



Exeter Cathedral Choir

## Music and Religion

# *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](mailto:editor@sofn.org.uk)

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Front cover image: Exeter Cathedral Choir

[Image: exeter-cathedral.org.uk](http://Image:exeter-cathedral.org.uk)

Back cover image: Blackbird singing  
[wikimediacommons.org](http://wikimediacommons.org).

# *sfia*

is the magazine of SOF – the Sea of Faith Network (Britain). Registered Charity No. 1113177.

*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.

# Music and Religion

Traditionally the music of the spheres was in the key of E flat major. In the 1960s it was flower power, ‘Love and peace, man!’, ‘Make love not war’, ‘Screw in the key of E flat’ – in cosmic harmony. We thought that was common sense, which indeed it was. But love and peace proved more difficult to achieve. You can’t just walk up Primrose Hill together with a flower in your hand and look down on London ‘flower of cities all’ to invoke blessings on it and everything will be all right. Nevertheless, it is still a good aspiration, a positive energy.

There is a tarmac viewing space at the top of Primrose Hill, a reminder of Louis McNeice’s poem ‘Autumn Journal’ (1938-9 at the approach to the World War II), whose first line is: ‘They are cutting down the trees on Primrose Hill’. They were being cut down to instal Ack Ack anti aircraft guns to protect London against the Blitz. There are still wars going on in the world today.



Ack Ack guns on Primrose Hill during the Second World War

This edition of *Sofia* contains edited scripts of the three talks given at the July 2023 SOF Conference in London on *Music and Religion*.

Patti Whaley suggests that the particular place of meaning that used to be occupied by God is now occupied by music, or the need that God used to meet is now met by music: ‘Music functions that way for me, as if it’s a sort of parallel universe that makes up for all the shortcomings of life.’ It does not make specific moral demands but suggests an ideal world of beauty, *splendor formae*, ‘the shining of [sound] shape’ and peace: *tranquilitas*

*ordinis* ‘the tranquillity of order’. She says: ‘I have never doubted that a Bach fugue is what life is meant to be like’.

The French poet Paul Verlaine’s ‘Art Poétique’, ‘Art of Poetry’, begins: ‘De la musique avant toute chose: Music before anything else.’ Stephen Mitchell and Elaine Henson offered what was really more of a gig than a formal talk with many delightful sung examples. They spoke of the power of Choral Evensong, which still attracts many people to cathedrals, not only believers. They concluded by singing a translation of a poem by Verlaine, written when he was in prison.

When Verlaine left his wife and ran off with the younger poet, Arthur Rimbaud, they lived in Royal College Street near me in Camden Town. They fell out over some fish which Verlaine brought from Camden Market. Verlaine rushed off and took a ferry to Belgium. Rimbaud followed him and they had a fight. Verlaine shot Rimbaud in the wrist and ended up in prison.

Verlaine’s famous poem ‘Autumn Song’, ‘Chanson d’Automne’, was broadcast in French on the BBC in 1944 to alert the French resistance to the imminent D-Day invasion. The first line: ‘Les sanglots longs des violons de l’automne’ was broadcast 24 hours beforehand and the second line, ‘blessent mon coeur d’une langueur monotone’ was the specific call to action.

Katie Hainbach, the Head of Music and Arts at Alyth Synagogue, also known as the Northwestern Reform Synagogue, in North-west London spoke about music in Jewish services. As in Christianity, she says, there are a variety of traditions; in some Jewish services music is banned and in others it flourishes. They often sing psalms.

I have never been to a Jewish service but, of course, the psalms are also widely used in Christian services. I love their parallelism. One of my favourites is ‘When Israel came out of Egypt and the house of Jacob from a foreign people, the mountains skipped like rams and the hills like little lambs. The sea saw and fled, the River Jordan turned back...’ I used to hear it sung in Latin plainsong at Vespers in the French Church near Leicester Square and still often hear it in my head: *In exitu Israel de Egypto, domus Jacob de populo barbaro...*

# The Music of the Spheres

## *3 Extracts*

1

The music of the spheres.  
A universe harmonious as a harp.  
Rhythm is repeated equal times.  
Heartbeat.  
Day/night.  
Migrant birds' arrivals and departures.  
Star cycles and maize cycles.  
Mimosa opening during the day  
and folding when night comes.  
Moon and tide rhythms.  
And crabs who know the tide is on the ebb  
and before it goes out have their hiding holes.  
A single rhythm in planets, the sea, atoms, apples  
which ripen and fall, and Newton's head.  
    Melody, arpeggio, chord.  
        The harp of the universe.

Unity  
behind apparent multiplicity  
that is music.  
    Difference between music and noise...  
The bell's sound is in its shape.  
Or girls' legs, come to that.  
    Matter is music.  
Matter in perpetual motion in space and time.  
Hearts and stars are rhythmical.  
The universe sings and Pythagoras heard it.  
    The music of the spheres,  
rather than classical music, jazz.

2

From water, invisible hydrogen and oxygen,  
invisible life arose  
which created the blue atmosphere  
    and the earth's green.  
The green of the fields comes from life,  
    green from the sun.  
The fields are green because they do not absorb green.  
As a camera flash  
    is sun. A sun flash.

How lovely the earth is seen from the air  
especially where it meets water!  
    Animals and plants, we all  
have the same microscopic ancestor.

We are notes in the same music.  
A universe harmonious as a harp –  
wings, neck, tail  
all keeping time –  
heart and aorta have rhythm  
like a musical instrument.

3

Matter:

spirit's shape.

A non-casual ordering of atoms and photons.  
Or as if matter were made of spirit.  
'Physicists speak of subatomic particles  
as if they had objective reality.'

Matter ever in movement.

Never at rest.

If atoms were immutable,  
there would only be a dead universe.

Nothing is or is not,  
everything in the process of being.

And what is real?

Is jealousy real?

Love is real.

The bodies of gaseous spheres that we call stars  
kept together and lit by their own gravity.

Their light is nakedness says Rubén,  
who brought harmony from the sacred wood.

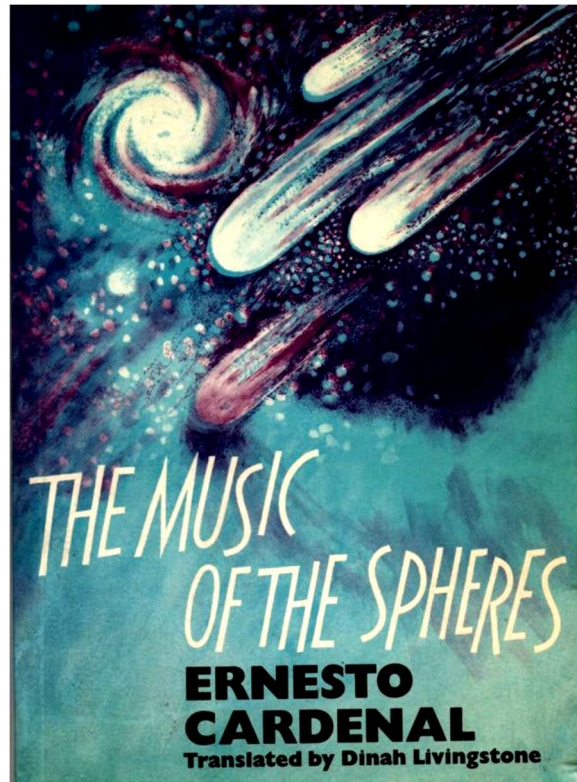
Suppose, reader, we want to see star HD193182.

The star could not see its beauty  
unless we did.

We are the star seeing itself  
born in its fire  
and cooled to be able to think and see.  
Protons, neutrons and electrons  
are the human body, the planet and the stars.  
From the unconscious consciousness came  
so in us the planet loves and dreams.  
It is the Earth singing this *Cosmic Canticle* in me.

The music of the spheres.

*Ernesto Cardenal*  
*Translated by Dinah Livingstone*



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Catholic priest Ernesto Cardenal was Minister of Culture in the Sandinista government from 1979—1987. 'The Music of the Spheres' is one *cantiga* in his 580-page poem *Cosmic Canticle* (*Cántico Cósmico*), published by Editorial Nueva Nicaragua, Managua, 1989. At the London launch of the translation the TMMC band (Telepathic Music Campaign, Tom Livingstone *et al*) played their 20 minute piece *The Music of the Spheres*, inspired by the poem. It is online at: <https://on.soundcloud.com/Di9Rd>

# Religion and Music

Stephen Mitchell and Elaine Henson

Religion and music went hand in hand long before the appearance of plainsong. Don Cupitt was talking to me on the phone about the theme of music and religion and giving me a little lecture on Neanderthal bone flutes and religion. Since Neanderthal times, music has been used to enhance the practice of faith – perhaps, but, not necessarily with divine approval. Here's Amos, the prophet. Forgive this rather loose paraphrase I found but I rather like it:

God says: I hate, I despise your religious festivals;  
your assemblies are a stench to me.  
I'm fed up with your conferences and conventions.  
I want nothing to do with your religious projects,  
your pretentious slogans and goals. . .  
Away with the noise of your songs!  
I will not listen to the music of your harps.  
I've had all I can take of your noisy ego-music.  
Do you know what I want?  
I want justice – oceans of it.  
I want fairness – rivers of it.  
That's what I want. That's all I want.

God is not the only one to have expressed disapproval of music in worship. C.S. Lewis said he'd much rather go to an early morning, said service without any music whatsoever. As for hymns, they were, he said, 'fifth-rate poems set to sixth-rate music'. I wonder what his opinion of this hymn by John Campbell might have been:

Oofy socks, stinky clothes,  
poo-filled nappies – hold your nose!  
In a world that's riddled with rotting and decay,  
smells assault us ev'ry day.

Lazarus, in his tomb,  
body rotting in the gloom,  
with a corpse that's riddled with rotting and decay,  
he's past helping walk away.

Jesus came, raised a shout,  
called his friend to come right out,  
with the power to overcome rotting and decay,  
Jesus' love won through that day.

Our own lives, what we do  
can get really smelly too.  
If our lives are riddled with rotting and decay,  
then we'll stink worse ev'ry day.

