will be your general, judge, and rewarder of every one of your virtues in the field.’

*

Below this Editorial there is a notice of SOF’s forthcoming National Day Conference, live after the pandemic. We hope plenty of people will come, meet face to face and enjoy real presence.

SOF Network National Day Conference 2023

In the Beginning was Music? – Music and Religion

Patti Whaley

Stephen Mitchell

Katie Hainbach

Monday 24 July 2023. 11.00 – 4.30pm

St John’s Church, Waterloo Road, London, SE1 8TY

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Speaking for Myself

The Inessentials of Faith

Edward Nickell

I first joined the SOF Network back in 2018, when I was 26. I'm pretty sure I was and still am the youngest member. At our last conference on Zoom, I saw another relatively young face zooming in from Australia. I dropped him a private message to ask how he'd come across the Network. He had discovered the Network when researching for a dissertation on the history of philosophy including non-realism and was, basically, a Don Cupitt fan. It was great messaging him, but I couldn't help but feel a little disappointed as part of me had wondered if perhaps in Australia they had somehow found the recipe for getting younger people interested in the Network. As it turned out, his interest was as unusual amongst his peers as I find mine is. Of course, this isn't unique to members under-30. I've spoken to quite a few SOF Network members now and I have yet to meet a 'typical' member. I suspect no such member exists. Like my Australian friend and like all other members, I can't speak for my whole generation; all I can do here is 'speak for myself'.

Childhood and school

I don't remember when I became an atheist. In fact, I can't remember ever believing in God, which is funny, because I believed in Santa and the tooth fairy well beyond the acceptable age. But for them, I'd seen the physical proof! I grew up in Northern Ireland and in my childhood we went to a Presbyterian Church in the suburbs of Belfast. From an early age, I found the story of Noah's Ark implausible and stories like the plagues of Egypt deplorable. To this day, my main objection to belief in a real God is more ethical than metaphysical and I've never been convinced by any response offered to the problem of evil.

By secondary school, I was what you might call a 'militant atheist' or on the Dawkins end of the spectrum. There was a growing group of atheists at school but plenty of evangelical Christians left to argue with. My being the only

openly gay kid definitely added to the fervour on both sides of the arguments.

University, smells and bells

I escaped Northern Ireland and went to university in Oxford. I remember going to LGBT drinks for freshers. Being from Presbyterian stock I was not familiar with alcohol, I really knew nothing about spirits, mixers or quantities. So when I poured my first drink, it was a full half pint of neat gin. I was surprised to look up and see the College Chaplain was sat opposite me, smiling. He leant over and just said, 'You'd better finish that off'. I gagged on my first sip, but I did finish it!

I found out that night that not only was our Chaplain a bisexual, but there was a huge overlap of the Chapel crowd and LGBT scene. And they weren't the straight-acting, apologetic or celibate gays you sometimes meet in evangelical churches. Our Chapel was high church and high camp – smells and bells. While the gays loved Chapel worship, members of the Christian Union wouldn't set foot in it, and as the president of the student body I actually had a few run-ins with them. CU viewed the Chapel with suspicion, the incense and vestments were all a bit Catholic, these inessential fripperies distracted from what was important: the word of God, in the inerrant bible, and belief in God and the Trinity. I realised that I felt the opposite. For me the ritual was what mattered. When I was asked to give a title for this talk, I picked 'The Inessentials of Faith', a line out of a John Betjeman poem, 'Summoned by Bells'.

Meanwhile, back at home, the Presbyterian church in Ireland was circulating a petition to oppose the introduction of gay marriage in England. My parents were asked to sign and refused, and were then visited by the Church Elders, who were presumably concerned about my 'same-sex attractions'. The Presbyterian Church in Ireland went on to ban people in same



Christchurch Cathedral, Oxford
[Image: skipmoen.com](http://image.skipmoen.com)

-sex relationships from having full membership of the church, and banned the children of same-sex couples being baptised. They are now getting rid of women Ministers – though they needn't bother, as they haven't actually had a woman at the theological college for years. The Presbyterian Church saw its membership decline by 40% between 1975 and 2015. This decline has continued and on current trends, academics have said they are left with just 35 more years until the last Presbyterian switches the lights off.

Church decline – the moderates go first

When church attendance declines, it is moderates who leave at a greater rate – the people who maybe weren't sure about what was in the creeds, but were there out of tradition or community. Who does that leave behind? Increasingly, the hardliners – those more certain or ardent about their beliefs. The culture of the church changes, from a place with a mix of beliefs, to a place where most of the congregation is quite ardent. This cultural change makes the church even less

appealing to the rest of the public and so you find the Church caught in a spiral of hardening stances and falling attendance.

All the remaining young evangelical people tend to congregate in big churches like Holy Trinity Brompton rather than going to their local parishes. This creates the illusion of growth. The evangelical churches might be better at 'catching the fish' than local parishes, but they are all fishing in the same pond, and that pond is shrinking. Evangelicals point to this illusory growth and say that this shows they've got it right – God is rewarding their confidence and certainty with his blessings of more bums on seats. This is another form of the 'Prosperity Gospel' – the idea that your wealth and success is proof of your virtue.

It is quite depressing for people like me who are trying to keep a local parish alive. I'm parish secretary for a liberal, Anglo-Catholic parish in East London. And we are constantly being told that if only we were more 'certain', more 'confident', then we would see growth like the

evangelicals. Implicit in this is a suggestion that the lack of growth in progressive churches is evidence that they have got it wrong, because God isn't blessing them with bums on seats.

Prosperity Gospel

There has been a lot of talk, in progressive Christian circles, about the dangers of the 'Prosperity Gospel'. The prosperity gospel is the idea that financial success is a sign of God's favour, not a new idea but one that has had a new lease of life on social media. In the Church of England, flashy cars or big houses are replaced with 'bums on seats' as the currency of God's supposed blessing. But I don't want to be angry or depressed because the bit of the Church that I like is probably going to die out. The fact it is coming to an end does not mean there was something wrong with it.

First encounter with Sea of Faith

It was at Oxford, back in 2012, that I had my first encounter with the SOF Network. I had organised a discussion group for the Oxford Atheists society on the topic of 'religious experience'. My lasting memory from that event, and others, was my surprise at seeing a vicar – in dog collar – in the room and his description of his own religious experiences. If I recall correctly, these included an apparition of the Virgin Mary and a talking lizard. That vicar was the Rev David Paterson.

At university I did a module on philosophy of religion as part of my studies. My tutor for the course was a secular Jewish American, my course partner was a devout Roman Catholic Scotsman, and I was an atheist ex-Presbyterian Irishman. It sounds like the start of a joke and it sometimes was. My other philosophy tutors warned me the course would be a waste of time. 'That course', they said, 'asks only one question. And the answer is no.'

Religious Fictionalism

Non-realism made a passing appearance on the course, but actually it was an essay on religious fictionalism that had the biggest impression on me. Religious fictionalism is the idea that you can engage with religion the way you might with any other fictional work. We don't claim that the

stories we read in books aren't meaningful just because we know the characters don't really exist. When we read books, or perhaps even with film or TV, we set aside what is 'real' or not, and allow ourselves to be engrossed with our imaginative minds.

To pick a basic example, when we tell children the story of the boy who cried wolf, we aren't claiming that there is a real boy and a real wolf out there that the story is about. But yet we still learn something from the story, there is a real moral message, or a warning anyway. Whether we think that message is true or not isn't really dependent on whether we think a literal boy and wolf exist.

Why the interest in religion

Most of my friends are totally bemused by the fact I am still interested in religion. I am *never* asked to explain or justify my atheism, but I *am* frequently asked to explain why I am still engaged with religion at all. Why would an atheist bother with any of the religious practice or language? I answer them that it is because I find the music, language and ritual of religion useful in prompting a certain way of thinking, or evoking a certain mood or atmosphere. I find that religion is so deeply woven throughout humanity that it is very hard for other human creations to rival it. We have millennia of myth, thought and art, which all reference each other and can always be looked at from new angles and in new combinations.

I grew up surrounded by religion and, whether I believed it or not, I've always taken an interest and it has been part of my life. This simply isn't true for an increasing proportion of the UK population. If you don't grow up with that familiarity and background, or you don't acquire it out of interest at some point in your life, I'm not sure there *is* much to be gained from trying to steep yourself in a particular religion. You will probably be better off searching for the same interest elsewhere.

The Sea of Faith Network

The SOF Network 'explores and promotes religion as a valuable human creation' – and I think more people than ever would agree with the religion as a human creation bit of that – probably including the 22 million people in the

UK (40%) who ticked 'No religion' in the last census. It is the exploring and promoting part that is the struggle. There must be a lot of people who think religion is a human creation, but either aren't bothered to explore it, or aren't looking to explore it through the Network anyway! I apologise for butchering the metaphor in our namesake poem, 'Dover Beach', but what if the tide isn't just going out – to eventually return – what if the sea level is falling.

The Network and other religions

That's the pessimistic view, but perhaps there still are people out there interested in exploring religion as a human creation and it's just that those religions are no longer Christianity. Are there Muslims, Jews and others of a similar mind set to SOF Network members? With some basic internet searching, I haven't found anything that is a clear match. There are 'ex-Muslim' groups in the UK, notably Faith to Faithless which is now part of Humanists UK. Or there is the Movement for Reform Judaism in the UK. Perhaps there are activities we could do with other groups, but ultimately this is not something that will keep the SOF Network going, as I think these audiences will be better served by their own specific organisations. And looking at other religions still doesn't answer the question of all those people who ticked that they did not have a religion in the census.

I've wondered this about the wellbeing and mindfulness movement. There is no structure or organisation to it, but it does feel like there is a coherent increase in people's involvement in wellbeing activities. Imagine a new church in the UK attracting over a quarter of a million people in the morning each weekend, with over 140,000 volunteers – including one with us today. Ok it isn't a church, but I was describing Park Run!

Or how about the 'Harry Potter and the Sacred Text' group I am attending tomorrow? They have three groups in the UK, who read the Harry Potter books as though they were a sacred text. The local groups are inspired by a podcast, which each week takes a chapter of one of the Harry Potter books and reads it with a theme in mind, themes like friendship, anger, tradition. But if you didn't grow up

with the Harry Potter books, perhaps they wouldn't be meaningful to you at all. And that is exactly what I was saying about Christianity!

The importance of presence

Before I joined the Network I knew that as an atheist who was fascinated by religion I was already in a real niche. Certainly the exception amongst the religious, but also the exception amongst the non-religious. So really, to find that there was such a thing as the SOF Network at all was quite remarkable to me!

