

s fia

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View of London from Primrose Hill

Utopia

sofia

down to Earth

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

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

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

Utopia

There are three utopian visions in the New Testament. Jesus preached the ‘reign of God’, a kind and fair society which is good news for the poor and hungry. He had come to announce its arrival, and he predicted that he would return ‘coming in clouds with great power and glory’ (Mark 13:26). to institute it in full. Furthermore, ‘there are some of those standing here who will not taste death before before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom’ (Matthew 16:28). He did not return in their lifetime and still has not returned two millennia later. But a kind and fair society is still a good idea, and if we have given up expecting him to return by now, then it is left up to us to bring it about.

Secondly, Paul ‘the apostle to the Gentiles’, preached a united new humanity ‘in Christ’, where everyone is counted of equal moral worth: ‘In Christ there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus’ (Galatians 3:28). . No racism. No classism. No sexism. This idea of *el hombre nuevo* – the new human being and new humanity – was taken up by Che Guevara, who tried to put it into practice in Latin America. In his book *Inventing the Individual* Larry Siedentop points out what a revolutionary idea this new humanity ‘in Christ’ was:

Paul’s conception of the Christ overturns the assumption on which ancient thinking had hitherto rested, the assumption of natural inequality. Instead Paul wagers on human equality...

Paul’s vision on the road to Damascus amounted to the discovery of human freedom – of the moral agency potentially available to each and everyone, that is, to individuals...

The third utopian vision comes in the book of Revelation (21:3-4): the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from heaven to Earth like a bride dressed for her wedding. The heavenly ideal is *realised* on Earth:

‘See the home of God is among humans.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his people,
and God himself will be with them;
he will wipe away every tear from their eyes...
Mourning and crying and pain will be no more.’

Utopia is the title of this *Sofia*. In the first article David Boulton writes about the persistent vision of Utopia, that quashed will rise again. His article

reviews *The Infinite City: Utopian Dreams on the Streets of London* by Niall Kishtainy. Every day when I walk through my little park in Camden Town I listen to the many languages being spoken, some I understand and some I don’t. I see the different parents and children in the playground, playing and chatting together. Those utopian dreams of London are being partly realised here. They are prominent in Londoner William Blake’s poem *Jerusalem*, two extracts from which are printed on page 15 .

Boulton begins by recalling the day in 1999 when he, the previous editor of SOF Network’s magazine, and its present editor ‘were among several hundred utopians marching to St George’s Hill... We were commemorating the 350th anniversary of Gerrard Winstanley’s attempt to dispossess the Hill’s landlords and return the land to the people.’

Next, Francis McDonagh writes the sad story of a failed Utopia: Nicaragua. In the 1980’s, following the Revolution that overthrew the dictator Somoza, the Sandinistas came to power in Nicaragua and did their best to promote ‘a sane and kindly humanism that sees the liberation and flowering of humanity as the chief object of culture’. Liberation theology had a very fruitful input into the Sandinista project Among other things, they redistributed the dictator’s lands to the landless and set up poetry workshops all over the country.

Now Daniel Ortega has been re-elected and become a dictator himself. Her or exiled many of his former comrades, including ‘Comandante Dos’, Dora María Téllez and the poet Gioconda Belli, now living in Spain, where she recently published a lament for Nicaragua in the Spanish newspaper *El País*. This *Sofia* includes a translation of her poem.

Greenness is a utopian ideal and John Pearson writes the first of what will be a regular column entitled *Going Green*. In his article ‘Who is Human?’ Dominic Kirkham writes about race and discrimination. There are the usual reviews, Penny Mawdsley’s *Penn’orth* column and more.

The projected title for the next *Sofia* (March 2024) is *Water*. Contributions to this theme are cordially invited.

Utopian Visions

David Boulton

One fine day back in 1999 the future editor of *Sofia* and the editor of its predecessor, *Sea of Faith Magazine*, were among several hundred utopians marching to St George's Hill, 'an affluent satellite of London, a wealthy community of stockbrokers studded with gated housing developments'. We were commemorating the 350th anniversary of Gerrard Winstanley's attempt to dispossess the Hill's landlords and return the land to the people. In his wonderfully engaging record of utopian dreams, in his book *The Infinite City: Utopian Dreams on the Streets of London*, Niall Kishtainy, a distinguished historian of economic struggle, sees the contrast as 'emblematic of the rise of private space and of wealth inequality in and around many of the sites of London's past social dreamers'.