Jesus, please, seek us out,  
see our need and raise your shout;  
with the power to overcome rotting and decay,  
work to heal us here, today.

I'm not going to condemn John Campbell. He wrote this sixth-rate hymn for a one-off children's service, picking up on the smells implicit in the story of the raising of Lazarus. (Incidentally, imagining the sounds and smells of a biblical scene is a very well-tryed and centuries old religious practice.) I have a sneaky regard for his creative approach to family worship. Perhaps his mistake was allowing it to be published.

C. S. Lewis's mistake was failing to recognise that hymn-singing has been the life-blood of his and my tradition. Eighty per cent of those who've left the church say that they miss singing hymns. And some of those hymns have become community anthems like *Guide me O thou great Redeemer* and *Jerusalem*. It's also said that believers learn their theology not from sermons but from hymns. There's another thing C.S. Lewis fails to recognise and that is the process of song-writing. Charles Wesley is said to have written over 6,000 hymns. Yet only a handful are found in today's hymn books. That isn't a waste of effort, but part of the creative process of hymn and song-writing. Composers like Gershwin and Irving Berlin and the song writers of Tin Pan Alley wrote hundreds, if not thousands of songs, most of which never saw the light of day. Like sketching or water colour painting, song-writing is often done quickly in one session and therefore of course there are a lot of rejects and second rate efforts.

I'm a retired Anglican priest who has been ordained for over forty years. I spent some of that time as a cathedral precentor. So I know a little about Anglican church music but I don't pretend to know much about the music of other denominations and even less about the music of other faiths. Forty years ago I gained a music degree so I have a broad experience of the Western classical tradition, but I'm rather ignorant about music of other cultures.



Choral Evensong in Westminster Abbey [bbc.co.uk](http://bbc.co.uk)

In religion, music forms part of a liturgy. It doesn't have to be a very formal liturgy like Evensong, with prescribed texts to be set to music but it is part of a liturgy. The music has the effect of reinforcing the words (without distracting from them), encouraging us to meditate on them, freeing our minds from distractions, lifting our spirits and inspiring us to work for justice and fairness. I'm using the word 'liturgy' deliberately as it forms something of a leitmotif for this talk. The word is often used simply to mean a service of worship but its roots come from the Greek meaning the public's work, the people's work – the work of the people.

Go to a cathedral Evensong as a bystander and let the music wash over you, by all means. But go as a member of a congregation and there's work to do. We, along with priest, choir and people must make those texts and that music come alive and give meaning to our lives. And all this is exactly the same if the music forms part of a much more informal and occasional service. Music and religion come together through liturgy, through work, hard work, our work.

Let's now turn our attention to the role of music in society in general. I read recently that when the 19th century composer Hector Berlioz was a child, the music he would have heard while he was growing up would have been church music, or folk songs sung by workers in the fields, and the occasional town band. It's very

different for those growing up today. Music is everywhere.

We go jogging and exercise at the gym and the music keeps us on pace. (Yes I know I don't go to the gym.) We practise yoga and meditation to music (I don't do that either.) We go to the . . . nightclub (well I *do* go dancing). We may be in a hospital waiting rooms or health centre being soothed by calming music, or invited to choose the music for our MRI scan (Stevie Wonder in my case). We go out to eat and the music is giving the restaurant a buzz. Although maybe we are at that age where we're asking for the music to be turned down because our hearing isn't as good as it was. And so on. Music is ubiquitous providing a running accompaniment to our lives. And one of the consequences of this is that we simply don't attend to most music. It is in the background and we listen passively.

There's nothing wrong with this. Background music is vitally important. As I stepped on to the long-haul flight setting off to New Zealand, I was glad of the lingering melodies and whale sounds accompanying a video of trees and forests. It calmed me down as I contemplated twenty hours travelling at 500 miles an hour, in a small metal tube, at 35,000 feet

All the music Berlioz heard as a child was, of course, live. Today we are much more likely to

be listening to a recording or a 'live recording' as they say. In the concert hall, the performer, dressed like a butler, has more traditionally served up to us the composer's dish of the day, with an exotic and tempting title. Nowadays, it's just as likely to be self-service from Spotify and anonymous musical chefs force-feeding us through various media streams. Whereas we have often thought of music as great works, composed by individual geniuses and performed by the super-talented, today we might do better to see music as an activity, a process which can be an end in itself and through which particular works or performances may or may not necessarily be the outcome. It's a collaborative practice with other artists contributing to the drama of the film, or the musical, or the drama of our lives. Music – wrote Nicholas Cook – doesn't just happen, it is what we make it, and what we make of it. It is less a 'something' than a way of knowing the world and a way of being ourselves.

And again all that implies work to be done by us, giving it real attention, being aware of how music plays a part in our lives, how it fashions us and we fashion ourselves through it. We actively have to carry out work, liturgy. That may still include going to the concert hall to focus our minds on particular pieces of music. It may be joining a community choir, playing in a band, attending a music therapy session – the work of taking part in the process of music-making.

I hope this very brief summary of the place of music in our everyday life rings some theological bells. Music is everywhere. It's omnipresent. It is that in which we live and move and have our being. Yes, for me, as indeed in orthodox Christian belief, God is that which is omnipresent, that in which (as St Paul quotes) 'we live and move and have our being'. Therefore to explore that which is ever-present to us – life, imagination, love, personhood, the things that make us who we are – is an exploration into God. And music is one such ever-present creative force. I would therefore say music is sacred and that we should have a reverence for music as for life.

However, I do need to be careful because I'm not wishing thereby to give music supernatural power. Nor am I distinguishing sacred music from secular music. All music has the power to

make us and move us. It's all sacred in that sense. Nor am I giving the composer and performer priestly powers. We are all capable of making music or, at the very least, making music a part of our lives. As members of Sea of Faith, we would want to say that religion is a human creation. Like art, like music and any other human creation, religion has the power to move us and empower us. But again I should be cautious, because I am not saying that art or music can be a substitute for religion. We may find going to a concert very uplifting. It may take us out of ourselves. It may change our view of the world. Equally, we may find taking a bath or going for a walk or doing some gardening uplifting and life-changing. But remember Amos the prophet: -

I want justice – oceans of it.  
I want fairness – rivers of it.  
That's what I want. That's all I want.

There has to be, for me at least, more to faith than having an uplifting, life-changing or, dare I say, spiritual experience. There has to be greater justice and fairness. The word religion comes from the word meaning 'to bind'. There has to be (as St Paul says) that which binds us together, love shared among us.

There is another danger in claiming that music is sacred. It's sometimes said that where words fail music speaks; that music communicates that which is beyond words; that music is a universal language; that it's transcendent. Music can certainly press our emotional and physiological buttons. It may be that within a particular community, a piece of music may press the same buttons. If you've seen the film *The Shawshank Redemption*, you'll remember the powerful effect of Mozart's soprano duet from the *Marriage of Figaro* which Andy broadcasts over the prison public address system. His friend and fellow inmate Red, who recounts the story, says he doesn't need to know what the two Italian ladies are singing about. To him, all that matters is that 'for the briefest of moments, every last man in Shawshank felt free.'

But, that said, we should know from so-called programme music and from the music of other cultures, that music isn't universal nor does it affect each of us in the same way or describe a thing or a concept with any accuracy. No, where music fails, words speak.



We live at a hugely exciting time in musical history. We can listen to almost any piece of music that has ever been written. We can be uplifted and energised by the astonishing world of musical theatre. We can be motivated by the power of protest music and rap. We can be turned on by dance music. We can be united through community singing. We can be entranced by an Indian raga or Japanese Hogaku. None of this is a substitute for religion but can come to its service through liturgy.

Creating that liturgy is rather like creating a musical. There's a company, a community, a tradition, a building, a stage within which costume, set, lighting and sound designers, writers, composers, actors and directors collaborate, often over many years, to bring a final work to the stage. It's a huge amount of effort. Religion too has its book, rituals, traditions, buildings, vestments, processions, community, a community of saints, and it needs a similar collaboration and effort to produce liturgy.

On the whole, I think in the church, in my tradition at least, we've been lazy in bringing music to the service of faith. You can't just shoe-horn a pop song into Evensong or a sonata into a Eucharist, without some thought. Equally I think laziness has often been the vice of those introducing religious works into the concert hall. I've been to too many performances of church motets and masses which as often as not haven't worked either musically or religiously. It is like taking a film score and expecting it to work as a concert piece without seriously re-working it. Why not take a short break between the movements of a Mass, have a short reading or project a picture or film to give the performance some shape and contemporary meaning?

There are some good examples. After Jonathan Miller died, I watched a re-showing of his semi-staged St Matthew Passion. It's simple but hugely effective. And there is an even more engaging and powerful production by Peter Sellars, Simon Rattle and the Berlin Philharmonic – you can find it for free on their website. 'It's not theatre,' said Sellars, 'it's a prayer, a meditation.'

I'd like to end with a sort of intercession or meditation using the song *The Sky Above the Roof*, a setting by Vaughan Williams of Mabel

Dearmer's rather loose translation of a poem by Paul Verlaine. Verlaine had been sentenced for two years in a Brussels prison for shooting his lover. Perhaps not surprisingly, his wife abandoned him when all this came to light and during his time in prison he converted to Catholicism.

The poem is one of a set of six poems entitled *Wisdom*. From his prison cell, Verlaine observes the sky, the roof and the branch of a tree. He hears a bell and a bird which symbolise for him not only his melancholy but also give him a glimpse of life beyond the prison. In a way, like Andy and his fellow inmates in Shawshank, those simple sights and sounds, whilst reducing him to tears also bring a sense of comfort and freedom. Give thought to people in prison whose view of the outside world might be similarly restricted. There are other kinds of confinement too; someone you know may feel imprisoned by illness, bereavement, depression or grief. The last line is especially poignant, and poses a question we may well ask of ourselves. The psalmist wrote. 'Bring my soul out of prison that I may give thanks'.