We might have to adapt ourselves to our more modest membership, but the mere existence of the Network and its legacy are themselves remarkable. We really are unique. We shouldn't hide our light under a bushel – and SOF's 40th year is a good opportunity for us to ensure our legacy is on the record. So even if I am the last one and I have to switch off the lights, I will have been happy to have had some company. And who knows, perhaps the tide will change?

Edward Nickell is Senior Content Development Manager for the NHS. He is SOF Network Secretary.

The Gentle Bush

There you are: lurking in plain sight
not even at the bottom of my garden;
the birds and squirrels know you and at night
the fox will seek your shelter, dodge the moon.
Shaggy, disregarded, a briar rose
climbs through you and little cabbage whites,
my brother once called fairies, flutter at your base;
beneath our walls the tangle of your roots
snakes and coils so slowly a century might pass.
Centuries have passed since this was last a field
where dancers circled, shadows in the grass,
whom only poachers saw and all that told
that they had been, their only residue
those dark rings under the morning dew.

Kathleen McPhilemy

The 'gentle bush' is the hawthorn. This poem is reprinted with permission from Kathleen McPhilemy's latest collection *Back Country* (Littoral Press, Lavenham 2022).

Creative with Our Faith

Robert Boucnik

I have been an SOF member for over a dozen years. My first encounter with SOF was an episode of the BBC's spiritual affairs programme *Heart of the Matter* (written and presented by Joan Bakewell) back in the mid-90s. I was not only fascinated by the idea of 'Christian Atheists' but warmed to how such a seemingly untenable position was explained. One interviewee, no longer a nun after 30 years in a religious order, argued that being religious no longer required belief in God but an appreciation that '*life is sacred*'. A working vicar argued that the most important thing was to be 'creative with your faith' (or lack of it). The essence of Christianity was accepting Christ's model of morality – the supernatural aspect had become irrelevant, outdated and superstitious.

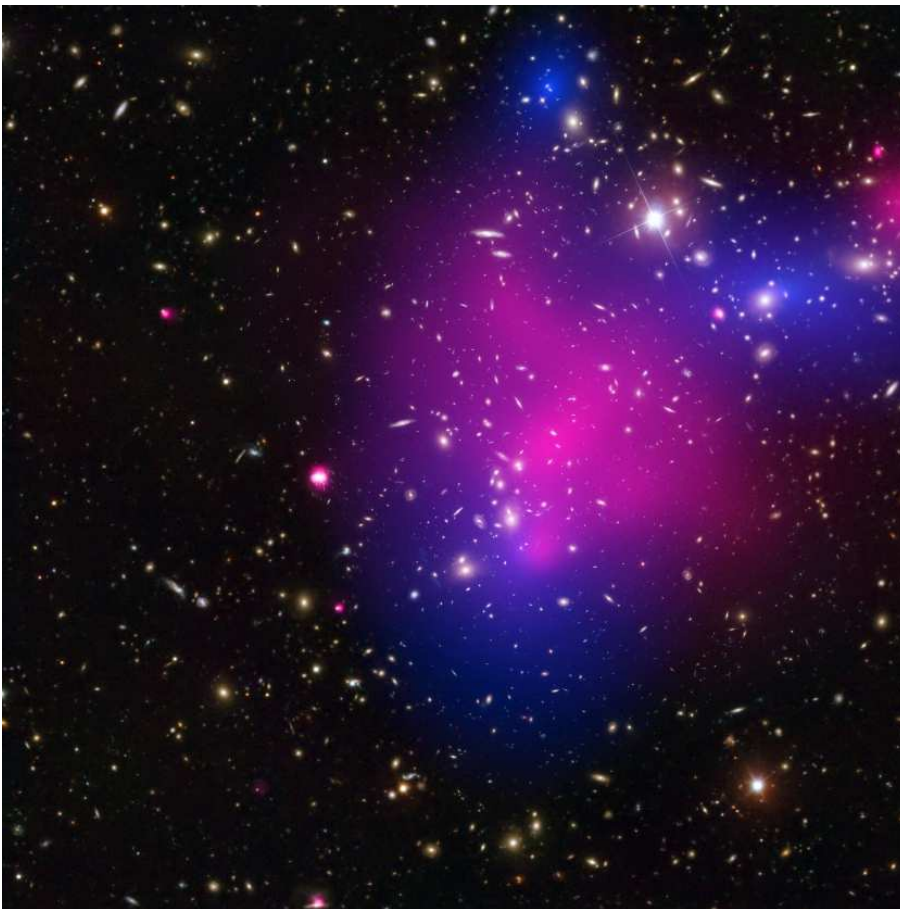
Having been brought up as a Roman Catholic

these insights were so refreshing – I had been through a negative atheistic phase, reacting against some literal aspects of Catholic doctrine, especially things like transubstantiation, which seem more like a warped loyalty test than an example of spiritual revelation. I have a loyalty to SOF because it represents freedom of thought, and I confess to a slightly impish pleasure at the 'heresy' of the main idea.

However, having just read Don Cupitt's *Taking Leave of God* I have to admit that I think the atheism which it argues for may now also be in retreat. While I take Cupitt's point that religion and religious faiths cannot each be validated by their own story of the cosmos but by their exhortation to live according to a religious ideal, the complete divorce between the cosmic and social aspects of religion leaves an essential gap.

Cupitt points out that a lot of religious doctrine and interpretation had been made in a 'pre-scientific' age and that it was missing the point to look for exact interpretation. You don't believe in Jesus, you believe in what Jesus said. Authority comes from the power and sense of his words not from his divinity; the miracles are basically an anachronism.

But does this not miss the point of being religious? Life is not just sacred, it is miraculous – all good scientists will tell you that – and the awe and wonder we experience, the appreciation that there is transcendental knowledge, is the very basis of religion, not moral authority.



Dark Matter simulation sciencehistory.org
Image: Smithsonian Institution@Flickr Commons

Cupitt describes a pre-scientific age but his own times are now looking like an age of scientific hubris. An age where the scientific method was the purest and surest path to truth, where all mystery would ultimately be conquered, be it the origins of the universe or of life. Mature philosophers of science understand that physics is unable to answer ultimate questions and that science is not ultimately based on mathematical truths revealed through evidence, but on unsolvable mystery: astrophysics and the life sciences will tell us more with progress but they will never tell us how and why everything originated. New things will come to light in our efforts to dispel mystery, but we will never dispel all of it; to believe that we can is to accept a false premise.

The essential strangeness and mysteriousness of life, the universe and existence is an affront to many scientists, but less so now than it was decades ago. New concepts such as dark matter and dark energy are now understood as placeholders before better explanations come along to reveal how we only perceive 4% of what actually exists. Likewise, we can track and describe the movement of DNA molecules but we cannot explain their origin or formation.

The hypothesis that organic chemistry simply emerged out of inorganic chemistry has been dismissed by both Francis Crick and Fred Hoyle. (Crick was co-discoverer of the DNA helix, a committed atheist for whom everything was merely matter and energy. Hoyle discovered that the organic compound, carbon, was made inside stars as were the other heavy elements.)

Both these giants of science preferred ‘pan-spermia’ to explain the start of life on Earth rather than the amino-acid soup theory, which both argued is impossible. The point here is not to do with their alternative explanations, but with the fact that these things are beyond explanation: we are rats in the underground system, we see the walls of the tunnel but are ignorant of the tube map.

So when we dismiss religious writing as mere poetry, we may be overlooking the chasm that this poetry is trying to bridge. Some argue that atheism is a metaphysical position: it requires accepting that the universe’s emergence is based on some higher scientific law or laws, but these

laws must therefore predate the universe, hence a leap of faith is required – the laws are given divine properties. When Carl Sagan was asked whether or not he believed in God he replied, ‘It depends what you mean by God’. A God which is not a mind as we understand it, which we cannot relate to, just because it is partly a way of describing that which is beyond our comprehension, does not make it less real. And that is my issue with Cupitt – he argues God out of existence, rather than arguing for the impersonal God over the personal one.

Our thinking may have been affected by a false dichotomy between science and religion, best exemplified by creationism versus evolution. It surprises many to know that the founder of modern physics, James Clerk Maxwell, was a committed Christian of the theist sort. He described the limits of scientific knowledge thus: ‘Scientists are like bell ringers at Church, we know what ropes to pull to get the right notes, but we don’t know what’s happening in the belfry.’ Whether it’s quantum, the Big Bang or the origins of life, science is limited in what it can explain. The religious-minded try to bridge the gap, agnostics acknowledge its existence but modern atheists may not just be in denial that this essential gap in our knowledge exists, but that acceptance of this gap is at the very heart of what it is to be religious.

Robert Boucnik is a Maths teacher from Hastings. Last autumn his interview with Rupert Sheldrake on the subject of collective intelligence/consciousness was the centrepiece of *Nexus* magazine’s 200th edition (an audio version is on *YouTube*).

Blessed are the poor

You can measure a
person’s spiritual health,
by how much they share
their personal wealth.
What goes for persons,
goes for countries too;
whether wealth gets divided
or just belongs to a few.

Grenville Gilbert

Speaking for Myself

Spiritualism and Religion

Bobbie Stephens-Wright

I have never considered myself capable of writing more than short articles, but last year an old friend informed me that she wanted to write a book about her experiences working as a medium and clairvoyant here in the UK and also in many other countries.

Of course all this sort of thing is anathema to the ideas of SOF readers and they may have mentally switched off already, assuming that the folk who would consult such a person are uneducated and thoroughly ignorant. I do believe that it was first Freud who suggested that it said little of us if we were not prepared to understand what he loosely termed 'oceanic feelings'. Not that Freud had ever experienced such feelings but he certainly had respect for at least one friend who had informed him of the reality of such feelings.

Dorothy has among her long term friends, who were once her clients, a Japanese professor who informs our government about human rights and other matters. As she sat working, in Belgrave Square London, for the Spiritualists' Association of Great Britain, or SAGB as it has been more commonly known, she was familiar with many a celebrity and government minister. Seeking reassurance seems to be universally sought by certain types of person.

Dorothy moved into the town where I live just over two years ago and we became reacquainted, having previously known each other when we were both involved in Spiritualism as mediums in the Spiritualist Church. On these grounds I felt that perhaps I could help Dorothy with her book when she gave me an outline of what she wanted to say. I started to write an account of Dorothy's experiences from childhood to becoming a loving and responsible wife and mother and then onward to working as a medium at home and abroad.

For Dorothy, her talent was a gift from God and she had guides who informed her work. Spiritualists long ago protected themselves from accusations of witchcraft by creating the religion known now as Spiritualism. For myself this had nothing to do with any god or religion but the wish to understand the reasons for my odd ability to drift into altered states of consciousness. For sure, I could act as a medium but without the notion that this was a divine gift. Through my work abroad and my own reading and research I became familiar with the idea that I suffered from a Borderline Personality Disorder.