This is a book about London. Its sub-title, 'Utopian Dreams on the Streets of London', is more informative than its somewhat enigmatic main title. Kishtainy acknowledges the dominant historical depictions of the city – 'an infernal maze, a centre of wealth, power and empire, a maelstrom of protest and disorder'; but alongside all this he discerns 'another narrative of it as a place of utopian possibility and experiment'. And narratives matter, he says, because 'they define our sense of possibility in the present... Without stories that aid social dreaming, society becomes rigid and confined'. London may be thought of as 'a white-hot turbo of capitalism': but what else, he asks, 'exists within its complex mosaic that could provide ingredients for an alternative to this dominant image?' His answer: 'stories, with their sensory and psychological qualities, that move people's hearts and minds – and propel them into action'.

Kishtainy traces 'an imaginative lineage that connects in time a selection of London's utopian visionaries, from Thomas More in the sixteenth

century... to the activists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries'. Thomas More, of course, coined the word utopia, playing with two Greek words, one meaning 'good or happy place' and the other 'no place'. His story of a distant island where land and goods are held in common and gold is useful only for making chamber pots has puzzled readers for centuries. Is it a fable, a satire, a joke? None of these, says Kishtainy. It is 'both a mirror to and an inversion of his home town of London, reproducing its physical characteristics – the river, stone bridge and hills – while through its social critique seeking to undo its moral ones. It is a starting point for a lineage of an imagined London that later city visionaries will build on'.

This More is neither Bolt's sympathetic man for all seasons nor Mantel's fanatical opponent of Reformation. Kishtainy sees him as troubled by 'the strengthening forces of capitalism that were weakening the sinews of medieval society' and toying with imaginative alternatives. The last thing Henry VIII's future Lord Chancellor wanted was a proletarian revolution, but the fame of his fictional island led to unintended consequences. Marx, Engels and Lenin would hail him as a Communist hero. Jesuit missions in 17th century Latin America would create utopian experiments that excited Voltaire and helped inspire the French Revolution. (It seems these echoes of More's utopianism could still be heard in the 20th century. The democratic socialist President Allende of Chile, brutally deposed by General Pinochet in 1973, lived in Santiago's Calle Tomás Moro – Thomas More Street. Pinochet, on the other hand, was granted a safe house on St George's Hill by Margaret Thatcher).

But I digress. Kishtainy doesn't take us this far from London. Instead, he fast-forwards a century to the chaos and confusion of the 1640s Civil War, the execution of Charles Stuart and the establishment of an English Republic. What an opportunity for utopian dreamers! Gerrard Winstanley, born in Wigan but by the 1640s a

Merchant Taylor and freeman of London, has a vision where God, who he re-names ‘the light of Reason’, tells him to stop writing pamphlets and *do* something, ‘Thoughts run in me’, he writes, ‘that words and writings were all nothing, and must die, for action is the life of all, and if thou dost not act, thou dost nothing’.

So with a handful of Diggers he finds some wasteland near Walton where ‘I tooke my spade and went and broke the ground upon George-hill in Surrey, thereby declaring freedom to the Creation, and that the Earth must be set free from intanglements of Lords and Landlords, and that it shall become a common Treasury to all.’

Kishtainy comments: ‘Because of their evident sense of practical purpose, the Diggers represent a watershed in our story. Unlike Thomas More before him, Winstanley intended his utopia to be real and tried to make it so.’ He failed, and today’s pile of wealth and privilege on the hill mocks his failure. But Winstanley lives on in his inspirational writings. ‘The fruits of his pen’, writes Kishtainy, are ‘powerful incantations that unchain the rebel passions, putting words to death and giving life to a new world of action’.

Fast-forwarding again, into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Kishtainy finds Thomas Spence castigating Tom Paine’s *Rights of Man* for failing to attack property rights. Spence re-writes ‘God Save the King’ as a communist anthem, invoking the Mosaic principle of the Jubilee, a fifty-year emancipation of slaves from their landlords and masters. In *The Rights of Infants* he conjures up a future where landlords are toast. ‘Behold their palaces, temples and towns, mouldering into dust, and affording shelter only to wild beasts; and their boasted, cultivated fields and garden, degenerated into a howling wilderness.’ Imprisoned on a charge of high treason, Spence could not be silenced, ‘his utopian call’, says Kishtainy, ‘ringing out from the very heart of London’s dark power, the rebuilt Newgate jail, which Fielding called a prototype of hell’. Defending himself at a later court appearance, he asked: ‘Are we never to expect a



Title Woodcut to *Utopia* by Thomas More

better state of things than the present? Must we be debarred from the pleasures of imagination also?’