The sky above the roof  
Is calm and sweet  
A tree above the roof  
Bends in the heat  
A bell from out the blue  
Drowsily rings

A bird from out the blue  
Plaintively sings  
Ah God! A life is here  
Simple and fair  
Murmurs of strife are here  
Lost in the air

Why dost thou weep Oh, heart  
Poured out in tears?  
What hast thou done Oh, heart  
With thy spent years?

The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light.  
**Upon them has light shined.**  
May we, and those in our hearts,  
**find true freedom.**  
May we number our days  
**that none be wasted.**

---

Stephen Mitchell is a retired Church of England priest who has worked as a Cathedral Precentor, school chaplain, Rural Dean and priest to rural parishes. He is a founder member of the SOF Network and its current Chair.

# And Again I Say Rejoice

Patti Whaley

There is a beautiful scene from *War and Peace*, where Prince Andrew realises he is in love with Natasha, and it is specifically her singing that breaks his heart open. ‘He looked at Natasha singing, and something new and joyful stirred in his soul... The chief reason was a sudden, vivid sense of the terrible contrast between something infinitely great and illimitable existing within him, and something limited and material, which he himself was, and even *she* was. This contrast made his heart ache, and yet he rejoiced, while she was singing.’

When I was asked to give this talk, another image also came into my head, from a poem by Mary Jo Salter:

Once home from a funeral  
I listened to a choir sing Henry Purcell.  
Rejoice in the Lord alway,  
they sang; And again I say rejoice!  
How explain to anyone the joy  
of that single missing ‘s’ – a winding path

down into a heritage so deep,  
so long a part of me it seems  
the very state of God

No, surely they were right,  
the mourners who stared at me today;  
schooled in other mysteries,  
I stood as far from them  
(or so it felt) as we all stood  
from the foreign country of the dead.

Yet at home in my random corner  
on truth, with no choice but to play  
the world sung in a transposed key,  
mine was another mourner’s voice:  
And again I say rejoice.

The phrase I want to pick out here is ‘it seems the very state of God’. From what I’ve seen, most traditionally religious people who talk about music and religion regard music as a sort of pathway or preparation for an encounter with God; a route into the soul that clears the way for God to enter, or a way of generating an emotional experience that can be redirected towards God. As Augustine said, ‘to sing is to pray twice.’

Let me make clear that that is not what I’m talking about. What I want to grapple with is that the particular place of meaning that used to be occupied by God is now occupied by music, or the need that God used to meet is now met by music, in some quite specific ways which may be totally idiosyncratic, although I’d be fascinated to know if other people share similar experiences. This will be a rather more personal talk than the one I made in 1998, and I apologise in advance that I’m going to talk a fair amount about myself, but it’s the only way I know to explain how one comes to feel that music has come to fill the God-shaped hole in one’s life. But I will then try to think through what that means, and whether it’s more than just a sentimental posture, and whether it might help others figure out a similar thing in their own life.

My earliest music memory, in fact one of my earliest memories of any kind, is that the Methodist church we attended when I was 5 years old in Tennessee sang the first verse of the hymn ‘Holy, holy, holy’ as a collective call to worship every single Sunday. I started taking piano lessons when I was six, and I can remember first singing in a church choir when I was about nine. I kept that up all through high school – playing the piano, accompanying the high school choirs, and singing in the church choir. My bachelor’s degree was in music history with a minor in piano, and I went on to do graduate studies in musicology. But musicology jobs were very hard to come by, and after a few years I did a qualification in accounting, lucked into a Price Waterhouse course on computer application design, and basically spent the next thirty years working for government agencies and charities, with some sporadic piano playing and choral singing as circumstances allowed.

When I moved to England in 1990, I did not really find a church home, but I did find the Sea of Faith, and for many years, as you know, this was my religious community. I bought a good Bluthner grand piano, played as much as time

allowed, and enjoyed the amazing musical life of London. In particular, I treasure one weekend in 1996 when the BBC orchestra devoted an entire weekend to the American composer Charles Ives, and I remember saying when the weekend culminated in his fourth symphony, that I was almost – almost! – ready to believe in God again. . It was not long afterwards that I wrote my earlier SOF paper on music and meaning, in which I said, among many other things, that ‘that it would be as much as my life was worth to live up to the Brahms Fourth Symphony.’

In 2007, I started taking organ lessons, mostly because a local friend kept asking me to substitute at his church, and I knew just enough about organ playing to know that I was not doing it right. I enjoyed it much more than I expected to, having not been a particular fan of organ music up to that point. My teacher, never one to miss a recruitment opportunity, invited me to play regularly at the local parish church where he was Director of Music. By that time I had not been a regular church goer for some 17 years, and I had not really planned on becoming a regular church goer, but unless you’re a full-time world-class recitalist like Anna Lapwood, there really isn’t any other way to be an organist. Playing in church is what organists do.

I’ve now been playing the organ for over fifteen years; I play most Sundays, sometimes twice, plus funerals, weddings, evensongs, and special services. English churches are pretty desperate for competent organists these days, so if you’re willing and reliable and don’t mind being paid practically nothing, it’s rare that anyone will question the state of your belief. When I had been playing at my parish church for a year or so, I was asked to write something about myself in the monthly church newsletter. I said in that article that ‘...I may never figure out what I think of the concept of the Trinity, but I’ve never doubted that a Bach fugue is what life is meant to be like.’

So music has drawn me, if not back into a state of belief, at least back into a state of practice, although you might ask, practice of what exactly? I do find that practising music provides plenty of opportunity for practising various virtues if you want to do that – humility and patience spring to mind, especially for those of us whose talent never matches our ambition, and who have to repeat and



Prince Andrew and Natasha. [bbc.co.uk](http://bbc.co.uk)

correct ourselves over and over and over again in order to approach a minimally acceptable level of performance. Compromise and willingness to adapt to the wishes of the larger team – not qualities that organists are particularly renowned for, I have to admit, but, still.

Most often, simply gratitude. I’m very conscious of my enormous good fortune in having time to play, easy access to a good instrument, a kind and patient coach, a husband who allows his holidays to be highjacked by my search for an organ to play, a regular and grateful audience – some people even pay me, though I expect I might continue playing even if they didn’t – and the opportunity to play a part in the major rituals of community life. Those occasions when, for example, you sit at the organ waiting to come in on the third verse of ‘Once in Royal David’s City’, thinking, well, here we are again, we have survived another year and we are back at this miraculous moment – these are occasions when I feel how deeply fortunate I am. Like many Anglicans I am particularly fond of Choral Evensong and will be happy to have taken my place in its procession down the centuries, and to have helped keep that tradition alive. ‘Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation.’

So far, so good? But saying that music is ‘the very state of God’ implies that music is more than just a much-loved hobby, or even an opportunity to try to be a better, more grateful person. So, two anecdotes that push a little deeper into what this is about.

Around 2019, I chanced into a little filming project for a big-name pianist. The characters in this little film were meant to represent ordinary people who liked to play the same student-level piano classics that were featured on this pianist’s

new album. Part of the project involved filming an interview where I was asked a set of questions, which I had been given in advance, about my experiences as a piano player. I always like to get my questions in advance; in more ways than just music I am by nature not much of an improviser, so I was well prepared, and we went through filming the expected questions and my carefully-thought-through answers. At the end of the session, someone threw in an extra question: Why should young people study music? Well, I don't know! They didn't tell me they were going to ask that! I didn't have an answer, so what I said was as unexpected to me as it was to them, which was roughly this:

'When I was a child, because of my dad's work, my family moved every other year or so. I was always having to say goodbye to friends and walk into classrooms full of strangers. When I finished my master's degree, four years was the longest I had ever lived anywhere. As an adult, I've uprooted myself and moved to England; I've changed careers, gotten divorced twice, lost friends, gained others, and my life in many ways has turned out completely different from what I might ever have planned or anticipated. And in all of that time, no matter where I was or what I was doing, even in times when I not actively performing at all, music has never left me. And no matter what else has happened, no matter whatever disappointments or losses or false starts or mistakes or trying again, *no matter what*. Brahms has never let me down.'

And then, every once in a while, something I am reading throws up to me the fact that our civilisation will end. If we manage to avoid nuclear war and survive global warming, then in some tens of thousands of years there will be a new ice age, and much of Europe will be covered by a layer of ice several thousand feet thick. If somehow Western civilisation survives that, then in some millions of years, the sun itself will burn out and all life on earth will be extinct. But then I realise that in a little corner of my head, a voice is saying 'yes, but...'. And that 'but' is me wanting an exception for music. The idea that there will be no one, no God, no consciousness around to remember and understand and treasure the very special magic that is Schubert – this is unacceptable.

In SOF we used to talk about people who clung to a 'sliver' of real theism. My mind clings to a sliver that somehow there will be a sort of Mind of

God out there that remembers Schubert. I know this is not logical, but the alternative is unacceptable. I am oddly more prepared to put up with the extinction of the human race than I am prepared to put up with the fact that there will be no one around to remember Schubert. That sounds rather cold-hearted and I'm not saying that I recommend this way of thinking or that I have any justification for it. I'm just telling you, that's how it is. That is the thing I am unwilling to give up.

So this is closer to what I mean when I say music is 'the very state of God.' I don't like all music – in fact I'm quite picky – and I don't want music on all the time, and certainly not as some sort of background wallpaper. But music is the thing that has always been there, the thing that has never let me down, the thing I always go back to, the thing that I want us as a human race to be remembered for.

To summarise what Grant Mc Cracken says in his book *Culture and Consumption*: 'One of the most pressing problems any culture must deal with is the gap between the 'real' and the 'ideal' in life, the distance between our aspirations (for ourselves, for our society, for human nature) and the reality with which we are confronted. McCracken identifies three strategies for approaching this problem: 'Those who retreat into naïve optimism must eventually accept that the gap is a permanent feature of social life. Those who move, instead, to open cynicism and a formal acceptance of the gap must contend with the unmanageable prospect of a life without larger goals and hope. The third strategy is to displace our ideals to some distant (and relatively inaccessible) place or time.'