Dorothy finds this description of me offensive in a way that I do not and the book that I hope to write is very much about the reasons that I would seek for certain phenomena that others would not trouble themselves about. What has emerged from her wish is a book about two lives informed by very different narratives. The infant world of Dorothy only presented one narrative in religious terms. There was one God above and a hell below. Dorothy in adulthood married a Roman Catholic, Bruce, and proceeded of her own volition, not his, to convert to Catholicism. As she laughingly tells me, she eventually knew more about Catholicism than he ever did.

For my own part, the narrative in my own childhood was very contradictory. My mother and her family were Methodists, who became Spiritualists. A mere 15 years after the beginning of Spiritualism and during the years of the First World War, the only male child of her family, and her beloved playmate and brother died of diphtheria, common enough in those days. When my maternal grandfather returned from the trenches of France where he had been a medic, to his consternation his wife – my grandmother – had become a Spiritualist, along with many thousands of others suffering from the losses of the Great War.

My father and his family, by contrast, were atheists. It must be admitted that his version of reality did not initially have the allure of what I found at the Methodist Sunday School, which I faithfully attended each week. There was no trouble to get me to go there as I still remember the enchantment of hearing of the miracles of Jesus from the very kind and attractive female teacher.

At this stage there was no real need for me to trouble myself about the reality in which I lived. Later there became a very pressing need to explain the strange personality traits which emerged. My father presented a very perplexed and worried face when he became aware of my strange abilities, whilst my mother basked in the glory of my very odd 'gift', as others would name it.

For a number of years mediumship presented me with the biggest ego trip I was ever likely to experience. After the events it would prove to be rather like coming off alcohol or perhaps drugs, not that I have any experience of the latter. When the adrenalin dropped I would feel empty and suffer bouts of depersonalisation. If you spend many hours connecting with members of a congregation and finding or feeling you are living their lives rather than your own, this becomes understandable.

Eventually Dorothy and I would work at Stansted Hall, the Headquarters of the Spiritualist National Union. Dorothy then pursued her ability as a medium. By contrast, I was invited by a German writer and psychoanalyst to visit Germany and hold workshops for her professional friends to demonstrate my ability for interpersonal connection. In this exchange I found that the opportunity to understand my behaviour lay within the language of psychoanalytic theory and practice. Now I had found a new narrative which resonated within and allowed me to leave the narrative offered in Spiritualism behind.

I came to describe the manner in which I demonstrated as an ASC or altered state of consciousness. The altered state allowed me to dissociate from reality in order to communicate



Bobbie at a football match

with others. I read extensively in psychoanalytic theory in order to understand the process but also to understand that the things that I had encountered as a medium could be explained in a language that was other than religious or supernatural. The very best summation of my search to find myself was in the work of analyst and writer Nancy McWilliams. From her writing I came to understand dissociation as a psychological defence mechanism:

People who use dissociation as their primary defence mechanism are essentially virtuosos in self-hypnosis. Movement into an altered state of consciousness when one is distressed is not possible for everybody; you have to have the talent. Just as people differ in their basic levels of hypnotisability (R. Spiegel & D. Spiegel, 1978), they differ in their capacities for autohypnosis.

In this short paragraph I was immediately reminded of the famous Irish medium and parapsychologist Eileen Garrett (1893-1970), whose written work *Awareness* is still sought after today. Apparently, Garrett was perfectly happy to be tested as a medium by the early parapsychologists. Of the altered state she described her ability to yawn herself out of existence. Clearly the narrative that Garrett uses is very different from the one that I have used in my work.

It will be fairly obvious that in the exchanges between myself and the analysts my understanding of myself changed radically. That I

do not suffer from a personality disorder is very much due to the connection with analysts during my time abroad. In the mutual exchange there was the opportunity to ask professionals from what madness I could be suffering. My question, at first, was greeted with much laughter and I had to ask my friend Dr Niedecken what they were actually laughing at. Her explanation was that folk who are mad are usually unaware of their madness. The answer I was seeking was very helpful and it was, they thought, most likely due to some kind of trauma. Not something that I would remember easily but the fact that I was asking this question gave one doctor the idea that I was ready to remember. She advised that I should not struggle to remember because it would most probably be remembered when I was very relaxed.

A short while after my return to England I was relaxing one morning in one of my favourite places, the bathtub, when I recalled an event of which I had never spoken to anyone. When I was 12 years old a man attempted to abduct me from the street on a busy Saturday morning in our little market town. It was a busy day but my habit was to take all the quiet roads and streets on the way to my Aunt's house for lunch. I saw no one approaching, as I always walked looking at the ground, until two large male feet planted themselves in front of me barring my way.

'Hello sweetie,' he said to which I immediately replied, 'I don't know you'. He went on to tell me that he knew my father who was parked in a car around the corner. I knew this could not be true and I quickly side stepped. He grabbed me by the arm but was unprepared for the swift kick that he received. Then I ran as fast as could to my Aunt's home.

One would have thought that I would immediately tell her what happened to defend myself over being five minutes late for lunch served promptly at 12 noon. The interesting part of this story is that it was never told until I was over forty years old when it simply horrified my mother. I did not tell because, of course, I was a child who suffered from low self esteem and thought that most things that went wrong were my fault.

Following my trips abroad there was no longer the need to be a medium, no compulsion to dissociate whilst knowing that I could and still

can easily do so. I do feel the wish to enlighten and show that strange phenomena can be explained using different models of understanding.

As my real love is for philosophy, I have no argument with religion and hence no argument with Dorothy's picture of reality. After studying religion at university I may have wanted to argue about certain issues but I feel no need to inflict my worldview on others. This rather came to a very abrupt conclusion when I came across *Sea of Faith* in 1997. On hearing Professor Don Cupitt I was immediately reassured that others thought as I did. I need not think that my way of looking at mediums is the definitive explanation but it is mine and has guided my life since. Years ago I allowed my philosophy tutor to read my M.Phil. thesis and he was very unhappy that I did not, in the end, fully denounce Spiritualism but I felt no need to do so.

It worried me that I may mislead people over the life after death issue, so I gave up platform appearances. The adulation was very briefly missed but I would rather be centred within myself and happy with life and fully at terms with death than go back to this strange time in my life. Let me be clear that I do not believe in anything supernatural. I never present anything as a definitive truth; it is only ever my humble opinion.

The differing stories of Dorothy and me are shaping up as a book which is almost at an end and I do hope that the differing explanations of mediumship will be of general interest. It has become apparent that if you do not know anything about the life of the medium then you will never understand them. For sure, I have never known any medium who has not, at some time in their life, suffered from very low self-esteem. This is completely reversed through the ability to act publicly as a medium or clairvoyant and Dorothy herself has admitted to her low self-esteem as a younger woman. I must add that she is very happy to be referred to by her name. If anyone out there could suggest a publisher who might be interested I would be most grateful.

Bobbie Stephens-Wright is a long-standing member of SOF Network living in Northumberland.

The Body of Christ III

Real Presence and the Spirit

Stephen Mitchell

The first Don Cupitt book I bought was *The Leap of Reason*. I was completing a PGCE course at Emmanuel College, and was captivated by the Dean who handed out sermon notes before preaching. It was 1976 and I devoured the book in one sitting on the day of publication. In those days, at Cambridge, you could attend any university lecture course and Don's on *The Anthropologists and Religion* was a good deal more interesting than the education lectures I was supposed to be attending. When later I was accepted as a candidate for ordination, I was determined to return to Cambridge and learn more from this (then, pipe-smoking) priest who never buttoned his shirt cuffs.

The Leap of Reason (Sheldon Press) is still, I think, a remarkable book setting out Don's agenda for the next decade, but the one sentence I took with me from the book was: 'The self is the fundamental analogy of God' (p 114). At that time, it chimed in with a sentence of St Augustine's: 'If I know myself, O God, I shall know thee.'

On Thursday 8th June (the second Thursday after Pentecost), a few churches will celebrate the Feast of Corpus Christi. From its beginnings in the 13th and 14th centuries, it became one of the most popular feast days in medieval times with performances of mystery plays and village processions of the Blessed Sacrament secure in a monsternace. Many readers will be familiar with the Latin hymn celebrating Jesus' Real Presence in the sacrament:

Ave verum corpus natum
de Maria Virgine,
vere passum, immolatum
in cruce pro homine,
cuius latus perforatum
fluxit aqua et sanguine
Esto nobis praegustatum
mortis in examine.

Hail, body really given birth
by the Virgin Mary,
that really suffered on the cross,
offered for humanity,
from whose pierced side
flowed blood and water.
May you be a foretaste for us
when we are facing death.

Some refer to the Blessed Sacrament as the Host as for them, it is Christ, present in the bread and wine, inviting his followers to the supper: it is a celebration of the Real Presence. But how is Christ present in the Eucharist, in the Breaking of Bread, and the re-enactment of the Last Supper? How for that matter is God present in the world as believers claim? Forgive me if I don't go into the minutiae of transubstantiation, consubstantiation, transignification, and all the other variations of Reformation theology. 'The self is the fundamental analogy of God'. Let's instead ask the question: How am I present in the world?

We use many expressions to suggest that we aren't always present even in the company of our friends. *Are you with us? He's miles away. She's day-dreaming. You didn't hear a word I said, did you? He looked right through me.* It can be a more urgent question. The King is present when the Royal Standard flies over the palace but what flags signal that the patient with locked-in syndrome is present? What are the signs of life in the terminally ill patient?

If we phone 999, we're asked immediately *Is the patient breathing?* It is hardly surprising that breath is such a vital symbol in religion. In Hebrew, the word breath (*ruach*) is also the word for spirit. Another word *nephesh* meaning soul, or being, is also a word for breath and *pneuma* in Greek and *anima* in Latin can stand both for breathing and the spirit. Many hymns play on the theme

Breathe on me breath of God
Fill me with life anew . . .

O breath of life, come sweeping through
us . . .

In 1996 Don retired as Dean of Emmanuel and the last two years of the century saw the publication of a remarkable series of books: *Mysticism after Modernity* (Blackwells 1998), *The Religion of Being* (SCM Press 1998), *The Revelation of Being* (SCM Press 1998), *The New Religion of Life in Everyday Speech* (SCM Press 1999), *The Meaning of It All in Everyday Speech* (SCM Press 1999). I was now a priest, still reading Cupitt's books on the day of publication, and by now being made to realise some of the implications of post-modernity on God and the self.