Spence had many admirers and followers. Robert Wedderburn, a Jamaican slave descendant, outdid Wilberforce and the Quakers by calling for the emancipation of not only slaves in the colonies but also captive wage-slaves in the dark mills nearer home. John Goodwyn Barmby founded a Communist Propaganda Society, renamed the Communist Church – this when a young Karl Marx was just a badly-behaved university student. Anna Wheeler argued that only under a system of co-operation and common property would there be the possibility of true equality, seeking ‘a transformation of relations between men and women, setting out feminist utopias in which women would be released from the oppression of the old social order’.

Utopianism itself was moving on. Kishtainy notes that ‘Rapid economic change made relics of traditional utopian tales of perfect societies to be discovered on faraway islands... Something

different was needed in the frenetic nineteenth-century world that was full of new social tensions and dangerous, agitated cities... The old utopian image of the pristine shining city, closed off and for ever perfect, was now too simple a picture to animate the radical imagination.' Under the influence of the mainstream Enlightenment, 'Utopian thinking came to be concerned with the concrete principles and actions that would be needed in order for conscious efforts at social improvements to fall into step with history's march of progress'.

As Kishtainy whirls us on into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries it seems to me that the distinction between utopian transformation and radical social action begins to blur. Ada Salter, wife of the Quaker reformist Alfred Salter, looked to the day when 'The injustices of the ages, the misery of the oppressed class, the sorrows of the poor, the tyranny of wealth and rank, are swept away for ever'. But her way of making a better world was through party politics. In 1922 she was elected mayor of Bermondsey, the first woman

Labour mayor in the country. She removed the town hall union jack and flew the red flag, abolished royal ceremonies and replaced the established church prayers at the start of council meetings with Quaker silence. That was for starters. For main course, she swept away the slums where workers were 'not housed but warehoused' and built homes with toilets and gardens.

Perhaps this is where utopianism and social action meet and merge, to animate the radical imagination. Kishtainy concludes: 'Although we may seem to live in anti-utopian times, utopian dreaming is essential to a vibrant society that is truly conscious of its own desires. Without it we fall back on ideas dictated by the powerful about how we should live.' Imagine!

David Boulton's books include *Gerrard Winstanley and the Republic of Heaven*, Foreword by Michael Foot (Dales Historical Monographs, 1999).

The Infinite City: Utopian Dreams on the Streets of London by Niall Kishtainy is published by William Collins, (London 2023. 353 pages, £25).



'Comandante Dos' Dora María Téllez (front left) leads the FSLN guerrillas in the liberation of the city of León in the Nicaraguan Revolution of 1979.

Archive photo.

Economic Report (Nicaragua 1981)

I am surprised to find myself reading
with great interest
things like
cotton harvest twenty five percent up
on last year
coffee exports US\$124.2 million
17.5% up on last year
a 13.6% increase in sugar is expected
maize production down -5.9%
gold 10% down
because of Contra attacks in that region
likewise shellfish...
When did such data ever interest me before?
It is because now our wealth
however little
is to be for everyone.
So it is
for the people,
love of the people
this interest.

Love is now the meaning of these figures.
Gold dug from the Earth, solid sun
cut into blocks, will become electric light
drinking water
for the poor.
Translucent molluscs,
reminiscent of women, the smell of a woman,
come from the sea, its submarine caves
and coloured gardens of coral
to be pills, desks.
Matter's holiness.
Mother, you know what a glass of milk is worth.
Soft cloud-whirl cotton –
we went singing to the cotton-cutting,
in our fingers we held clouds –
will become, roads, zinc roofs,
the economic has become poetic
or rather, with the Revolution
economics now is love.

Ernesto Cardenal
Translated by Dinah Livingstone

This translation was first published in *Nicaraguan New Time*. Poems by Ernesto Cardenal (Minister of Culture in the 1980s Sandinista government), translated by Dinah Livingstone. (Journeyman Press, London 1988). The Spanish original was published in *Tocar el Cielo* (Salamanca, 1981).

Nicaragua's Failed Utopia

Francis McDonagh

Many aspects of the society created by the 1979 Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua qualify it to be described as a utopia. Perhaps most notable is the literacy campaign launched less than a year after the overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship. It is estimated that the campaign reduced the illiteracy rate from 50% to 13%. No less important was the methodology, which involved, as well as government institutions, citizen's associations, labour organizations, and church and student groups. The unprecedented focus on rural areas also had by-products such as infrastructural and construction work, an anti-malaria campaign, environmental, health and sanitation actions, and research for the governmental Agrarian Reform Institute. An emerging health programme reduced infant mortality by half. These results were achieved against the hostility of the United States, which regarded the revolution as a communist intrusion into its 'backyard', and supported a military opposition known as the *contras*, which attacked civilian communities and regularly killed Sandinista prisoners.