Religion can also be a vehicle for displaced meaning. Faith in the kingdom of heaven – whether it be on Earth at some future date, in our individual 'life after death', or in some other dimension altogether – offers a ready location for displaced meaning, a place where the meek may inherit the Earth, the wolf lie down with the lamb... Through sacraments and religious experience we get glimpses of what this life will be, and we live in hope that we will enjoy it in full if we live as our creed demands.

It feels to me as if music functions that way for me, as if it's a sort of parallel universe that makes up for all the shortcomings of life. But how would it do that when most music doesn't really represent

anything? More concrete art forms – painting for example – can easily conjure up an ideal world where voluptuous ladies forever recline on couches eating grapes. Music can't really do that; aside from occasional pieces that evoke a pastoral life, or a storm, or the sea, music mostly doesn't represent a particular thing or even a very specific state of being.

In spite of that, I'm going to suggest four ways in which music can embody the meaning that I have 'displaced' onto it. Before I explain those, I need to lay down a few parameters within which this meaning displacement would have to operate in order to be successful.

First, a successful haven for displaced meaning cannot just be an escape from 'the real world'. It certainly *can* be that; but many things can function as escapes, by offering simple pleasure, or distraction, or rest. But, to borrow a recent phrase from Julian Baggini, we don't just want an escape from the ugliness of life, but something that helps us to tolerate it and grapple with it. Something that is not just palliative, but curative.

Second, while many phenomena may be available as havens for displaced meaning, it should be possible to argue that some are better than others. Consumerism may act as a locus of displaced meaning for many people, but I'm not sure it has made us better people individually or collectively. I think, for some people, their football team might be their displaced meaning, although from the outside football mostly seems to encourage a sort of tribal competitiveness, which is powerful but not always very constructive. Is music any better? This is shaky ground because, as I noted, music doesn't give you any specific moral instruction, and some people do use their musical talent as a ground for competitiveness and egotism. So if music is my 'displaced meaning', what are the things that I have displaced there, that tell me what sort of ideal world I am dreaming of?

First, a release from myself as an individual, into something more spacious, more boundless. Towards the beginning of Vikram Seth's novel *An Equal Music*, there's a beautiful description of this feeling. He says: 'Every rehearsal of the Maggiore Quartet begins with a very plain, very slow three-octave scale on all four instruments in unison: sometimes major, ... sometimes minor, depending on the key of the first piece we are to play. No

matter how fraught our lives have been over the last couple of days, no matter how abrasive our disputes about people or politics, or how visceral our differences about what we are to play and how we are to play it, it reminds us that we are, when it comes to it, one. When I play [these scales] I release myself into the spirit of the quartet. I become the music of the scale. I mute my will. I free my self.'

I suspect that this is, for musicians, something like what meditation is for people who meditate. Some of the psychological impact of this practice is possibly due to the way you really cannot play well, you cannot even practise well, unless your mind is totally on what you are doing. Letting the mind wander is fatal. You must develop the ability to pay attention and stay focused. If you can do that, then, as the Anglican collect says, 'in [this] service is perfect freedom.'

Second, a different relationship to time, where time doesn't pass but simply 'is'. Oliver Sachs in his wonderful book *Musicophilia* talks about the case of a man with a very severe form of amnesia, who could not remember what happened five minutes ago, but who could perform music beautifully; he had the skills and procedures, and he did not need to know what happened five minutes ago, or what would happen more than 30 seconds ahead. If you are listening to music, and even more if you are performing, you are on a knife-edge of the present moment; there is no time to look back or to think more than about a bar ahead, because the music is continually insisting that you move forward bar by bar by bar. Whether this is what eternity might be like, I cannot say, but it's probably as close as I'm going to get.

Third: order, completeness, and, if it's not too much of a stretch, justice. We create order to rescue ourselves from chaos, as we learn from Genesis, by dividing light from darkness, day from night, and the waters from the dry land, or, if we are musicians, meaningful sound objects from random noise. When Bach proposes a fugue subject to you, you may not be able to translate it into something concrete, but you can see clearly how the phrases respond to each other, lead to a new section, and then bring you back to where you started. Ideas are stated, developed, varied, contrasted, and then re-affirmed. Every voice has its place, and all voices lead to the correct ending.

That may not seem earth-shattering, but think how out-of-control the world seems to us these days, and how desperately we shore up fragments against our ruin, as Eliot said. For me an orderly world implies a just world, a world that is fair, and world where we always get closure. For so many, it seems there is no justice. And yet almost every day, I walk to the church, sit down, turn on my iPad, and if I am careful and diligent and attentive, the Bach fugue will, again, reach its perfect and inevitable conclusion. Is it any wonder that I get twitchy if I have to go for several days without re-enacting this little existential reassurance to keep myself sane?

In this respect my relationship with music is very much like the relationship that believers have with God. We have created God out of our need for order and benevolence in the universe, and then we project that creation out into ‘reality’ and ask it to remind us and reassure us that order and benevolence and justice do exist. Is this, as I asked before, an escape, or a way of strengthening myself – is it curative, or simply palliative? Certainly the promises held out to me by Bach and Brahms keep the vision of a better life in front of me, and remind me not to ‘normalise’ the cynicism and greed and despair that I see all around me; they remind me that this is not how the world is meant to be.

And fourthly, finally, I’d be selling Schubert and Brahms short if I did not at least acknowledge that they are, simply, very beautiful. It is difficult, maybe impossible, to explain this, and explanations always fall so far short of the experience of beauty. The sounds, of course, can be ravishing to the senses; the difficulty is in explaining why they tug so hard at the heartstrings and why they feel so transcendent.

. Victor Zuckerkandl in his book *Sound and Symbol* said: ‘Concerning one thing – that music does cross a decisive frontier; that we find its most essential nature in this crossing, this transcendence – all who have ever thought about music are of one mind... Even Herbert Spencer... pauses in amazement before our strange ability to be moved by melody and harmony.’ Confronted with a phenomenon that he can in no way integrate into his picture of the universe, he sees only the possibility of comprehending it as an ‘indefinite expression of an unknown ideal life’, or of letting it alone as ‘an

incomprehensible secret’ – both of which are confessions of helplessness. I think this is what had such an effect on Prince Andrew as he listened to Natasha. It created that sense of ‘the terrible contrast between something infinitely great and illimitable existing within him, and something limited and material, which he himself was, and even she was’.

So, in my displaced-meaning world, music offers me a release from my individual self, an experience of being radically present in time, a vision of a world where every tone, every phrase takes its rightful place in a well-ordered, balanced whole, and an experience of deep beauty. If I bring the right attention, the right effort and the right attitude to that practice, it will not just offer me a respite from the world, but a renewed sense of the sort of world that I want to help create. That’s as near to ‘the very state of God’ as anything is likely to get.

As always, my attempts to explain this always fall short of how music itself feels, so let me close with one more little anecdote. I recently sang in a performance of the Brahms Requiem – a rare bit of luck on my part, because a local group needed more tenors. I had sung it before, and I love it enormously, but I no longer sing in that kind of big choir, and I hadn’t really had any hopes of ever singing the Requiem again. So it was wonderful, and completely transporting. At the beginning of the concert the conductor introduced the piece and reminded the audience that they were about to hear one of the greatest compositions ever written: ‘If you know this work,’ he said, ‘you know why you’ve come. If you don’t know this work, you’re going to walk out of here thinking, *‘My God, how have I coped before now?’*’

Does that sound over the top? Not to me. If you’re here today, you probably have more than a passing interest in music already, but if you don’t, trust me, we lovers of Brahms don’t know how other people make it through the day. We really don’t.

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# Music in a Reform Synagogue

Katie Hainbach

My name is Katie Hainbach, I am the Head of Music and Arts at Alyth Synagogue, also known as Northwestern Reform Synagogue in North-west London. Before working at Alyth I worked as a freelance opera singer and teacher, having completed my Masters in Vocal Performance at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama in London. I grew up in a very liberal Jewish home in Dublin, being a member of the small Dublin Jewish Progressive Congregation. My first real memory of actively partaking in Jewish music was singing the Barechu (call to prayer) at my brother's bar mitzvah and singing with the three-to-four-member High Holy Day choir for Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur.

I began working at Alyth in September 2015, taking over from their previous Director of Music who had been there since the 1980s. Alyth is a Reform Synagogue and one of the largest in the UK with over 3000 members. It has just celebrated its 90th birthday, the congregation being formed in Hampstead Garden Suburb in 1933. Working as a musician and being part of a progressive congregation allows for great variety in the music we use in services. Reform and Liberal Judaism are both progressive forms of Judaism: egalitarian movements where women have the same rights and opportunities as men. I am allowed to read Torah, to sing in services and we have female cantors and rabbis. As a woman I feel very lucky to have grown up and now work in a community where I do have these opportunities.

However there are many different denominations in Judaism, many of which have different rules regarding music in Synagogue. For example, in a modern orthodox or ultra-orthodox congregation, women are not allowed to sing as part of services. All clergy must be male, and instruments are not permitted in services (something that is a big part of prayer at Alyth). When the reform movement began in the mid 1800's, the organ was a large feature of the synagogue service, accompanying four-part choirs and in many ways sounding like music heard in churches at the same time.

Currently at Alyth we have many different

styles of music as part of our prayer life, Reform Judaism began in mid-19th Century Germany and the first Reform Jewish music we have reflects the style of music that was popular at that time. Therefore, the music that was used in these early Reform services sounds very like some of the music one would have heard in Christian Church Choirs in the same period, the words however being in Hebrew. Solomon Sulzer and Louis Lewendowski were among the first to adopt this new approach to Jewish liturgical music. These composers' style amalgamated the traditional Jewish melodies of the Ashkenazim (Yiddish speaking Jews) with modern harmonies, often calling for instrumental accompaniment. The solos in these compositions remained the more traditional cantorial idiom, but the choral sections reflected the influence of the contemporary composers of the day, such as Felix Mendelssohn. This choral sound was also influenced by the most prolific religious music in Germany at the time, which was Lutheranism.