Some of our expressions, written just a few paragraphs earlier, are rather misleading. We may ask *Is he with us?* but of course there is nowhere else he could be. To be a living human being is to be part of a world, the human world. As the present moment is always passing into the future, so we are always slipping away and our presence is sustained only by the human world we create through our language and culture. If we reject the dualisms of body and soul, mind and spirit, then we can only be part of the world described in our scientific theories and the stories we and others tell about us.

Today many embrace this through mindfulness. One website describes its aim as paying attention to the present moment. The practice includes many techniques which some will find akin to forms of prayer and meditation. Interestingly some of these are encouraged by Don himself in the books mentioned above. Bring your attention to the physical sensation of breathing. Be aware of your body and its tension and emotions. Be kind about your wandering mind. Practise observing your thoughts coming and going without reacting. Just sit and pay attention. One of the benefits attributed to mindfulness is that it improves creativity and releases the imagination. If we are indeed part of a world described in our scientific and personal stories then this faculty is key to who we are.

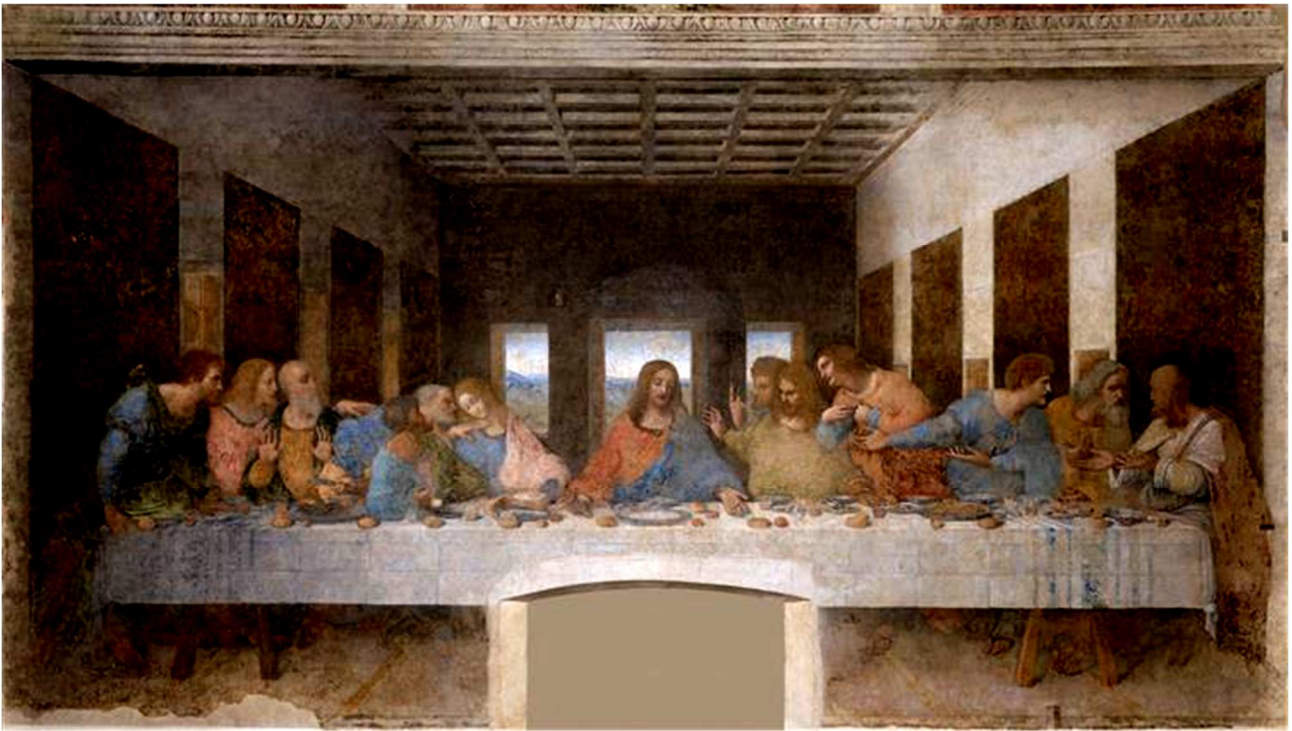
At its heart, imagination is concerned with images and our ability to conjure up pictures of the past, the future and the fantastical. It is very likely that this faculty enables consciousness, it certainly enables knowledge. It takes a leap of imagination to make a scientific discovery, to act in the world and set goals. It helps us to understand people and show compassion. To be driven to respond to another's needs, we have to imagine what it would be like to be in their shoes. To ensure that our help is practical, we imagine the various possibilities open to us and their likely effect. We recreate past solutions to see what we can learn from them and what mistakes we might avoid. To be the sort of people we would like to be, we examine the images we have of ourselves, self-images we largely take for granted and yet which shape our lives, our character and responses.

Using our imagination is an essential part of what it is to be a living, conscious, thinking, understanding and responsive person. It deepens our insight, clarifies our vision and motivates our action. It's creative, liberating, key to the exploration of our inmost desires, and central to every moment of our lives. It's no wonder then that in Christian thought all this is characteristic of the Holy Spirit.

In *Genesis*, the creativity of God is seen in the spirit brooding over the face of the water. Throughout the bible, the spirit gives wisdom and understanding. Through the spirit, prophets have visions and the people dream dreams. In the New Testament, to be filled with the spirit is to give birth to love, joy, peace, kindness and goodness. To live in the spirit is to be bound together in love. In short, we are the image of the creator God. The Spirit is the presence of God in the world and the believer.

In classical theology there is an age-old question regarding God and the self, and it's one that is addressed in Cupitt's *The Religion of Being*:

'Is the religious person and the religious object 'in' which one believes – are they numerically two or one? If they are two, then faith is trust in another, namely God; but if one, then faith is that one should be true to oneself. *So which is it?* (page 148).



Leonardo da Vinci *The Last Supper* . Image: wikiart.org.

I was well aware of this question which is traditionally answered in terms of *substance*. If the soul is thought of as, in any way, a part of the substance of God, or unified with God, then it would no longer be subject to God's authority. For the church authorities that won't do at all. No, God is an infinite spiritual substance, the human soul a finite substance. But what of faith when we don't believe in spiritual substances?

Still, there can be something akin to worship. As traditionally the believer waited upon the presence of God and for an awareness of the movement of the Holy Spirit, so we may also wait for the sense of life, the energy flowing through us. In so doing both may experience a sense of awe. Where the traditional believer would seek to discover a calling and a task to be fulfilled, so we too may hope to find our vocation. Not a duty given to us by a divine authority, but something like the urge to create, to put forward a conviction that has formed in us, fulfil what we see as a moral obligation. As believers seek to accept God's will for them, so we hope to accept the fragility and passing of life and our own vulnerability and mortality.

And as Don Cupitt points out, here there is a parallel with the faith of Christ and his acceptance of his mission and fate. 'God is an abyssal mystery, and Christ's faith is his acceptance of his destiny as the one in whom and through whom God comes forth into the human realm, in self-expression and self-revelation.'

I will be celebrating the Feast of Corpus Christi, the Feast of the Real Presence, hopefully in the company of people rejoicing in the energy and creativity of life, reminding ourselves of the need to attend the present moment, to accept the given-ness of life, to give full attention to those we meet, and making our presence felt.

We should live as the Sun does. The process by which it lives and the process by which it dies are one and the same. It hasn't a care. It simply expends itself gloriously and in so doing gives life to all. (*The Time Being* SCM Press 1992).

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

Let Canaan be his Slave: The Stories we Tell

David Rhodes

In the March edition, I discussed the idea of ‘race’ and how the idea was created and developed in the context of slavery and Enlightenment thinking. Now I’ll take a look at the stories we tell, and how these stories justify white supremacy. I’m particularly interested in the stories that the Christian church told providing the overwhelming moral justification for slavery and racism.

One of the things that first attracted me to *Sea of Faith* was its appreciation of what we all know – that stories are important. It is through stories that we get a basis for approaching our world, for making our sense of it. They are our most powerful cultural tool. And maybe religion is the most powerful story we have ever developed.

Addressing past wrongs

In January the Church of England published a report by the Church Commissioners into its historical financial benefits from slavery.¹ The detailed 46 page report concentrates on the Queen Anne’s Bounty fund, established in 1704, which invested significant sums in the South Sea Company, profiting enormously from chattel slavery and the slave-based plantation economy. The archbishop of Canterbury said the report ‘lays bare the links of the Church Commissioners’ predecessor fund with transatlantic chattel slavery. I am deeply sorry for these links. It is now time to take action to address our shameful past.’ A £100 million fund has been set up to ‘address past wrongs’ in a programme of investment, research and engagement. The archbishop was keen to make it clear that the money is not ‘reparations’ – and indeed that word does not appear in the report. Two criticisms have been made – firstly questioning if the amount is sufficient, and secondly commenting on the fact that the church remains in control of how the money is to be spent, reflecting the old power relations.

Nevertheless, so far so good. But the church needs to go much, much further. The church has looked at its financial gain from slavery in the same way that any business should – the Guardian and the Trevelyan family have recently done the same. But the C of E is not just, or even

primarily, a business. It claims to be the voice of the Christian gospel, the upholder of Christian morality. In this way the church provided the moral justification for slavery and racism – and that’s a responsibility beyond the totting up of the amount of profit. It is responsible for the stories it tells.

It is worth acknowledging up front the objection that not all members of the church were singing the same song. Brave dissenters and abolitionists did not cease from mental fight. But right now that’s not my story.

The Curse of Ham

Let’s look at a story that gets straight into racism and the justification for the enslavement of African people – the ‘Curse of Ham’.² The biblical story is short – Genesis 9: 20-27. It’s all a bit confusing, with internal contradictions (like much of Genesis, which was assembled from different sources). It’s after the flood, and Noah has three sons – Shem, Ham (who has a son called Canaan), and Japheth. Noah plants a vineyard, drinks the wine and gets drunk. Ham ‘sees the nakedness of his father’ and tells his brothers. The brothers are careful not to look as they cover Noah up with a cloak. Noah comes round, knows (how?) what Ham has done, and says, ‘Cursed be Canaan: lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers’. It seems like he didn’t really mean his brothers, but his uncles. (Best not to curse when you’re hung over I guess).

What was Ham’s misdeed? What did the writer mean, ‘Ham saw the nakedness of his father’? Literally? Well that was hardly his fault. Maybe he mocked his drunkenness to others. Maybe this is a euphemism for having sex with him. Or maybe (and a verse from Leviticus, 20:11, might support this interpretation) he had sex with his father’s wife – his mother – and Canaan was the result. Anyway, the curse was not from God, but from Noah. And although Ham did whatever the misdeed was, it was his son Canaan who was cursed. And Ham had four sons – Cush, Egypt, Put, and Canaan. Why pick on Canaan? Has it anything to do with the fact that Canaan was the ancestor of the Canaanites, the enemies of the Israelites, ‘utterly destroyed’ by

Joshua in conquering the Promised Land (Joshua 11:21)?