This was also a government that initially included four priests as ministers, inspired by the 'preferential option for the poor' proclaimed by the Latin American bishops' meeting in Medellín in 1968 in the wake of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1968). The Medellín conference began a transformation of the Roman Catholic Church from the closed, defensive structure created after the Reformation into one that engaged with the world and its problems.

Remarkably for a Marxist-dominated movement, the Sandinistas allowed free elections in 1990 and accepted their defeat by the opposition. Nevertheless, between their election defeat and the new government's taking office some leading Sandinistas seized estates, vehicles and other property confiscated from the previous elite. This started the fracturing of the Sandinista leadership, which had originally been a coalition of Marxists and other groups opposed to the

dictatorship. In 1994 Daniel Ortega, who had led the revolutionary junta and was later elected president, removed Sergio Ramírez from his role as vice-president. In the same year priest and poet Ernesto Cardenal, who had been minister of culture, resigned from the Sandinistas, saying: 'My resignation from the FSLN has been caused by the kidnapping of the party carried out by Daniel Ortega and the group he heads.'

The Sandinistas regained power after Daniel Ortega was re-elected to the presidency in 2006. The party also won a plurality of seats in the legislature. In 2009 the Nicaraguan Supreme Court lifted the constitutional ban that prevented presidents from serving consecutive terms, paving the way for Ortega's re-election in 2011. Having obtained a 'super-majority' in the National Assembly, the Sandinistas then pushed through changes to the constitution that removed presidential term limits, setting the stage for Ortega's re-election in 2016.

2018 was a key year for Nicaragua. In April President Ortega and Vice President Murillo ordered police and paramilitary forces to put down with violence peaceful protests that began over discontent with a government decision to reduce social security benefits. The government's excessive response included the use of live ammunition and snipers. Protesters built makeshift roadblocks and confronted police and government paramilitaries with rocks and homemade mortars. By late November, the conflict had left at least 325 persons dead, more than 2,000 injured, hundreds illegally detained and tortured, and more than 52,000 exiled in neighbouring countries. Beginning in August the Ortega government instituted a policy of 'exile, jail, or death' for anyone perceived as a member of the opposition, amended terrorism laws to include prodemocracy activities, and used the justice system to characterise civil society actors as terrorists, assassins, and coup-mongers.



The Risen Christ by Olivia Silva. 1982.

Primitive painting by a member of the Solentiname Community.

The risen Christ wears the Latin American traditional *cotona* shirt. The 3 crosses bear the names of the members of the Community who died in the struggle for the Revolution: Felipe, Donald and Elvis.

In 2018 student protesters were sheltered at the Jesuit Central American University in Managua. In August this year the Nicaraguan government closed down the Jesuit university and transferred its premises to a state university, which, however, has still not been able to start operations. The attack on the Jesuit university is part of a broader attack on the Catholic Church, symbolised most dramatically by the arrest of the bishop of Matagalpa, Rolando Álvarez, who is serving a 26-year sentence for ‘subversion’. A reason for the government’s focus on the Church was suggested by the Jesuit spokesman for Central America, Fr José María Tojeira: ‘Without being as much a competitor as the political opposition, it remains so at a level of awareness-raising. The Church is a very powerful force, and the contrary thinking there is in the Church, the opinion of clergy and laypeople.’

There are signs that the government’s harassment of the Church are causing it political problems internationally, as more and more governments and international bodies criticise it. This seems to be the explanation for its request to

the Vatican to take twelve imprisoned priests, who were deported to Rome on 18 October.

For the present, Nicaragua’s utopian dream is being kept alive in exile, by opposition media now forced to operate from Costa Rica, or by prominent exiles such as Giaconda Belli and Sergio Ramírez, now based in Spain. At an award ceremony in Costa Rica on 21 October the two writers commented their dream. Belli said: ‘As a Nicaraguan I can say that I am a survivor of a failed utopia. It was not just overthrowing the tyranny, but creating a happy society, where inequalities, the oppression of one person by another, would end and culture, education, freedom and humanism would thrive.’ Sergio Ramírez said the two were ‘united by the utopia of victory, of creating a new Earth under a new heaven. It is a utopia in which we believed and continue to believe.’