The organ became a feature of Synagogue music in German-speaking lands in the late 1800's but reached its peak by the turn of the century. Its use in synagogue was fully legitimized in the second half of the 19th century. At the beginning of the 20th century this music continued to evolve into Western classical music, liturgical and folk melodies and started to develop into a form that could be performed in concert settings as well as in the synagogue service. Up until recently we used an organ at Alyth synagogue, however we are now using the piano as the upkeep of the organ unfortunately became too much.

As Reform Judaism is constantly changing and evolving, so is Reform Jewish music. As we have moved through the decades since the formation of Reform Judaism, we can hear how music popular at the time has influenced composers of Jewish liturgical music. This mixing of styles and influences is still something that permeates Reform Jewish music to this day.

I am going to focus on the Shabbat morning service and liturgy as Shabbat always takes



A Service in Alyth Synagogue

priority above all other festivals. As Jews we are told to 'remember the Shabbat day and keep it holy'. Music permeates all parts of the service, helping congregants connect to G-d, to each other, to themselves and to guide us through the service.

Music of majesty aims to create a sense of awe and grandeur to our service; music of majesty would often include the four-part choir with organ or piano. Music of meditation gives the congregant the opportunity to be inward and reflective through music, often the Shema (one of the most important prayers in Judaism), where eyes are often shut or covered, is composed in this style. Music of meeting involves music in which we become aware of the larger community and meet each other through prayer. There are several meeting moments in our liturgy where the community come together. Some music serves as the music of connection in a service, this is our music of momentum carrying the worship from one section to the next.

Music of momentum can also be used for music when movement is happening as part of

the service, such as when the Torah scroll is being processed around the congregation before or after the Torah reading. Here we traditionally sing Psalms.

Music of memory may be associated with any of these moods but is very much connected to the individual. Many of us grow up with familiar memories that take us back to our childhood. Music has the ability to bring us back to a time and place, therefore memory is often a strong connector for many individuals to their personal connection to Judaism

As I mentioned earlier, we now have liturgical music composed in a variety of styles and inspired by a variety of cultures. Each piece of liturgical text that can be set to music usually has multiple compositions and arrangements and the way these pieces are arranged and performed can affect our experience of the text and our prayer experience.

It is important to remember this is all the same part of the liturgy, just one small section of text can be musically interpreted in so many ways. This is the same core text we have heard



every time (though there can be slight denominational differences).

An important part of our service planning is having an idea of the type of congregation we may be leading in prayer and making sure to try and include different tastes in the musical choices we make. This can often be very difficult when you know there are some people who like the 'poppy' more modern pieces compared to some people who prefer the more traditional Reform four-part harmony. Finding balance in a service, catering to different needs of individuals in the congregation and putting together a cohesive service is a large part of the preparation work I do with a Rabbi or service leader before Shabbat.

One of the aspects I love best about working in a progressive community is the opportunity to experience so many different styles of liturgical music; as someone with eclectic taste this is a real joy for me. One of the more traditional types of singing one will hear is cantillation, also known as leyning. Leyning is the Yiddish word for the traditional cantillation of the Hebrew Bible which takes place when it is publicly read from a Torah scroll. This is often done by a trained Cantor or Rabbi, but can also be done by members of the congregation, such as a thirteen-year-old becoming bar or bat mitzvah. This leyning tradition dates back to biblical times and is still an important feature of the sound of the synagogue today.

For generations this was a completely orally transmitted tradition, but between the 7th and 10th centuries the 'Masorettes' systematically notated the sounds to prevent the ancient tradition being lost as the Jewish population became dispersed. As the Torah scroll is written without vowels or punctuation it can be extremely difficult to establish the exact pronunciation and meaning of the text, the Masorettes' system of notation helps us to do so. In Hebrew, this system of notation is called 'Ta'amei Hamikra' and consists of 28 signs, which are placed around the Hebrew word itself. Unlike Western musical notation, the cantillation symbols do not represent a single musical note. It is more of a musical phrase made up of two, three or more notes -- some use up to 15 notes! As Chani Smith explains in her book 'Learn to Layn' the word ta'am means a number of things: flavour, sense, meaning, accent, experience.

Over the centuries the musical interpretation of the t'amim diversified between communities. For example, if you attend a progressive synagogue in North America, the leyning melodies you hear will sound very different from what we have in the UK, even though the musical symbols are the same. In the UK we use the Western Ashkenazi (German) tradition. Not only are there different melody sequences amongst different communities around the world, there are also different cantillation systems (commonly known as trop) for different festivals. The one we most commonly hear is the Torah trop, which we hear every weekend but others include the High Holy Day trop, the Haftorah trop, Megillat Esther trop used for reading the Book of Esther scroll at Purim, the Megillat Eicha trop, used for reading the book of Lamentations from a scroll on Tischa Ba'Av, and Megillah trop, used for the remaining three scrolls that are read on the major pilgrimage festivals; Pesach (also known as Passover), Shavuot and Sukkot.

As you can imagine, learning to leyn proficiently in multiple tropes and styles can take many years, something that professional Cantors study at great depth. It is a great honour to be asked to leyn in front of your community and a moment for those doing so to musically connect to generations from many centuries before them. One of the privileges of my work is being able to work with different groups throughout the community. Alyth is a multi-generational community with active involvement from our youngest members in groups such as Baby Den all the way up to social club, which is for more elderly congregants. We have musical groups for teenagers, primary school children and those with special needs. I have worked singing for those with dementia as part of my work at Alyth and with a charity I used to work for called Lost Chord. I find this work incredibly rewarding, yet at times challenging.

Many of us can hear a piece of music and remember where we were in our life when we first heard it and many of us have songs that remind us of a person or place (such as the first dance at a wedding). There is a saying in Judaism that something is 'Mi Sinai' – meaning coming from Mount Sinai. The idea that the music is so old and engrained in our psyche that it has been

around as long as Judaism itself. Obviously, we know this is not the case as although it's true that we don't know the composers for all of our older melodies, these tunes were composed by someone at some time. Many congregants feel that compositions such as Hirsch's Oseh Shalom or Rothblum's V'Shamru are 'Mi Sinai', even though they were composed in the latter half of the 20th century.

In my experience singing these melodies to those with dementia often tap into formative memories of being in synagogue or at important life-cycle events, which can help them access other memories. I have been in situations in Jewish care homes and in our groups at Alyth where I will start singing a familiar Jewish melody and the entire room starts singing and clapping. I have also found that when a piece of music taps into the memory of a person with dementia, it can help unlock other memories. I have had cohesive conversations with individuals who are most often non-verbal in care homes who after hearing a familiar tune will go on to tell me about their partner, or children or about their childhood. Music as an access to our memory is truly fascinating.

Judaism puts a huge emphasis on teaching the next generation, L'dor va dor, from generation to generation. It is part of the ethos of the religion and in fact a commandment to educate your children and music is no exception to this. Music in Judaism is an important way of teaching children about Jewish values, engaging them in services and festivals and connecting them to older generations. At Alyth, our Friday night Erev Shabbat service is usually full of children and teenagers who come with their family to engage in prayer and be together with their community.

As part of my work at Alyth I have led the children's choir and the youth choir, taking them to perform at events at Jewish care homes, Jewish cultural centres such as JW3 in Northwest London and for services such as the Barnet Holocaust Memorial Day service.

One of the important ways we have been using music with young people at Alyth has been through interfaith work with children and young adults from other faith communities. Before Covid during a youth choir trip to Israel we met with a very special choir with teenagers from

Jewish and Arab backgrounds, the teenagers from Alyth attended a rehearsal with this group and learned a song in Arabic. I have taken the youth choir to sing at Interfaith events, such as the annual Nisa-Nashim conference, a charity that connects Jewish and Muslim women. In more recent years we have worked with a local Church of England community and the London Ismaili centre to compose a song to perform and create a music video together. We recently joined together again to sing this special song in a concert celebrating choral music at Alyth. This work is incredibly valuable as having a shared goal of creating music together bonds these young people and creates friendships and links between people who may never ordinarily have met.

I am happy to say that Jewish music continues to develop and thrive. There has recently been a large resurgence of people studying and playing Yiddish music and klezmer music, supported by organisations such as the UK Jewish Music Institute. Wonderful liturgical music continues to be composed and performed around the world. Jewish choral music continues to thrive, with composers such as Stephen Glass, Meir Finklestein and Craig Taubman (to name but a few) writing beautiful choral arrangements for communities around the world. Before the pandemic I attended the North American Jewish Choral Festival, which featured presentations from composers, cantors, musicologists and ethnomusicologists and performances for many different types of choirs. Attending this festival highlighted how Jewish music is thriving internationally and the vast range of people who engage in their Judaism through the music they hear and sing.

In the UK organisations such as the Jewish Music Institute, Shirei Chaggigah, the Jewish Music Fair and the multitude of Jewish Choirs continue to teach and perform Jewish music both old and new. I believe that music keeps many people, both old and young, engaged with their Judaism, whether it is a religious or cultural connection and will continue to do so well into the future.

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# Harvest Festival

Tony Windross

Human beings have celebrated Harvest for about as long as there have been harvests – and maybe even before, in the case of nomadic peoples. Ancient Greeks gave thanks to Demeter, the goddess of grain, who was known by the Romans as Ceres; and the 3 main festivals of the Jewish year (dating back over 3000 years) all originated with agriculture: the Feast of Unleavened Bread (which later became part of Passover) was a thanks-offering at the beginning of the grain harvest; the Festival of Weeks (50 days later) celebrated the end of the grain harvest; and Tabernacles (or Booths or Sukkot) was an autumn thanksgiving for the wine harvest in particular – but acted also as a general harvest thanksgiving, marking the end of the agricultural year.

Given the sheer precariousness of life for most people throughout history, there's nothing surprising about the way a successful harvest was a time of great rejoicing (presumably with corresponding lamentations and fear for the future, on the not infrequent occasions when the harvest was desperately disappointing).

In medieval England, Lammas Day (from the Old English, meaning 'loaf-festival') was widely kept on 1<sup>st</sup> August, and marked the first fruits of the harvest. Originally this involved offering the first-cut sheaf of corn to one of the fertility gods, in the hope of receiving a good harvest; a custom that later developed into making a loaf from the first corn to be harvested, which was brought into church, and then broken and used in Holy Communion. A Christian festival, with very obvious pre-Christian origins, combining elements of the feast of the Celtic sun god Lugh, and the Jewish festival of Shavuot.