So how does this story relate to race? To start with, it has been used to separate some humans from others. We are all the children of Adam, and in the image of God. But at this point, when humanity started to increase, we have immediate separation into three – the descendants of Shem, Ham and Japheth. In medieval times the descendants of Ham were said to be serfs – justifying the institution of serfdom. It was in the 18th century that the story of the curse came to be related to black people and to the justification of their enslavement. Nowhere in Genesis does it suggest that Ham was black, and the Canaanite people were Semites, like the Jews. Some commentators thought that ‘Ham’ sounds like a Semitic word for black/dark/hot, but scholars are convinced that there is no linguistic link.

The curse of Ham story was retold as biblical justification for slavery with particular enthusiasm in the southern US states before and during the civil war. Reverend Benjamin Morgan Palmer, first Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in the US, was a great believer in the story; his infamous ‘Thanksgiving Sermon’ of 1860 became the popular rallying cry for secession.³ Some historians see this sermon as the critical turning-point in establishing moral authority for the Confederacy.

The Mormons used the story as justification for excluding black people from their ministry – a ban only removed in 2013. The Southern Baptist Convention resolved to ‘maintain and renew our public renunciation of racism in all its forms, including our disavowal of the ‘curse of Ham’ doctrine in 2018; just five years ago it was felt necessary to renounce the theory!

Whiteness

Let’s look at another concept, another story – ‘whiteness’. Whiteness, as it is used in the context of racist ideas, grew up with the concept of race, and as it did so the church adopted the association of whiteness with Christianity. It’s quite a long story.

Colour symbolism of black/white and light/dark is ancient and universal. Origen, the great third century scholar and theologian, characterised sinners as having darker faces than good people. But the association of blackness with sin was spiritual and theological, reflecting the character of a person; it was an idea, a symbol. There was no claim that physical blackness

literally made a person inferior. SOF members will be familiar with the process whereby an idea, an attempt a picturing something, starts to be taken literally with horrible effects – and this is what happened to the idea of ‘white’ more than a millennium later.

In Britain, there is no evidence of ‘white’ being used as a label for Anglo-Saxon people before the colonial period. In the 1500s, indeed, ‘white’ was used to describe elite ladies whose skin was pale because they didn’t have to work outside in all weathers. But in colonial times the spiritual and theological connotations of whiteness and blackness dropped away, and the physical characteristics became paramount.

So how did this story of whiteness develop? Prof Willie Jennings of Yale Divinity School points to a ‘perfect storm’ of four elements coming together around the 17th century.⁴ First, the idea of the people of Europe (and the church of Europe) replacing the people of Israel as the ‘People of God’. As the people of Israel had (so the story goes) rejected the Son of God, so God had rejected Israel and placed the European church at the centre of God’s work in the world. Second, the ‘Age of Discovery’ placed Europeans in new worlds to offer the people the truth of Christianity, to ‘mature’ the people and the land in the name of God’s mission. Third, the Europeans could name what they found – and whiteness became the name of productivity, maturity and development, in contrast to blackness. And finally came the claim that white Christians can take command of the people and the land to bring it to productive use. Whiteness became a way of seeing and being in the world.

Initially, for Britain and the US, the racial identity of ‘white’ referred only to Anglo-Saxon people. As the concept of whiteness evolved, the number of people considered white would grow as people wanted to push back against the increasing numbers of people of colour, due to emancipation and immigration. Activist Paul Kivel says, ‘Whiteness is a constantly shifting boundary separating those who are entitled to have certain privileges from those whose exploitation and vulnerability to violence is justified by their not being white.’⁵

A telling change in legal documents in Barbados illustrates how whiteness gets involved with slavery. In the 17th century, slave owners in legal documents described themselves as ‘Christians’ – and indentured servants are re-

ferred to as 'Christian servants'. From about 1690 there was a switchover to refer to slave owners as 'white', and the word 'white' starts to appear in the colony's legislation. White now has legal status.

Christian Slavery

Christianity had a problem with slavery – or, more accurately, slavery had a problem with Christianity. English Protestants identified themselves as a free people, and believed that Protestants should not be enslaved, even though it might be OK to enslave 'heathens'. In the early days of the slave economy, slave owners resisted the missionaries as it challenged the status of the 'heathens' whom they had enslaved. They were worried that a baptised slave might announce their own freedom and rebel. Also Protestantism encouraged the reading of the bible, and that meant literacy, and who knows where that would lead.

The resolution to this was for the church to change its story such that Christianity and slavery were compatible, and that the free people of God were now the white people. The idea was that if the most horrific abuses were used sparingly, then enslaved people could be managed as Christians, to become more compliant and peaceful. The concept of 'Christian slavery' was born. George Fox, the founder of the Quakers, visited Barbados in 1671. He was horrified by the conditions of enslaved people and urged improvement but was adamant that involving them in Christianity would not encourage them to rebel, and he did not advocate abolition. This is from his letter *To the governor and assembly at Barbados, 1671*:

Another slander and lie they have cast upon us is that we should teach the negroes to rebel, a thing that we do utterly abhor and detest in and from our hearts... this is a most egregious and abominable untruth. For that which we have declared to them is to exhort and admonish them to be sober and to fear God, and to love their masters and mistresses and to be faithful and diligent in their masters' service, and then their masters and overseers will love them and deal kindly and gently with them.

The Anglican missionary Morgan Goodwin argued much the same in his 1680 treatise *The Negro's and Indian's Advocate suing for their Admission into the Church*. 'Christian slavery' –

the collusion of the church in the institution of slavery was becoming the norm. Slave owners were fearful of Obeah (cultural and religious practices brought from West Africa), and Christianity tried, with limited success, to suppress Obeah.

Christianity also became critical in the move to 'creolisation'. Slave revolts were frequent and brutally suppressed, but the 1760 revolt in Jamaica (known as Tacky's war) shook the empire. It triggered a move to change the model for slave plantations, advocated particularly by Edward Long, who witnessed the events in Jamaica. Before, the straightforward model was to buy slaves, work them to death for eight years or so, then buy some more. The 'creolisation' approach was to create a self-sustaining slave community, exemplified by the later plantations in the southern states of the US. It became a necessity after Britain abolished the slave trade in 1808. The approach was to import fewer slaves, avoid working them to death too soon and create conditions for child rearing. Now, instead of resisting Christianity as they had in the early days, the slave owners often enforced Christianity. The official church was completely embedded within slavery.

What now?

In this article I have chosen to look at some stories and concepts (a concept is a sort of story, I think) that in part explain how the church got involved in a discourse justifying slavery and racism. I concentrated on the church because of its unique position of moral authority, and its use of that moral authority in promoting racism means that it has incurred an enormous moral debt. I am aware that I have used the word 'church' rather loosely, sometimes meaning the Church of England specifically, sometimes western Christianity more broadly.

I have looked at the past, and have not gone into the question of what is to be done now. A brilliant example of looking to the future is The Diocese of Southwark Anti-Racism Charter, adopted in 2021.⁶ It contains a vision and commitments on how the diocese will address racism. The conclusion of that document clearly acknowledges the past role of the church:

Racism is an affront to God. It is a sin, born out of the denial that all human beings were created equal in God's image and that all are

one in Christ. Racism, racial injustice and racialised exploitation, through structures such as historic or modern day slavery, have no place in society or church institutions. Acknowledgement of the anti-slavery campaigns of Wilberforce, Clarkson and Equiano does not obviate the fact that for hundreds of years, racialised theology and biblical interpretation were used to justify Church collusion with the enslavement and racial denigration of people of African heritage. Racialised attitudes of white Christian superiority also undergirded the post-slavery movement of Asians from the Indian subcontinent to Africa and the Caribbean through indentured servitude in the 19th century.

Notes

1. Available from C of E website www.churchofengland.org
2. For ideas on the Curse of Ham, and on 'Christian Slavery', I was inspired by the excellent film *After the Flood: The Church, Slavery and Reconciliation* from The Movement for Justice and Reconciliation
3. For more on the Thanksgiving Sermon- Historic New Orleans Collection: <https://www.hnoc.org/publications/first-draft/thanksgiving-1860-new-orleans-pastors-sermon-defending-slavery-rallied>
4. Prof Jennings explains this is the *After the Flood* film
5. Quoted in *Talking about Race* from website of National Museum of African American History and Culture (Smithsonian)
6. The Diocese of Southwark, *The Diocese of Southwark Anti-Racism Charter: Strategies for Enhancing Ethnic Diversity and Inclusion*

Racism: A Response

Dominic Kirkham

I appreciated the informative and carefully written article by David Rhodes on the idea of race and its origins in slavery, even that 'Race is the child of racism not the father'. Though this is a complex issue I think this view is fundamentally mistaken. My own view, for what its worth, is that racism, like anti-semitism, is the product of a distinctive Christian European culture (Christendom) that in its later phases in the Enlightenment also gave rise to attempted 'scientific' categorisations of race (cf 'The Christian Roots of Racism', in *Horror and Hope*)

Though he acknowledges that his focus is on the Atlantic slave trade, with its uniquely iniquitous features, and gives passing mention to pre-existing forms of slavery, one thing that has always concerned me is that the current discussion of slavery – and, by implication, the attribution or accusation of 'racism' – rarely seems to expand further to include the far more extensive East African slave trade in the Indian Ocean and the Sahara that was a distinctive feature of the Muslim world. Whilst the Atlantic slave trade lasted some three centuries the East African slave trade lasted over a thousand years (and in some ways, such as in the *kafala* stem still continues); if nothing else it must qualify the modern conceptual equation between slavery and racism.

The slave trade in this area dates back to the third millennium BCE, indeed it is concomitant with the rise of civilization itself and made it possible, but escalated considerably in Islamic times. Though numbers are speculative estimates indicate Muslim merchants traded an estimated 1000 African slaves annually between 800 and 1700, a number that grew to c. 4000 during the 18th century, and 3700 during

the period 1800–1870. In all, numbers exceed 17 million. (For verification see various web sites on slavery) Even in Europe between the 16th and 19th centuries over one million white Europeans were enslaved by Muslim Barbary pirates from North Africa with people from Cornwall and Ireland being particularly vulnerable, yet little note seems to be taken of any of this – for example, David Olusoga's authoritative study of slavery and racism *Black and British, A Forgotten History* makes not the slightest mention of this other 'forgotten history'.

One reason for this common historical elision is that slavery took a very different form in the Muslim world and left few recognisable descendants (as on the American slave plantations) as the males were generally castrated, to be regularly replaced from the great slave markets such as Zanzibar, and females used for concubinage (harem slavery), their offspring being assimilated into society – our former Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, being the product of such a lineage.