Francis McDonagh is a translator and journalist who writes on Latin America for *The Tablet*. His book *Dom Hélder Câmara: Selected Writings* was published by Orbis Books (New York) in 2009.

To Nicaragua (2023)

So often I've decided to forget you
as if you were a cruel lover
who slams the door in your face
or one of those who, the more you love,
the quicker they forget.
But however hard I try, I can't forget you,
your rain, your wind, your greenness,
papers rustling in the street,
the oak dropping its blossoms
like silk shells on the pavements,
the face of the child holding a rag,
his smile covering his poverty to overcome it.
Dusk descending over the pointed peak
of the distant volcano,
clouds spreading red and violet across the sky.
Your people's quick-witted, playful way of talking.
Then everything I curse and scorn about you undoes me
and love breaks in like horses galloping in my breast.
I look at you through silk cotton and golden trumpet trees,
lemonwood, mahogany and palm trees
and I love you, country of my dreams and pains.
I take you with me to wash away your stains in secret,
whisper hope to you,
promise you healing and spells to save you
I speak words because they cement my life
and through words I imagine you born again, shining,
free of the worms that eat into your foundations day by day.
Those who sell and rob and abuse you
I snatch out of your hair.
I tell you stories on my pillow,
I tuck you in and close your eyes
so you can't see the murderers coming to behead you.
My land, landscape,
I'll die and so will my distress
but you'll go on, set in the same place,
snuggling into my memories
and my bones.

Gioconda Belli
Translated by Dinah Livingstone

Gioconda Belli, now lives in exile in Spain. This poem was originally published in the Spanish newspaper *El País*.

Christmas

Tony Windross

It all began one Christmas – well actually, a few months earlier. A few months earlier I'd found a battered copy of HJ ('Bert') Richards' *The First Christmas* in my local second-hand bookshop, and as the festive season had almost arrived, it seemed an appropriate thing to browse through. I did – and the whole world changed. Being a latter-day logical positivist (albeit somewhat late to the party) the idea that things might be true in a variety of ways was a bit of a revelation. But that book meant that when the *Sea of Faith* programmes landed a few months later, the seed fell on some very receptive soil.

That sliver of autobiography shows why I always find Christmas a particularly special time. And why it's beyond desperate that the Church keeps the Good News about Christmas (as well as pretty well everything else) to itself. But the reason it does so is not (primarily) out of any proprietorial sense – but an unholy combination of fear and ignorance. We don't tell the news to others, because (apart from a few isolated pockets of unprincipled liberalism) it's not yet got to us (echoes of Nietzsche's Madman, perhaps?) With the Good News being – that the Christmas stories (like all the other bible stories) can be taken seriously, *whatever* your beliefs.

And that's really handy, because whilst we live in an increasingly multi-faith/no-faith society, Christmas is still widely celebrated, with its core message about the coming of God to Earth in human form. In cathedrals and parish churches across the country, people will respectfully listen to the readings and enthusiastically sing the carols proclaiming that message. And then, a few short days later, when the tinsel and trees get put away, continue exactly as before. Unmoved, unscathed, and completely unpersuaded that any of the religious stuff they've just encountered, might have something to offer them.

Which is hardly surprising, given that the message itself is *so* bizarre, as to verge on (or tip over into) meaninglessness. No wonder the thoughtful unchurched shake their heads in collective bewilderment and look elsewhere for more plausible and persuasive guides to life.

Exactly one hundred years ago this month, the House of Bishops of the American Episcopal Church brought charges of heresy against William Montgomery Brown, the retired Bishop of Arkansas, on the grounds that he wanted the freedom to interpret the creeds non-literally. One of the charges related to the bishops' indignation, that (according to Montgomery Brown) the Church's understanding of '*conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin Mary .. need not be accepted in their obvious sense*'. What an 'obvious sense' might amount to was never explained, although it was evidently something along the lines of 'literally'. But it was (and is) ludicrous to imagine that 'conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin Mary' *could* ever be understood literally!

Bishop Brown was found guilty as charged, despite (or maybe because of) his protestations that he believed The Book of Common Prayer in its entirety: 'I will venture to say there isn't one Bishop here that believes any more than I do and takes more delight in the worship from that Prayer Book than I do. I believe it from cover to cover, and the Bible too ... I don't reject one supernaturalistic representation of the Bible ... of the creed, of the Prayer Book. I interpret it all symbolically.' (quoted in *The Bishop Pike Affair*, Stringfellow and Towne p. 101).