It wasn't until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the Church of England gave any official liturgical recognition of the importance of Harvest. In 1838, the Bishop of Hereford had asked the prime minister, Lord Melbourne, to allow a harvest festival – but was refused 'on the ground that one would then be obliged to have a thanksgiving for everything' (quoted in Owen

Chadwick *The Victorian Church* p517). But the tide was turning, and in 1843 Parson Hawker, the famously eccentric vicar of Morwenstow in Cornwall, devised a liturgy that combined elements of Lammas Day, with the long kept secular tradition of 'harvest home'.

It quickly caught on – and like the 'timeless' traditions of the English monarchy (which in many cases actually go back only to late-Victorian times) was soon thought of as having been around forever. But as the biblical writer known as Qoheleth put it 'there is nothing new under the sun' – and Parson Hawker was simply giving a modern gloss to some very ancient foundations (and in the process, providing the Church with an opportunity to offer some sort of moral lead, by offering a more respectable alternative to the days of drunkenness that tended to follow harvest home, with a 'special service in church, followed by dinner of beef and plum pudding and beer' (Chadwick, *ibid*).

From Lammas at the beginning of the harvest season to Harvest Festival itself at the end, when the long and almost unimaginably arduous job of finally gathering the crops safely into the barns was celebrated with great feasting – it can all seem a bit like relics of a bygone age (in the same sort of league as Plough Sunday or Rogation Days – rural church festivals which have generally fallen by the wayside, largely on the grounds that they reflect farming patterns that have long since ceased to exist). Something anachronistic and quaintly rustic, something to be celebrated (if at all) slightly ironically – and only ever ecclesiastically. We have no national equivalent of the great American celebration of *Thanksgiving* (a federal holiday kept on the fourth Thursday of November, and dating back to 1789) as an occasion to give thanks for the fruits of the Earth.

But Parson Hawker didn't have it all his own way, and the idea of unalloyed joy and celebration at Harvest Festival wasn't universally shared in ecclesiastical circles – as is clear from the grudgingly sour observation in the Anglican

classic *The Parson's Handbook* (published in 1899) 'Harvest Festivals have been much abused by excessive displays of greengrocery, but this is no reason why they should not be observed'. But that greengrocery just kept on coming – to be supplemented by flowers, tinned food, fish, even coal – depending on the area. All entirely appropriate, as a thanksgiving for the fruits of the Earth. When the festival is over, the harvest gifts are either given away to those in need, or sold and the money raised given to the poor.

Harvest has long been a time when some modest redistribution of food occurred – sometimes as a requirement of law. 'When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard: you shall leave them for the poor and the alien' (Leviticus 19: 9) – a practice that found expression in the story of Ruth being graciously allowed to follow the reapers and collect what was left (Ruth 2: 8). Which is a very practical recognition of the way that the Earth's harvest is not (and never has been) equally shared. And because the Kingdom (however understood) will never be a reality unless and until it is. Moral or religious or even legal prompts can sometimes help to give people a bit of a steer.

But Who (or What?) are we thanking at Harvest Festivals? The traditional understanding of God, as a (more-or-less) benevolent, all-powerful being is very much alive and well, among both those who are regular churchgoers, as well as many of those who stay well clear. And at Harvest Festivals most people are thanking that sort of being, in the same kind of way as a child might thank a parent for a present.

So what about those whose understanding of God is very different? Or those who, whilst subscribing to the traditional view of God, take the view that there's no one (or nothing) corresponding to such a thing in reality? They're



Wheat Harvest in Britain. NFU.

a constituency that the Church has, shamefully neglected – offering instead only an ecclesiastically-sanctioned version of God. What about all those disenfranchised religious outsiders, with noses pressed against the beautiful (but impenetrable) stained glass windows of orthodoxy?

Many of them will continue to turn up to services such as Harvest Festival, but find the language and assumptions on offer, almost unbearably grating – as well as painfully excluding. Because for anyone of normal intelligence, the Big Questions (of ethics or metaphysics) are forever inescapable. 'What's it all about, Alfie?' wasn't just something that troubled Cilla Black. Paul Tillich saw the entire religious enterprise as arising from the way human beings respond to such issues of 'Ultimate Concern'.

Many, of course, see religion as a way of bringing closure to all those pesky metaphysical puzzles that interfere with the smooth running of everyday life. Less ambitious (or impatient) souls see religion as providing a framework (or safe space) within which such questions can be taken with the seriousness they deserve. A means of keeping the conversation about reality going, in ways that do not insult anyone's intelligence (or strain their credulity). So is it possible, at harvest time, for people like that (people like us?) to be grateful to no one in particular?

It's a question that all members of SOF will have had to face – and continue to face. Because it gets to the very heart of our understanding of the nature of God. A realist God (one 'out there', in some sense) is (at least on the surface) a whole

lot easier to engage with, than a non-realist one. There's a whole lot more epistemological solidity about a God who 'really exists'. But if that's not the way we see things (and we don't/can't ever *choose* how we 'see things') – we're either forced to abandon religion altogether – or find some understanding of God that works for us. That understanding may (of course) eventually turn out (in John Hick's sense of eschatological verification) to be an incorrect one – but we're where we are, and have to do *something* with whatever religious and psychological materials we have to hand. It's an act (or leap) of faith either way: to hitch our wagon to the realist version – or to the non-realist one (or indeed, to dismiss it all as a load of nonsense, and live an entirely secular life).

Whilst not meant entirely seriously, the 'Black Cat Analogy' isn't meant entirely flippantly either. Many versions exist, but one of the most popular suggests that: Philosophy is like being in a dark room and looking for a black cat; Metaphysics is like being in a dark room and looking for a black cat that isn't there; and Theology is like being in a dark room and looking for a black cat that isn't there, and shouting 'I found it!'

Quite apart from the quibble that metaphysics is actually a branch of philosophy, we can also speculate as to whether all the rooms are equally dark. But the point is well made – in that, if we're honest, we're all of us, all of the time fumbling in the dark – and ever prone to the temptation of claiming to have found whatever it was we were looking for. Wittgenstein famously used to immerse himself in cowboy films by sitting in the very front row of the cinema – as part of a desperate attempt to blot out the questions that were forever tormenting him. The relief was only ever temporary, of course – but maybe that's all any of us can hope for (and, when it comes to it, very few of us are ever going to feel the questions with the same degree of acuity as Wittgenstein – so aren't in such desperate need of some form of escape).

At its best, religion (like cowboy films or inebriation or Morris dancing) provides a life-giving (because transient – and therefore demanding continued attention) way of dealing with existential puzzlement and ennui – and at its worst, provides something solid, fixed, unyielding (and therefore neither needing, nor inviting

ongoing reflective effort). At its best, religion keeps the conversation open – and at its worst, claims there's no more to be said. At its best, religion is open to all possibilities – and at its worst, sees itself as the only game in town.

At its best, religion expresses all the different ways in which we can celebrate and give worth to life – and at its worst, demands acquiescence to the only version deemed acceptable to the ecclesiastical authorities. In which latter case, if the (only) version of God deemed acceptable to the ecclesiastical authorities ever loses its hold on people – the idea of celebration premised on such a God might look under threat.

Which is why it's vital to do all we can to demonstrate that other models of divinity are both available – and accessible. Because Harvest is not just about giving thanks, important though that is. It's also about taking the needs of the poor and dispossessed in at least as serious a way as did the author of Leviticus. And that is bound to act as both a stimulus and an opportunity – to do what we ought to be doing the rest of the year as well, by being far more ambitious than simply allowing those who are struggling to do the equivalent of gleaning the field of Boaz. Is offering crumbs from our tables *really* the best we can do? Or might we think more in terms of inviting today's gleaners to share our meal, rather than allow them to subsist on the basis of foodbanks or supermarket dumpsters?

If we worship a God of love and generosity (in other words, if we see love and generosity as our guiding ideals and principles) we'll be unable to sit easy, surrounded by our plenty, without feeling compelled to do something to improve the lot of those whose days are spent just trying to get by. And if we have any sense of Cosmic Gratitude for our good fortune, we'll be unable to see it in terms of simply something we deserve. Every day (despite Lord Melbourne's reservations) needs to be seen as a Harvest Festival, in that every day is both an opportunity and an obligation to give thanks – and to resolve to do more than just permit those on the margins to carry on gleaning around the edges of our society.

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## John Pearson reviews *The Climate Book*

by Greta Thunberg

Allen Lane (London 2022). 464 pages. £20.

This is an admirable tour de force for its creator and compiler Greta Thunberg ... more of a manual than a straightforward textbook. Well over 400 pages long it is not an easy, fun read – this is not a fun topic. Rather, it is a relentless journey through the causes, evidence and projected consequences of Climate Change. There are no fewer than 100 free-standing mini articles, each by a different expert author, held together within five main sections each introduced by Thunberg: How Climate Works; How our Climate is Changing; How it affects us; What We've Done About It and What We Must Do Now.

All the articles are tightly written, full of facts or predictions and clear, as you might expect since each author has only between two and four pages to get their message across. As a result, though it's a lot to take in, the book is never dull, and throws up facts or food for thought on nearly every page. There is some degree of duplication here and there, due in part to the many writers each individually addressing the same overall issue, but also because the causes and consequences of climate change are closely inter-related.

In explaining **how climate works** authors examine the crucial role of CO<sub>2</sub> in our creation and preservation but also our potential destruction. They look at how the human race has, by its development, affected much of our environment – how, for example, as we have evolved farming and industrial techniques over the past ten thousand years, we have unwittingly altered balances on Earth and in the atmosphere.

**Reviewing the changes** born of the above aspects of climate change and its consequences, we study air pollution, clouds, arctic warming, droughts and flood ... and the list goes on. We are shown the increasing possible consequences of warming at each of 1.5, 2.0 and 4.0 degrees. Many kinds of extreme weather will increase even with a 1.5 degree change, both drought and heatwave. With 4.0 degree warming, increased temperatures which we currently regard as extreme will become commonplace.