Another feature of this story is that slavery is still thriving in some form or under some description: in some Saharan countries like Morocco almost 50% of the population is vulnerable to enslavement. This is true for much of the *sahel*. Globally, 50 million people are in situations of slavery on any given day, often in clandestine occupations of which authorities are wilfully ignorant.

I mention all this by way of giving some perspective not only on the extent of this iniquitous practice but of the willingness of humans to engage in the exploitation of their fellow humans that has always characterised their societies, regardless of any particular theory or ideology. One may add, that while it is right to be aware of and address our own historical legacy, instead of just beating ourselves up about the past it would be better to focus on addressing the reality of the present.

New Testament Poems and Proclamations 5: The Shining City

Dinah Livingstone

In the New Testament there are three divine descents, each of which is a vision of a fair and just society on Earth:

- Jesus the divine Word come down Earth to announce the imminent reign of God, which is good news for the poor and hungry.
- Paul's vision of a new humanity 'in Christ', as one body with one spirit, all sharing the same bread.
- The beautiful city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from heaven to Earth.

That vision is in Revelation, the last book of the Bible:

I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, dressed as a bride for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying:

'See the home of God is among humans.
He will dwell with them.:
They will be his people
And God himself will be with them;
He will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'
(21:2-4).

It is the marriage of heaven and Earth, the divine and human, 'God with us'. We can think of heaven as the realm of the imagination, which can only be realised by us: the divine vision 'come down, embodied, become human'
(Council of Nicaea 325).

This final chapter of Revelation goes on to say of the beautiful city: 'the glory of God is its light' (v. 23) – it doesn't need any lamps. The Proto Indo-European root of our word divine *diu, div* meant 'shining' (as also in Zeus, Jupiter [Diupiter] Deus, Dios, Dieu...). The divine shines like the sun and all that it shines on shines.

The city has a river of the water of life and 'on either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit... and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of nations.' (22:2)

The poet William Blake understood this coming down to Earth in his poem 'Jerusalem', in which he sees his own London transformed into the new Jerusalem:

The fields from Islington to Marybone,
To Primrose Hill and Saint John's Wood,
Were builded over with pillars of gold
And **there** Jerusalem's pillars stood.

Her Little-ones ran on the fields,
The Lamb of God among them seen
And fair Jerusalem his Bride
Among the little meadows green.

Pancras and Kentish Town repose
Among her golden pillars high,
Among her golden arches which
Shine upon the starry sky.

The Jew's Harp house and the Green Man,
The ponds where boys to bathe delight,
The fields of cows by Willan's farm
Shine in Jerusalem's pleasant sight.

The beautiful city *shines* – the divine shining come down to Earth. Then at the end of this section of his poem 'Jerusalem' Blake says:

In my Exchanges every Land
Shall walk, and mine in every Land
Mutual shall build Jerusalem
Both heart in heart and hand in hand.

As I am writing this in London in Spring, every day I walk through my little park, St Martin's Gardens. The London plane trees are beginning to come out with their new green and when the sun shines, young people working locally come out and sit picnicking on the central grassy mound in their lunch hour. There are also benches to sit on for the less agile. I often sit and look at the trees sprouting a bit more as the season advances, and feel their healing power. Children are playing together in the playground with mothers and fathers keeping an eye on them and chatting. Some chat in English and some of them chat in many other languages. London speaks more than 300.

Those 'ponds where boys to bathe delight' are on Hampstead Heath and are not just for boys but adult men and women. April is when it starts getting warm enough for most people to swim (some hardy souls swim all the year round).

My small local park, St Martin's Gardens, has mostly plane trees, Hampstead Heath has all kinds of trees and the River Fleet runs from its source through the Heath ponds. Although London is also the 'city of dreadful night', you can get the feeling, especially on a sunny day, that this vision of the shining, happy city is at least partly realised here, down to Earth in London.

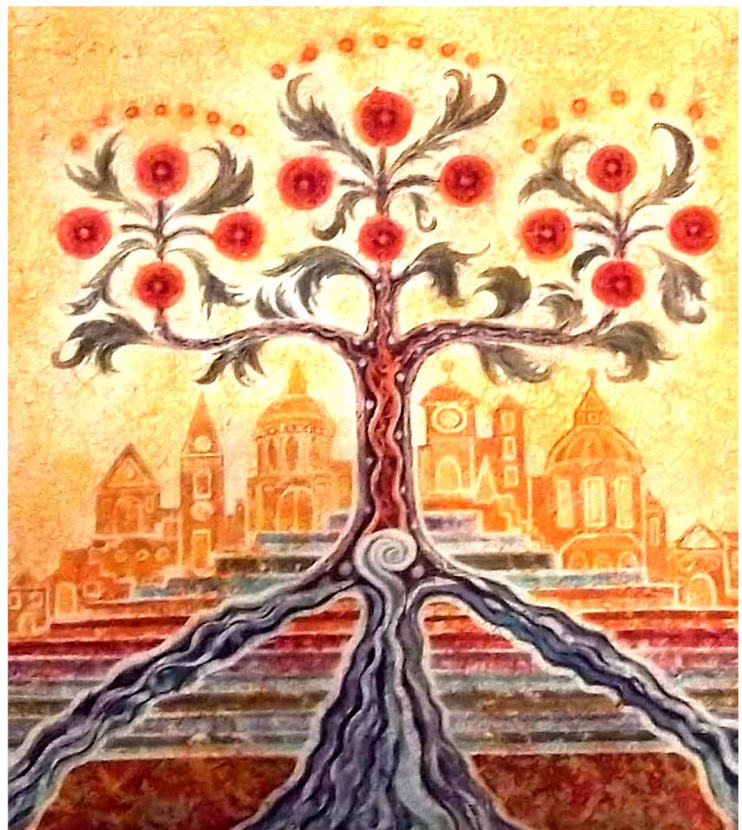
On the other side of the world the Nicaraguan poet Ernesto Cardenal also had a vision of his own capital city realising the vision in Revelation. In his poem *Oracle upon Managua*, written just after the devastating Managua earthquake in 1973, he says something similar;

After all God is also City...
 A classless city
 the free city
 where God is everybody
 He, God-with-everybody (Emmanuel)
 the universal City
 the City where God's humanity
 is revealed to us.

Cardenal joined in the struggle to overthrow the Nicaraguan dictator Somoza and after the triumph of the Revolution in 1979 he became minister of culture in the Sandinista government, which tried to implement this vision of a kind and fair society. For a decade they had considerable success. When they came to power one of the first things they did was abolish the death penalty and Cardenal's ministry of culture set up poetry workshops all over the country. (They also had a poetry marathon once a year in Ciudad Darío, at which I was invited to read my poems. I translated some of Ernesto's poems and when he came to London we read them together in the South Bank Centre Purcell Room.)

The Nicaraguan Revolution inspired the whole world but it is devastating what is happening now with President Daniel Ortega, together with his Vice President wife Rosario Murillo, bringing in repressive policies, imprisoning and exiling opponents, including many of his former Sandinista colleagues.

The same thing happened in 1789 at the time of the French Revolution, which also inspired the world. The poet Wordsworth wrote: 'Bliss was it



Reredos Batik in St Botolph's without Aldgate, London

in that dawn to be alive but to be young was very heaven'. But following the Terror and with the rise of Napoleon intent on Empire, when he invaded Switzerland in 1798 many felt bitter disappointment, which the poet Coleridge expressed in his 'recantation' poem 'France: An Ode'. (This poem also referred to John Milton, who was himself disappointed in England's abandonment of the 'Good Old Cause' in 1660.)

Because attempts to create a better society, envisioned in the book of Revelation, frequently seem to fail, some Christians retort: 'That just shows we should leave it up to God. We shouldn't try to play God. That invites hubris.' However, two millennia have passed since Jesus preached the imminent coming of the reign of God on Earth 'in the lifetime of some of those standing here present' – and nearly as long since the vision in the book of Revelation. But God still has not made it happen.

I think we should conclude that God is not going to do it, so we have no option but to keep trying to bring it about ourselves. Sometimes we do make improvements to our society. We can't just give up; we have no option but to keep on trying.

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Mystic Meg

Mystic Meg, Britain's most famous astrologer, died aged 80 this March. Astrology – what a load of crap I always say. In the student canteen we had a breakfast ritual. Pass *The Sun*, tearing out page 3 of course, and reading each other's horoscopes. Just for a laugh.

'You will meet new love at a petrol pump, they will have an unusual form of identification'. Discussion begins. I can't drive, so you won't find me at a petrol station. We mourn missed romances and my motoring deficiency. On the other hand, my new Irish passport may be the 'unusual identification'. We debate my national identity.

I admired the chutzpah of Mystic Meg. Her predictions were too specific, too risible, too easy to refute. Proof to me that her self-belief or delusion was genuine. Broken clocks are right twice a day, but they don't start conversations, or turn acquaintances into friends.

Edward Nickell
London

Sofia 147

March's *Sofia* (no 147) was pertinent to my current preoccupations. Ygdrasil (the ash) Tree of Life was on the cover and in Yate, near Bristol, where I live most ash trees have been felled, though my son may just have saved his from the die-back. Ian Harris writes plainly about my foremost concern, our eco-future.

Then David Rhodes's article on slavery. Coming from Rhodesia I've always been very aware of race prejudice, that category of class prejudice that is supercharged by the visible 'badge of colour'. And here the review of Justin Welby's book comes in. I must read it because he knows that the answer to prejudice and polarised views is to listen and talk and, crucially, he has developed his ideas on the processes involved.

How to combat racial injustice? For what it's worth, as a onetime archivist, oral historian and librarian of record, seeking to keep safe the sources rather than shape a story, when I stood back I found that many of those most effective in this regard were practical folk, farmers, businesspeople, extension workers, missionaries (as opposed to city clerics), even internal affairs officers (once called 'native commissioners'), as likely to be doctrinally conservative as radical or liberal. In times of war, the military. The point is, they worked together on vital tasks and

could not help seeing the worth of the other. In my limited experience most people are fundamentally decent and they are proud of their work, or wish to be given the chance to be. Naïve?



Digby Hartridge
Yate, Bristol

Eco-Human

The Eco-Human Future commended by Ian Harris (*Sofia* 147) rightly exposes unworthy motives accelerating climate change. That Prometheus was condemned for granting fire to then unwitting humanity begins to seem faintly appropriate.

Wilful disgraces of our dominion over this sin-doomed 'vale of woe' include the smug excesses of the very rich and the deliberate denial campaign (petrochemicals imitate tobacco) for business profit.