Were those weasel words – or just unusually honest words? Whatever they were, here *we* are, an entire century later, in exactly the same place. Any parish cleric (or, heaven forbid, bishop) who dares to explore non-literal ways of understanding Christmas, is likely to be cast into outer darkness – if the news ever got out. All the members of the Nativity tableau must be left undisturbed (and unexamined), as the Church continues its descent into cultural irrelevance, apart from the way that crib services are increasingly seen as entertaining opportunities for facile adaptation. (One such was the memorable introduction in *Love Actually* of the hitherto unknown character of an Octopus.) It's all a bit of a laugh – for people who daren't take Christmas (or much else) seriously. That is an enormous shame, as an intelligent understanding of it has the potential to cut through all the layers of

self-protection we usually wear, and put us in touch with something that is raw and real.

But if this is ever going to happen, it will demand a commitment to seriousness on the part of the individual, as well as a commitment to openness on the part of the Church. The former is tricky enough, whilst the latter is vanishingly unlikely, apart from in local pockets, and even then, only patchily. Any church with liberal elements in its congregation is also bound to contain others, who would be shocked to the core at any suggestion things might demand more of them than the Sunday School picture they've clung to all their lives.

And whilst there may well be all sorts of possible routes to a mature understanding of Christmas, it's unlikely any of them will be able to dispense completely with the sort of threefold typology set out by Marcus Borg (in such places as *The Meaning of Jesus* p. 247-8 and *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time* p. 49-51), from whom I have borrowed shamelessly.

At their heart, they focus on the journey of faith moving along a continuum from an unimaginative literalism, towards a position that allows the stories to get under our skin. But to begin at the beginning:

When we were little, we first heard the birth stories of Jesus, in a state of *precritical naïveté*. In that state, we took it for granted that things really happened that way, and Jesus really was born of a virgin, and that there was a magic star, wise men, birth in a stable, angels singing to the shepherds, and so forth. In that state, we simply heard them as true stories.

Gradually, at least some people begin to question and evaluate, not just these stories, but much else besides (including Santa Claus). This is the state of *critical thinking*, and it would be worrying if young people *didn't* go through it. It involves a demand for evidence, and the abandoning of ideas that don't meet the test.

Many people (such as the so-called 'New Atheists' of Dawkins, Dennett, Harris and Hitchens) get stuck in that stage for their whole lives – which is unfortunate. Because on the far side of critical thinking is *postcritical naïveté*, which is about being able to hear the central stories of the Christian tradition once again as true stories. Not in the sense of somehow returning to the childhood state of *precritical naïveté*, but realising that their truth does not depend on their historical factuality.

It is the ability (Borg tells us) to affirm the words of a Native American Storyteller, 'I don't know if it happened this way or not, but I know this story is true'. As T. S. Eliot famously put it: 'And the end of all our exploring – will be to arrive where we started – and know the place for the first time'.

Which is all very well – until the Church gets involved, and insists (as it almost always does) that the stories need to be heard as history, rather than as 'just' (sic) stories. Anything else is seen as thin gruel, because facts are apparently the only things that count. If the stories aren't historically-based, they're simply 'not true'. And if they're 'not true' – then they 'don't matter'. No wonder congregations are so keen to hang onto the historicity of the bible, as that's the only way it can (they're told) 'be true'. And even when people are prepared to countenance the language of metaphor (such as Jesus being described as 'the bread of life'), it's on condition that the words themselves are accurate renderings of historical events and conversations.

There's an obvious disconnect in all this with the worlds of film and theatre (as well as literature more generally), where most reasonable people would find it somewhere between absurd and offensive if members of the audience felt obliged to stand up and object that (say) Macbeth 'wasn't true'. We willingly suspend disbelief and enter another world whilst watching a play or film – and hope that when we return to the everyday one, our lives are richer, with sympathies and empathies enhanced. So if we're able to appreciate fiction, we should be able to appreciate the Christmas stories. But to say that, for many people, would immediately sound as if we've sold the pass, and given up on the 'truths of religion'. That's because they're stuck in the first of Borg's stages, seeing 'belief' as the (only) thing that matters, rather than simply allowing the stories to sink into and inform our consciousness.

We can probably all think of people of goodwill who are happy enough to go along with the Christmas 'stuff', but unable (and it really is a case of 'unable' rather than 'unwilling') to see it as the gateway to something far deeper. That was certainly the situation I was in, pre-Bert Richards. And many of those who will sing the carols this Christmas are likely to be similarly located – on the outside of the Church, looking in.