**The effects of the above?** Heat causes illness. Contributing to this there will be increased air pollution, airborne diseases, antibiotic resistance and consequences for food and nutrition. Change will not be evenly spread how-

ever, and authors foresee varying outcomes for different parts of the world,... leading in turn to environmental racism; prejudice against those creating the most harm, climate refugees; mass migration from those countries most affected by changes to those surviving these better, and climate conflicts; warming temperatures and extreme variations in rainfall have been shown to exacerbate the amount of group-level conflict.. ranging from violence and riots to civil war. And imagine fighting over the availability of fresh water!

Ask **what we have done about all this?** It would seem that the quick answer is 'not enough'. In her overview of each of 27 sub-sections here Thunberg paints a depressing picture, suggesting we deny our failures, saying one thing whilst doing another. We must draw a line and seek whole new approaches.

**What we must do now;** the solution, such as there may ever be one, seems born of changing attitudes, doing as much as we can in *every* sphere rather than choosing compromises, avoiding 'climate apathy', educating others. We should push for binding commitments from those in power, those with power. Apart from the international Grand Plan, there are six steps we can ALL take as individuals to play our part; End Clutter, Holiday Local, Eat Green, Dress Retro, Travel Fresh, and Push for Change in the wider system.

I strongly recommend this book – for environmentalists seeking substantial evidence to back up their campaigns. Climate-change deniers, should they happen to read it, could not fail, surely, to wonder if they've been missing something (?) The book certainly deserves to grace the shelves of every school, university and public library.



## Tony Windross reviews *The Shaping of a Soul*

by Richard Harries

Christian Alternative (Winchester 2023). Pbk. 256 pages.  
£13.99.

Richard Harries has had a long and glittering career in the Church of England, rising to become Bishop of Oxford. In retirement he looks back on the people and events that helped to shape him, and this book is an engaging account of those years of ecclesiastical success, peppered with some splendid anecdotes.

A couple of examples: 'In his advice to the Prime Minister (Harold Macmillan) Archbishop Geoffrey Fisher said: "Dr Ramsey is a theologian, a scholar and a man of prayer. Therefore he is entirely unsuitable as Archbishop of Canterbury". And, given all the famous people Harries mentions, in what is (surely?) a piece of self-deprecation, he quotes an unnamed Dean of Windsor remarking to a friend: 'The Queen and I don't like name droppers'.

As with all Harries' books, the endnotes give full details of his own writings, but barely mention those of other people, which means there's little guidance for anyone who'd like to take things further – something that really does need to happen, given Harries' clear reluctance to do so.

Because despite his many and varied abilities – there seems a blissful unawareness of the gulf that separates him from those many thoughtful people who find religion, in its normal manifestations, absolutely impossible. It's 30 years since the publication of Anthony Freeman's *God in Us*<sup>2</sup> – with one of the earliest responses being Harries' own *'The Real God'*, which came out just a few months later. It was a fierce defence of liberal Christianity, but one that completely failed to engage with the reasons why non-realism had come as such a lifeline to those who could make no sense of the concept of God as conventionally understood.

So far as Harries was concerned, his response was apparently all that was needed, as there's no indication over the following three decades of him ever returning to the subject. And that's completely understandable, given the way his confident clarity seems to have remained untroubled.

He sees the Christian faith as based on three 'essentials' – each one being a belief which, if it was rejected, would see the whole edifice come tumbling

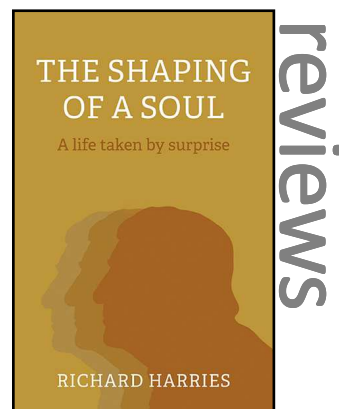
down'. And whilst he doesn't think of the virgin birth as one of these, the assertion 'that Jesus is truly and fully God and truly and fully human in one unified person' certainly is.

But of course everything hinges on how such a claim is unpacked – and because the ideas are so very far from straightforward, there's plenty of scope for exploratory disagreement. But one suspects that Harries wouldn't see it like that, and instead regard any such manoeuvre as a weaselly fudge. Because although he says that he's 'not trying to draw boundaries as to who should be regarded as a Christian or not, simply trying to make my own position clear' – such apparent tolerance might have been sorely tested, if any radical clergy had been bold enough to try and find a parish in the diocese of Oxford!

The other two 'essentials' are an understanding of resurrection, which comes perilously close to theological gobbledegook: 'an appearance from heaven, not a body climbing out of the tomb, but an appearance of the risen Christ from the heart of God'); and a similarly opaque belief in life after death (understood as 'the stripping away of the veil between us and the all-holy God')

Harries has written and broadcast extensively, and possesses a wide range of social, political, intellectual and cultural interests. But nowhere in the book does he show the slightest interest in the chasm between liberal and radical Christianity. And despite the rapid (and somewhat impatient) rejoinder to Anthony Freeman noted above, only mentions the furore in passing – with the name of Don Cupitt never actually appearing at all. It would show an arrogantly SOF-centred view of the world to expect any and every theological survey of the last few decades to major on non-realism – but effectively to ignore it completely, merely reinforces the suspicion that Harries never began to understand it in the first place.

The book is a fascinating read, especially for anyone interested in Church of England gossip and characters. But those wanting some genuinely open theological engagement, would be well advised to look elsewhere.



## Francis McDonagh reviews *Bad Theology. Oppression in the Name of God*

by Leah Robinson

SCM Press (Norwich 2023). 256 pages. £15.99.

I learned a lot about the Ku Klux Klan from Leah Robinson's book, and it was very interesting. However, Dr Robinson's book is not intended as a history book; rather, it is an exercise in practical theology. Practical theology is not a discipline I'm familiar with, and despite reading the first seventy pages of the book that describe the field, I'm not convinced that it has unique qualities that make it superior to other forms of theology.

If I have understood correctly, practical theology wants to analyse the impact religions have on their adherents and through them on the world around them. Dr Robinson contrasts this with systematic theology, by which she means concepts such as the Trinity, the incarnation, eschatology, and so on. The trouble is that she takes it for granted that theology that reflects on these concepts is rigid. 'I am not a systematic theologian,' she says, 'and I don't think that theology should just be set in stone for centuries' (p. 173).

As it happens, the Gospel of this morning's Mass ended with this verse from Matthew: 'He said to them, "Therefore every teacher of the law who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his store-room new treasures as well as old" (Mt 13.52). This remark might well describe what Pope Francis is doing with the Catholic theological tradition, for example, as regards ecology, marriage and sexuality.

To Dr Robinson's credit, she recognises that practical theology, especially in the United States, comes from a comfortable white, middle-class background. It has not made a serious attempt to dialogue with liberation theology, and Dr Robinson recognises this as a failing. In Europe, apparently, it has moved on.

The meat of the book is to expose the 'bad theology' of four historical phenomena: South African apartheid, the Puritan colonists of the United States, the Ku Klux Klan and the Jonestown massacre. Dr Robinson does this by scrutinising them in terms of theological concepts, apartheid through providence, the Puritan colonists through election, the Klan through tradition, and the Jonestown sect through eschatology. The selection of the theological concepts appears a bit random: the difference between 'providence' and 'election' is not great.

D.F. Malan, who was to be the first president of apartheid South Africa is quoted as saying: 'Our [Afrikaner] history is the greatest masterpiece of the centuries. We hold this nationhood as our due because it was given to us by the architect of the universe.'

The basic theological critique of the apartheid movement in the book was that its ideologues identified themselves with the Jewish people of the Old Testament, though it might well be pointed out that this is a partial view of the Old Testament, omitting the prophetic tradition with its emphasis on justice.

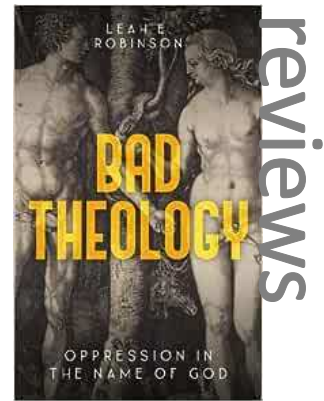
The aridity of this analysis will become clear if we compare it with some words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu from his Nobel Prize acceptance speech. He starts by describing a visit he and other church leaders made to a black township:

We visited the home of an old lady. She told us that she looked after her grandson and the children of neighbours while their parents were at work. One day the police chased some pupils who had been boycotting classes, but they disappeared between the township houses. The police drove down the old lady's street. She was sitting at the back of the house in her kitchen, whilst her charges were playing in the front of the house in the yard. Her daughter rushed into the house, calling out to her to come quickly. The old lady dashed out of the kitchen into the living room. Her grandson had fallen just inside the door, dead. He had been shot in the back by the police. He was 6 years old.

... There is no peace in Southern Africa. There is no peace because there is no justice. There can be no real peace and security until there be first justice enjoyed by all the inhabitants of that beautiful land. The Bible knows nothing about peace without justice, for that would be crying 'peace, peace, where there is no peace'. God's Shalom, peace, involves inevitably righteousness, justice, wholeness, fullness of life, participation in decision-making, goodness, laughter, joy, compassion, sharing and reconciliation.

Tutu's theology was one that engaged with the world around him and applied its principles to the betterment and liberation of its people. Set in stone it was not.

Francis McDonagh has worked for two leading Catholic development agencies, translates for the international theological journal *Concilium*, and is an occasional contributor to the *Tablet*.





*Kathryn Southworth reviews*  
*The Fox, the Whale and the Wardrobe*  
by Dónall Dempsey

Dempsey & Windle (Guildford 2023) Pbk. 119 pages.  
£10.99.