Worship of the natural world lingers in paganism. But we do not need to assign a conserving morality to Nature (biological competition and geological extinctions refute). The circumstances of our evolution and adaptation demand compatible regard as prudent and link aesthetic, ethical and spiritual.

Edwin Salter
King's Lynn

Queer Holiness

I applaud the comments of Edward Nickell in his review of *Queer Holiness* that, 'Theology needs to take human knowledge seriously' – something which does not seem always to have been the case in recent Church of England synodal discussions, that often seem to have been characterised by a 'God said....', text-bashing mentality that simply puts a stop to further discussion. Apart from the actual issues what this lamentable mentality expresses is its ignorance of the way scripture itself has been composed, often by way of an evolutionary aggregation of attitudes that reflect particular historical epochs.

If scripture reveals anything it is that moral understanding evolves. But the very composition of scripture also reveals that such development is often resisted by reactionary elements: this is particularly clear in the New Testament where radical teachings of Jesus have obviously been later 'qualified'. We are left with the paradoxical situation that it becomes possible to quote scripture against itself, depending on which bit one selects. For church leaders to be seemingly incapable of understanding this or oblivious to it is rather depressing.

Dominic Kirkham
Manchester

Digby Hartridge reviews *A Liberation for the Earth: climate, race and Cross*

by A.M. Ranawana

SCM Press (Norwich 2022) 256 pages. £25.

Anupama Ranawana is a Catholic theologian. Climate Change is the great issue facing humankind. My background is Christianity, so I hoped we might be in some sympathy. She begins: 'Taking a trip in a small boat in Negombo, Sri Lanka,...to see the mangroves.... I drew back a little in shock. Covering the base of them was a brightly coloured skirt of plastic.' She provides further arresting examples of environmental devastation. Much later she stares over the beautiful but overburdened ocean and in 'an experience of grace' understands the need to care for Creation. 'All is fallen so the work towards justice and liberation must occur in complex ways.' She develops her argument over four short sections – sans notes, the book is barely 100 pages long. An ecological conversion, a 'personal conversion to the struggle for institutional change', must occur before we can see meaningful change, a radical break required, 'beyond the idea of sustainable development, suggesting a shift from the purely anthropocentric to the understanding of 'multiple and interlocking networks of relationships'. Nature is not merely a 'utility for humankind'.

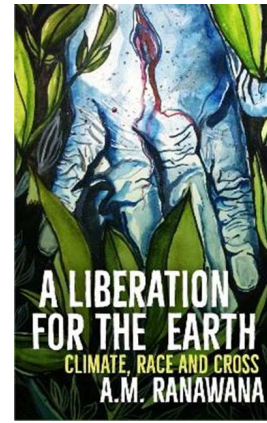
The Pope's 2015 encyclical letter *Laudato Si'* moved her, but it's 'an incomplete document' in its insistence on the centrality of the family, patriarchal bias and 'failure to think beyond the binary of two genders'. She monitored its reception; righteous anger was a common reaction. She was convinced of 'the need to further conversations on the topic of ecological sin and the importance of spiritual awakening that would add to the ongoing activities that focus on effective transformative social justice.' And she was speaking from 'theologies of the ground' as she developed a political theology of rage, citing examples of righteous anger from Moses to Jesus to Francis of Assisi – and many more.

Liberation theology is 'the through-argument' of the book, its mantra: 'Earth is the new poor.' Her absorbing chapter on liberation theologies necessarily scuttles through the territory and it's hard to condense, but I want to mention James Cone, Leonardo Boff and Ivone Gebara, a Catholic theologian who 'focused on deconstructing knowledge using a liberationist perspective' and was referred by the Vatican for re-education. Ranawana touches on: Buddhists challenging consumerism, the Fire Sermon as their guide; the Muslim concept of stewardship; a 2015 Rabbinic Letter demonstrating

the dire effect of 'the worsening concentrations of wealth'; 'Indigenous communities that live within a spiritualist setting'; the (drowning) Pacific Island cultures.

Ranawana condemns neo-liberal economics, consumerism, throw-away mindsets, extreme technological fixes, land appropriation, chemical pollution, loss of biodiversity, vast strip mines – common ground. 'I feel angry every time I am asked what needs to be done or asked how we can gather to lament together and lately my response has been... to remember that for so very many there is no choice to lament.' (Rather than lamenting, I contemplated practical measures.) Before justice can be attained, Ranawana says, we must 'take on a process of *unsettling*'. She takes issue with 'apocalyptic narratives', problematic because they expect climate catastrophe to trigger largescale immigration. XR she attacks for its 'whiteness', neglecting history by not fore-fronting blame. Meanwhile, the extreme right appropriates the story (Le Pen says certain ethnic groups should 'remain distinct and restricted to their 'native lands'.) And, even if you ignore denialism, there are Christian groups that envisage an Apocalypse offering 'selective salvation'. Remedies long practised by ancient 'worldhoods' in the Global South are ignored while the West arrogantly assumes leadership, focussing on technologies, setting long timescales for reform, ignoring reparations.

We could all add egregious examples of abuses from across the world and through history and I've wondered if 'rage', the twin of hopelessness, could be harnessed to dispel our national complacency, generate pragmatic action. But Ranawana eschews the middle ground. She believes with Sarah Jaquette Ray that 'there is an inherent whiteness to climate anxiety', mere fear of losing privilege, while early environmentalists were linked to eugenicists. She cautions the reader *not* to think of anger in a *secularised* manner but to equate it with the *thunderings* of Jesus. 'We need more theological work... [and] scholarship requires us to make epistemological breaks'. She calls for a rainbow coalition of the dispossessed. But must we wait while she rallies her troops and wins the argument before we can cooperate?



reviews

Digby Hartridge is a SOF member living in Bristol.

Kathryn Southworth reviews ***In search of Julian of Norwich*** by Sheila Upjohn

Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd (London 2019). Pbk. 94 pages. £8.95.

Many readers will first have encountered Julian of Norwich through the famous lines which precede the closure of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*. And all shall be well and/ All manner of things shall be well'. Sheila Upjohn's book takes the form of a spiritual detective story, engagingly illustrated and designed to uncover the identity, significance and long obscurity of Julian, how the famous lines relate to the rest of her mystical writings, and why she has become an inspiration.

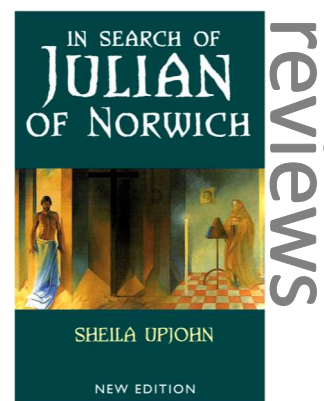
Upjohn has promoted Julian's text through many editions of translation and selections for daily and Lenten readings. The author of *Revelations of Divine Love*, is intangible, without relics, or known grave. Her existence is documented, fortuitously, by another woman born in 1373, the first writer of English autobiography, Marjorie Kemp, who gives an account of several days of 'holy conversation' held with the anchorite, 'talking of the love of our Lord Jesus Christ'.

Outside of this source, little can be known of Julian. As Upjohn acknowledges, her book is a story 'where everything is speculation and there is no real answer in the final chapter'. The text itself survives only through a manuscript presumed to have been taken to Paris by a fugitive religious. The first edition was printed in 1670 and in 1901 Grace Warrack edited a version for Methuen which has never since been out of print. Julian herself was clearly an anchorite but not necessarily a nun. Indeed, Upjohn tentatively decides she was more likely to have been a householder and a mother. Certainly contemporary advice for an anchoress suggests a way of life that is far from the popular idea of enclosure. The *Ancrene Riwle* is full of homely advice on the needs of an anchorite, including suitably warm clothing and even pets: 'My dear sisters, you should keep no beast except a cat'. It specifies a cell should have three windows, facing church, domestic support services and visitors seeking spiritual advice, the latter being not so much a distracting window on the world but a way of meeting God 'in your neighbour's troubles'.

It is unclear how educated Julian may have been. She described herself as 'unlettered' but may just be referring to her lack of Latin or rhetorical skills. She is clearly aware that she needs to justify herself as a

woman writer and her style is vivid but highly repetitive. Upjohn includes sizable selections of text in her own translation but discusses the merits of translating differently, in 'sense-lines', as in the text by Fr. John

-Julian OJN which, she demonstrates, makes the words 'shine out'. Or else, one might say, the text is essentially poetic and works best laid out as verse.



Julian's theology can be summed up in the ideas of love and relationship. God 's substance and our own is no different, since Jesus entered our nature and all is God. Far from the male club of the Trinity, Jesus is our 'true mother' who hungered to embrace Jerusalem as a mother bird gathers her brood. Prayer is a conversation with God who wants to make us a partner in good deeds and by prayer we are attuned to God and make God happy and glad. How, says Julian, can we help but be restless when we look to little things that have no rest in them? Only in God, all wise and good, is true rest. This is the source of the reassurance that all will be well.

Upjohn's approach is as homely and accessible as her subject, though this may not appeal to everyone. Her detective work is unashamedly unscientific in the usual sense, since it focuses on something which cannot be tested or measured: love. Mysticism, by definition, embodies the unproven and reaches beyond language itself. Upjohn concludes her investigation with a consideration of the proliferation of Julian groups which meet for contemplation and silent prayer. As she says, it often seems that every day brings more torrents of words:

In the beginning was the Word, but we have over produced and trivialised words to such an extent that, in order to find the Word at the heart of the universe, we have to take the way of silence.

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

Dominic Kirkham reviews
*Jesus' Alternative Plan:
The Sermon on the Mount*

by Richard Rohr

SPCK (London 2023). 208 pages. £16.99.

Do we need another book on the Sermon on the Mount? Richard Rohr, a widely published and respected Franciscan priest, spiritual director and globally recognised ecumenical teacher based in New Mexico, thinks we do. And I agree.

It is widely recognised that every individual, community or nation needs a narrative or set of core values to live by, that give cohesion and purpose to life. As Rohr writes, 'the existential temptation that you and I face every day, [is] the doubt as to *who we are*' (p.115) and is the central challenge that the Gospel addresses. Sometimes this is called a moral compass and as such the Sermon on the Mount is something of high water mark in the moral development of humanity. It deserves to be constantly set before us.