And whilst we could list the various elements of the Christmas stories with present day personal implications (the value of giving, the miracle of new



Bartolo di Fredi, Nativity and Adoration of the Shepherds, Vatican Museums, 1383

life, the importance of family), doing so robs those stories of much of their power. In the same way that trying to turn the behaviour and language of the characters of a novel, into a series of philosophical propositions/lessons that we could learn from, would rob it of whatever it was that *made* it a novel. Stories (including religious stories) can't be analysed without significant loss – otherwise people would read the works of moral philosophers rather than novelists in order to try and make sense of life.

But we need the philosophers in order to try and make sense of religion. In his *Culture and Value* Wittgenstein says: 'An honest religious thinker is like a tightrope walker. He almost looks as though he were walking on nothing but air. His support is the slenderest imaginable. And yet it really is possible to walk on it'. And in *The Sea of Faith* Don Cupitt adds (p. 230) 'to be honest, you must walk the tightrope; to be religious you must not fall off it'.

Again, in *Culture and Value* (p. 33) if a man (sic) has faith 'you no longer rest your weight on the Earth, but suspend yourself from heaven. Then

everything will be different (as) a man who is suspended looks the same as one who is standing, but the interplay of forces within him is nevertheless quite different, so that he can act quite differently than can a standing man'.

Which doesn't offer much comfort for those who aren't prepared to take risks – or put in the necessary practice on the high wire. People can't move to Stage 3 without considerable effort – which is why many will never manage it. But the potential rewards are so great that we need to do all we can to rescue and rehabilitate the wonderful Christmas stories from the clutches of the literalists (of either Stage 1 or Stage 2). We need to insist on their beauty and power, and refuse to apologise for their fanciful elements. There will always be those who remain cynical and jaundiced about the season, which is both unfortunate and sad. And whilst the commercial aspects are bound to dominate, we need to counter all the silliness and self-indulgence, by offering a far richer model of human flourishing. And taking the nativity stories from 2000 years ago as seriously as they deserve, is a pretty good place to start.

Who is Human?

A Short History of Race

Dominic Kirkham

The word 'race' first appears in the English language in the sixteenth century, probably from an Italian root. It is often a bit of a mystery as to exactly how new words appear in a language, but one thing that seems certain is that their appearance denotes some new social or epistemic understanding of a changed reality.

It is perhaps no coincidence that the new 'reality' of the sixteenth century was the discovery of whole new worlds previously unimagined and inhabited by people never before encountered. There seemed genuine confusion as to whether the inhabitants were human and to be regarded as similar to Europeans (cf. Francisco de Vittoria, *De Indis*, 1532) or brutes more like animals, even monsters – the Spanish Caribe rendering of Arawak *karina*, 'strong men' and Shakespeare's Caliban or 'bestial man'.

One thing all agreed on was that they were heathens in need of salvation. On some of the new maps that began to appear following the work of Mercator (d. 1594) whole areas, such as the sub-continent of India, were labelled simply 'Devil Worshippers'. A crusading concern for conversion provided much of the motivation of early explorers, especially Spaniards like Columbus and Magellan, and above all the Jesuit, Francis Xavier (d.1552), who would later become the patron saint of missionaries. Ultimately, though the scriptural view prevailed that all of

humanity had one common origin (monogenism, as in Rev. Thomas Smyth's, *The Unity of the Human Races Proved to be the Doctrine of Scripture, Reason, and Science*, 1850) this was compromised by a cultural divisiveness (cf Domingo Sarmiento, *Facundo: Civilisation and Barbarism*, 1845) and general understanding that one Christian civilisation would prevail with other 'savage' cultures destined to disappear 'at the approach of civilisation like dew before the morning sun' (Charles Dickens, 1853).

By the eighteenth century a primarily religious understanding of reality was being challenged by a largely rational (or 'enlightened') approach. With it came the systematisation of knowledge, such as that of biological classification (Linnaeus, d 1778). A source of confusion that would have dire consequences was that race was used with

reference to the categories of both *genus* and *species* for groups of people – as in the 'races of man' and 'the human race' – with *genus* meaning a group sharing qualities related to birth, descent, origin, race, stock, or family, and *species* referring to distinctive groups with the implication some would be 'sub' or 'pre' human (as with the Neanderthals).

Anthropology, a word first recorded by medical pioneer Richard Harvey (in 1593), became the comparative study of such groups or 'varieties', a word initially used for different members *within* a single species (Johann Friederich Blumenbach, *On the Natural Variety of Mankind*



Caliban from *The Tempest*. www.wikiart.org/

1775) and only later substituted with the word 'races' in a more divisive, specific sense. Physical difference such as skin colour and skull shape were obvious distinguishing features but there was also growing awareness of linguistic associations or 'families' of associated languages that seemed to have 'mutated' from a common core, or ur-language (William Jones, *Third Anniversary Discourse*, to the Asiatic Society, 1786).