This collection, Dónall Dempsey's sixth, is dedicated to 'my Uncle Mikey, the treasure trove of my childhood' and, indeed, Irish childhood is a magical resource for the poet's whimsical delight in language, people and performance. The title poem exemplifies the range of reference and emotion which can be achieved in simple narrative forms drawing on richly textured objects and events, narratives which evoke literary analogues, in this case C.S. Lewis, whilst asking fundamental metaphysical questions. The poem is addressed to his child sister, dead in a tragic accident, from which the poet hides in a wardrobe which is both literal, with his auntie's fox stole and whale bone corset 'smelly evilly of pink plastic', and metaphorically a retreat from life where he can 'Gather the darkness/about me/Dissolve into/the nothingness/I have/become'.

This childhood loss haunts him and gathers memories of all 'darkness', against which the 67 year old man he has become seeks to comfort and make amends to the nine year old he was. An aspect of the 'amends' is the poet's ability to write the past, evoking its formative power with joy and ensuring it endures as what, in the final poem, he calls 'Ever ever land'. All happiness may exist in 'little snippets of time/and space', as he puts it in the penultimate poem and even if the protagonists remain only in black and white photographs, 'I/& the moment/keep happening/in the attic of my head'.

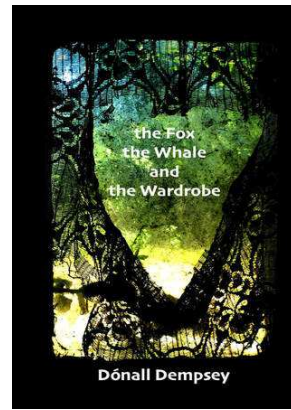
Grief, then, is juxtaposed with celebration of life, love and moments of joy. Dempsey is not a believer in the comforts of religion: 'the bell tolls/putting everything back in place/for those with faith/me, I /think the wind and crows/speak the truth' but that is not a cause for despondency: there may be no God but 'just/the sweet rain blesses me/with its good self' and a robin 'unaware/that he's my prayer'. Above all, people like his father are 'the only religion/I could believe in'. 'I pray to him', the poet says in 'Go Gentle'. At the other end of life is the three year old child Tilly, a source of joy and wisdom. In 'Coming back to the world', for instance, she

wakes up sobbing that she fell asleep and potentially missed out on something happening. Comforted that the world, too, fell asleep, she snuffles

'Good/I hate to miss/anything the world does'. This could be said of Dempsey himself, with his tactile poetry warm, as in the lovely 'Le mie mani', with hands, kisses, textures, affection.

There is much conversation in these poems. Voice is given to molecules, goldfish, birds and even a ball. In 'Tales told by birds' hatchlings are told stories of how they are the only survivors, as if humans 'had never been invented'. Sometimes inanimate objects are whimsically brought to life, like the 'Fallen angel on the graveyard shift' who gathers snowballs and which the poet persuades: 'Go on throw it' and '...she lets him have it'. In 'Don't forget to write' the poet enters a dialogue with his own poem: 'Make me proud', he whispers as it leaves his mouth. Even in print, the poet is in dialogue with the reader. Instead of footnotes we have italicised asides like the introductions one might get in a live reading event. There are classic literary undertones everywhere in this book, nudges towards Eliot, Whitman and Yeats, amongst many, and more extensive engagements with Shakespeare, Joyce and Dickens, yet the levity of the showman and shades of the stand-up comic are always evident. Dempsey is distinctive in print in his short, unpunctuated lines and brief stanzas, and in person, in his dapper style and audience connection. As a school teacher he must have been memorable. On Twitter he is prodigious, inventive and refreshing.

This reviewer must declare an interest, as someone supported by Dónall the publisher and his wife Janice, also celebrated in the book. Nevertheless, the range of feeling, the vitality, and love of life are clear to all. Dempsey concludes in 'The Nothingness', reflecting on his birth in 1956, 'would I do it/again, given half a chance/you can bet my life/I would'. Would a reader want to hear more from this poet? I bet they would.



reviews

Please send your letters to:  
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[\*editor@sofn.org.uk\*](mailto:editor@sofn.org.uk)

## SOF'S Future

Though I accept that Sea of Faith is on the wane due to lack of youthful membership I happily join Edward Nickell our youngest but very valued member in applauding the very existence of the organisation. I identify completely with him that being an atheist who was still fascinated by religion I was, as he so succinctly put it 'already in a real niche'. He is quite right to claim that we are unique.

I first attended the annual conference in 1997 and with very little persuasion from Ronald Pearse joined up in 1998. The ideas that I encountered at Sea of Faith resonated within me in a way that no single religion had ever really fulfilled my searches for fit. Even the Progressive Christianity Network, certainly in my area in the North East, did not match the peace and companionship that I had found in SoF.

Even though it seems we are destined to wind down by the end of 2024, certainly in our present form I will never cease to be thankful, as Edward remarks, that I have had company on my spiritual journey, if the word spiritual is accepted despite being a nebulous term. Neither will I cease to promote the idea that religion in all its many manifestations is a human creation.

In this regard my latest opportunity to introduce SOF came after a chance meeting in a lift at a Premier Inn close to Wembley Stadium. I had been attending the final of the Carabao Cup supporting won by Manchester United but I was supporting the losing side Newcastle United. After a long day I was in the lift returning to our room after a long but exciting day when a younger man, spoke to a fellow lift passenger about having a book published.

It was clear that he was a Newcastle supporter so I felt confident to admit eavesdropping and congratulated him on the publication of his book. He told me that he had published a number of children's stories but that this particular book was about his journey from teenage years, in the 1970s, to be the longest survivor of cancer in the UK.

By the time the lift arrived at his floor he had passed me a piece of paper which advertised his autobiography *Me and My Shadow*, the shadow being the



ever present threat of cancer throughout his days. I do enjoy biographies and autobiographies and purchased the book.

Current statistics tell the story that religion is in decline. However, it is pretty much the case, that when faced with difficult circumstances, people begin to ask questions and especially about the 'G' word.

The writer John Walker Pattison eventually declared that, in his opinion, religion did not stand up to scrutiny or analysis. I could not resist the opportunity to write to him that the Sea of Faith position that it was, a human creation. It is the case that as religious belief is in decline, maybe SOF is now surplus to requirements but I share the view of Edward that I am glad that it has been in my life for over 20 years and continues to support me throughout my twilight years. I will continue to promote SOF until the light is finally extinguished.

*Bobbie Stephens-Wright*  
*Morpeth*

## The Habit of Perfection

*Extract*

Elected Silence, sing to me  
And beat upon my whorlèd ear,  
Pipe me to pastures still and be  
The music that I care to hear.

Shape nothing, lips; be lovely-dumb:  
It is the shut, the curfew sent  
From there where all surrenders come  
Which only makes you eloquent...

*Gerard Manley Hopkins*

# A Penn'orth

## Penny Mawdsley makes some Short Sorties into Silence.

For a hearing test recently, I experienced being in a dark anechoic chamber. The silence between the staggered bursts of sound were eerie and I was glad to get out! Physicists maintain that pure silence is non-existent. The lowest sound level to be observed in the natural world is apparently that of Brownian Motion i.e., that of particles moving through gas or liquid, but humans without auditory problems who listen acutely to apparent silence can pick up a faint thud from the blood pumping in the ear or a quiet hiss from the auditory neurons transmitting sound to the brain.

Religions down the ages have made much of silence and many examples come to mind, but there isn't space to discuss them here. I'm suddenly reminded however of lines from W.B. Yeats's *Last Poems*: 'Like a long-legged fly upon the stream His mind moves upon silence' – lines which inspired Don Cupitt's *The Long-Legged Fly* (1987). Cupitt writes:

I take the pond skater as an image of religious thought in an age of thorough going reductionism. It is light, resourceful, fast-moving and well able to survive... Like the pond skater's world our theology will have to be perfectly horizontal.'

In Christianity, silence has been sought and valued, often in the most inhospitable venues, for practising deep spiritual contemplation or the apophatic prayer that is beyond words, thoughts and images. There are of course many similar practices to be found in eastern religions, and meditation unconnected with a higher power is popularly practised in the West today to still and relax body and mind from the pace and stress of modern living.

From the beginning Quakers latched on to silence as an important part of their worship. William Penn said, 'True silence is the rest of the mind and is to the spirit what sleep is to the body, nourishment and refreshment.' Friends have told me how beneficial they find an hour's corporate silence in a Meeting but that it is something to work at. Unfortunately, I haven't the patience or a particular inclination to persevere with this practice for more than a few minutes. Here I'll add that in my view deafness is possibly more of a handicap than blindness for its social invisibility and the risk of lonely isolation - of being out of things. I was

surprised to discover that before Harry G. Lang's 1994 book *Silence of the Spheres: The Deaf Experience in the History of Science* came out there was a complete absence of literature on the valuable contribution made by deaf men and women to science.



Gerard Manley Hopkins

Simon and Garfunkel brought attention to the plight of politically voiceless social outcasts. The lyrics to *The Sound of Silence* include:

And the sign said, 'The words of the prophets  
Are written on the subway walls  
And tenement halls  
And whispered in the sounds of silence.'

In Walter de la Mare's poem *The Listeners* he speaks of the human failure to surmount the mysteries of the universe, and from the Catholic tradition G.M. Hopkins expresses the intensity of deep spiritual silence in the opening lines of *The Habit of Perfection*. Apparently, for a time he denied himself all sensual delights and even vowed at the time to write no more poetry.

There are myriad ways we use silence productively, from disciplined listening in a counselling situation or in a medical context; when we listen attentively to music; when awed by spectacular scenery, skyscape or viewing the exceptional beauty of a person or artwork; in the contented silence of absorbed activity and the companionable silence of being with another where speech is unnecessary is to name but a few. Silence is then truly 'golden'!

Silence can be used compassionately to protect a friend from trouble, but unfortunately silence can be used manipulatively too, as when one party in a quarrel seeks (usually unsuccessfully) to use silence to attract attention and prolong the argument, and it's used often to avoid the likely consequences of supporting a controversial cause. Kahil Gibran points out in *The Prophet* that 'There are those amongst you who seek the talkative through fear of being alone.' Fair enough! But sharing the same fear, or just feeling uncomfortable in taciturn company, gives the garrulous bore, insensitive to his or her audience, the perfect excuse for not shutting up!



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