However, this book is not just another commentary on the Beatitudes. In fact Rohr doesn't get round to talking about what he calls the 'Happy Attitudes' until towards the end of the book (chapter 8). Before that he devotes several chapters to describing the cultural world in which Jesus lived, particularly its social order, to which he refused to offer allegiance and against which he defined his own 'new world order': 'Jesus was undercutting the system of human society, refusing to take it seriously.' (27)

This essentially apocalyptic vision was not, Rohr avers, about the reform of the world but its end in anticipation of a new age. An important caveat is that this is not the end of history. What we read in the apocalyptic announcements is 'not so much of a final end of history, but an end to our own personally constructed worlds.' The transposition from the social to personal gives Rohr the gambit to focus on what must happen 'in our own psyche, in our own relationships, and in our culture' and the much wider issue of 'the malaise of Christianity today'. What he deems this to be is the facade that 'People keep up the external observance of reliance upon God, whilst underneath they depend entirely on themselves.' (123)

Expanding on this theme he points to 'the danger of postmodern liberal society' in which 'most

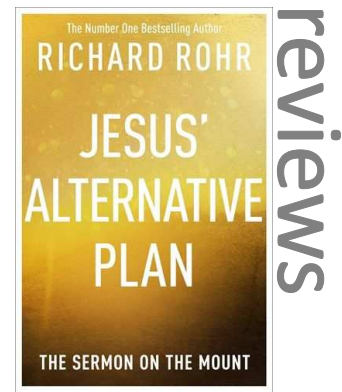
people have no place to stand,' (71) everything is relative, in constant motion. His contention is that we need to hear the solution, 'plan', of Jesus which is to move the boundaries to a greater world vision, the Reign of God, that calls not just for renewal but transformation:

'Transformation, though, is not the same as change. Change is when something new begins. Transformation is the opposite: It happens... when something old falls away.' (129)

The assumption underlying Rohr's diagnosis is a very clear belief that there is a God – 'of course there's a God' - as he goes on to dismiss atheism as 'a modern, rational phenomenon of the Western world – a little blip on the screen.' (126). Until we meet a benevolent God and benevolent universe we will not be at home in this world, Rohr tells us: 'No matter what religion or belief people may hold, underneath it all are three possible worldviews: the universe is against us, the universe is for us, or the universe is neutral.' Thanks to grace we can come to see that 'God is in charge and that this God is good and involved' (125).

To my mind what is strange in all this is that at no point does Rohr actually elaborate on what this word God means other than as some positive, controlling, universal force. There is no sense of the need of the crucial challenge of modernity to reimagine God, as Lloyd Geering attempted so perceptively in his book of that name. This radically changes the way we now conceptualise 'Jesus' alternative plan'.

Rohr concludes his book with a chapter on *Bridges and Boundaries: Liberals and Conservatives* and trying to keep a balance. Well, good luck with that. Anyone who has been following, for example, the fraught debates of the recent Anglican synod may wonder at Rohr's breezy confidence that, 'The reason Christianity has the power to be universal is precisely because of (the) doctrine of open table fellowship.' I can envisage quite a number of groups who may take a different view.



Kathleen McPhilemy reviews *The Poison Glen*

by Annemarie Ní Churreáin

Gallery Press (Oldcastle, Ireland 2021) Pbk. 72 pages.
£10.95.

The ‘Magdalen Laundries’ scandal has thrown up a fair amount of literature. Sometimes this is totally convincing, as in the case of Claire Keegan’s novella, *Small Things Like These*; sometimes, no matter how powerful the imaginative empathy of the writer, there is a whiff of misery appropriation, of horror approached from the outside. In contrast, Annemarie Ní Churreáin’s collection, *The Poison Glen*, comes unquestionably from the inside. The poet writes from personal experience; for her, the personal is political, although she does not see herself as an activist. The personal experience, most obviously, is the fact that the poet’s father was brought up in a mother and baby home, while her parents fostered all through her childhood. She claims over 30 foster siblings. At the same time, these poems are written from the point of view of women, whether the forgotten and nameless women of the Irish underclasses or the woman of myth, Balor’s daughter Eithne, whose story is woven through these poems. In Ní Churreáin’s version, Balor, the ultimate patriarch-dictator kills two sons of his daughter, Eithne and imprisons her in a tower in the glen. The surviving son, Lugh, the god of light, shoots Balor through the eye, so that poison spills out blighting the glen in County Donegal, where the poet grew up. Bringing light to the dark history of suffering and secrecy experienced by unmarried mothers and their babies is important, but more dramatic is the conflict between the feisty daughter, Eithne, and her controlling father, Balor:

Eithne was the name we chose, and as she grew tall
she had this way about her that boiled my blood.

Like a secondary school teenager, Eithne loosened her hair and rolled her skirts. In her opposition to her father, ‘the odd tooth was knocked / out of her head’ but in his view this was ‘purely horse play’, a devastating snapshot of casual male violence. The poem concludes, after Balor has drowned her babies, with the timeworn excuse, ‘was the girl not asking for it?’

These poems also expose a culture blighted by silence and secrecy, where a whole village can ignore the plight of an unmarried, pregnant girl: ‘If I were to tell you that a vigil was held – / candles lit, prayers said – // or that long beams of silver torchlight scanned / the village in search // ... I would be lying.’ In another poem, the family refuse to take back the body of a girl who dies in childbirth in the Castlepollard Mother and Baby Home: ‘The body was

a symbol they would not concede.’ Ní Churreáin eschews direct political statement, but politics are implicit everywhere. There is the contrast between Christian faith and practice, as in ‘Baptism’ where the poem

retells the story of a woman who was found frozen with her newborn child in the snow, who was:

every woman who kneeled alone less than
two miles from the hospital, to scoop water
upon the forehead of her dying child...

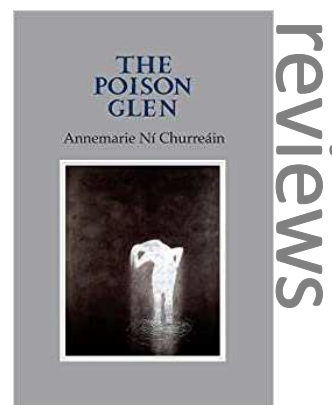
There are the references to institutions founded by well-meaning Anglo Irish benefactors, whether aristocrats or Quakers where the effect of colonial oppression is only implied:

Who [the Quakers] raised this house out of speckled
stone
as a house of refuge? And in the deep silence
of failures since, what can love do?

There is the poem about Éamon de Valera, often seen as the father of the nation, himself the child of an unmarried mother, the mystery of whose origins, often romanticised, Ní Churreáin attributes firmly to the culture of secrecy and shame. Here the grandmother who reared him says: ‘The yarn his mother spun concerned a marriage / to a Spaniard who died soon after. / It was the first I heard tell of it.’

Nevertheless, this is not book of misery and gloom. It celebrates the power of love, especially in the longer poem, ‘The Foundling Crib’, which has at its heart the story of Bridget Kearney who as a destitute mother placed her ‘newborn girl into the foundling crib’. As the poem relates, the fate of these foundling babies was rarely fortunate, ‘the best sent out to nurse, the others bound / for the infirmary // to suckle on a bottle so heavy with lily few woke...’. Yet, despite everything ‘Bridget Kearney came back, / a foundling price in her pocket, a demand on her lips’. The poem ends as Bridget sets out ‘along the bog-road home, / the child’s low breath at her collar-bone. // Together again. / Together again.’

Annemarie Ní Churreáin, has integrated fragments of grief and loss, both from her own experience and what she has found through her research, as well as myth and buried histories to create a work which is beautiful and powerful.



A Penn'orth

Penny Mawdsley thinks about surprise.

Sadly, today a penny will no longer buy a hot cross bun or a contribution towards a 5th November firework, let alone help an old man when one is dropped in his hat at Christmastime. However, as one of these now nearly worthless coins myself, I'll do my best to fill the back page of *Sofia* with a column or two, endeavouring to follow in John Pearson's inspirational footsteps.

The theme in my first venture is 'Surprise'. Good ones or bad, they are experiences we have all had at some time. What is common to both is their unexpectedness. At their extremes they can delight or shock. What matters is how we cope with them.

Members of my Bangor Unitarian group came up with some interesting examples at a recent Zoom 'house group' that I led. Its purpose was to encourage contributions from all participants and to give food for thought. For some opening music I used a clip from John Bratton's popular children's song *The Teddy Bears' Picnic* (YouTube: An old recording by Henry Hall and the BBC orchestra), which unsurprisingly evoked nostalgia amongst the group. If you remember, its first line goes 'If you go down to the woods today, you're sure of a big surprise'. We discussed how our reaction to these words had possibly changed over the years. For us hard-bitten adults, who have probably watched far too many thrillers where something dark and sinister has happened when the victim has ventured into the forest, an otherwise innocent and pleasurable walk in the woods for a meeting might signal caution!

Ice-broken, the conversation – often awkward and stilted on Zoom – soon flowed freely and thankfully everyone willingly volunteered a surprise of one kind or another to share with the group. We heard from someone who fondly remembered receiving what became a precious plaything from an unexpected source; from someone who won a raffle prize for the first time and from another, on passing a driving test at the umpteenth attempt. In contrast were the painful shock surprises: A long-term partner walking out of a relationship without warning, a husband dying suddenly, the shock of hearing an unexpected medical diagnosis and someone's shock at not receiving the confidently predicted good exam grades that would have led to a desired university place.

We tactfully quizzed those who had shared these



Image: sussexexpress.co.uk

memories to find out how they had coped with their 'surprise' – particularly if it had had disappointing or difficult consequences. The group split over whether having faith had helped in coming to terms with their experience. It appeared that most participants acknowledged that it had played little or no part; rather, that the routine of work, distractions of everyday life or the sympathetic ear of a good friend made for the most effective healing and the spur to 'move on'.

Next, our conversation took another turn: Not unexpectedly, we got on to examples of surprise and suspense in literature. The denouements of detective and mystery fiction came readily to mind, as did well-known biblical narratives in both Old and New Testaments. There is the surprise of Pharaoh's daughter at finding a baby in the bullrushes, the welcome symbols perceived by Noah's crew at the ending of the Great Flood, Isaac's last-minute reprieve from death at his father's hand and David's victorious sling shot that did for Goliath. In the New Testament there is the surprise for those well-versed in scripture that not only can ten individual Commandments be dispensed with, but the many stipulations of 'the fence round the Law' as well. There is Judas's surprise at Jesus's reaction to the precious ointment gift, and the disciples' astonishment at Jesus's disappearance from the tomb. We reckoned that the surprise and suspense elements of these stories explained why we remembered them so well from childhood.

Boris Pasternak is quoted as saying 'Surprise is the greatest gift which life can grant us', and Françoise Sagan, that 'Art must take reality by surprise'. Discuss! A penny for your thoughts!

Penny Mawdsley is the convenor of the Merseyside and North Wales SOF Group.



Queen Elizabeth I addresses the troops at Tilbury, 1588 .

Alfred Kingsley Lawrence (1893–1975)