Also appearing at this time in ever increasing numbers were the 'isms'. Words with this suffix, denoting vast conceptual constructs, began to proliferate, perhaps not by accident, after the appearance of the monumental works of Hegel (d.1831). His nebulous philosophical history of the human spirit mind was accompanied by a new word 'ideology' coined by the French rationalist contemporary, Destutt de Tracy (1796), and of which Napoleon opined, 'It is to the doctrine of the ideologues...[that] one must attribute all the misfortunes that have befallen our beautiful France.' Race would now become an accomplice of potent ideologies expressing ever more nebulous theories.

In the nineteenth century a new 'scientific' evolutionary perspective began to characterise the understanding of reality by placing groups of people now regarded as specific races in ascendant order of perfectibility based on emergent characteristics (Samuel Thomas von Sommerring, died 1830). Linguistic or cultural groups also became mistakenly equated with physical groups to create a racial hierarchy (Arthur de Gobineau, *An Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races*, 1855). It is in this period that the word 'racial' appears to denote species with inherent differences and inequalities, with the ominous implication of a superior or 'master' race. (Modern genetics has shown a biological basis for distinct human races to be false.)

Further ominous developments that took place in the nineteenth century were reflected in the appearance of the prejudicial phrase 'race-hatred' (1882). This escalation was a clear indication that the most sinister aspects of racial theory were becoming a dangerous reality, one that in the twentieth century led to such terms as 'racialism' and then 'racialist' (1930) to indicate a belief in the superiority of a particular race.

From being a religious, academic, then a scientific issue race had now become primarily a political and sociological issue, as highlighted by the Civil Rights movement and Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). The word 'racism' had taken on an unequivocally hostile denotation indicative of a dehumanised status that humanity had created in seeking to understand itself. It has become the lens through which we now view the past and in 2019, the American Association of Physical Anthropologists stated: "The belief in "races" as natural aspects of human biology, and the structures of inequality (racism) that emerge from such beliefs, are among the most damaging elements in the human experience both today and in the past.'

Jerusalem

2 Extracts

1

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

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

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

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

2

In my exchanges every land
Shall walk, and mine in every land
Mutual shall build Jerusalem:
Both in heart in heart and hand in hand.

Arthur Shearly Cripps

Digby Hartridge

My mother's and, I think, my grandfather's hero was Arthur Shearly Cripps (1869-1952). He had attended Charterhouse and Trinity College, Oxford, where he knew the poet Laurence Binyon (remembered as the composer of 'For the Fallen') and won a prestigious poetry prize. His theological education was at Cuddesdon College, near Oxford, relatively Low Church, but he was much influenced by the Roman-leaning Charles Gore and the Pusey House Group, greatly moved by its pronounced social conscience. In 1893 he was a curate at Icklesham, Sussex (my great-grandfather Revd Charles Bedford was twenty miles away at Denton).

Then, whilst Vicar of Ford End, Essex, he read Olive Schreiner's *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland*, a bitter satire on Rhodes's and the BSA Company's subjugation of the rebellions: the frontispiece was a photograph of nonchalant white troops lounging below a mimosa tree, hanged black 'spies' weighing down the branches, which made a deep impression upon him, one that stayed with him for the length of his life, one which persuaded him to work as a missionary in Africa. He became a strident if erratic critic of 'settler' attitudes.

Cripps was variously described as awkward, rangy, shy, impractical, set-jawed. He lived from 1901 until 1926, apart from a period as a chaplain to the forces in East Africa during the Great War, on Wrenington Mission, where he built a church with a round nave and two round transepts and lived in a hut in Franciscan simplicity. Wrenington, in the deeply conservative Charter District, was bordered by Afrikaans farmers. The nearest town was Enkeldoorn (Chivhu) and Cripps

walked eight miles each way each Sunday to take a service there.

In 1926 he returned to England for a period but from 1930 until his death lived, no longer attached to the Anglican Church, in a lone hut on his own farm. There he encouraged his converts to work as tenant farmers and build a new church, the famous Maronda Mashanu ('Five Wounds'). Naturally enough, various legends attached themselves to him: for example, that as he never owned a car he used to run everywhere, that he made a visiting dignitary ride bare-backed upon a donkey, that he would refuse gifts of new furniture. His clothes were old, his tobacco atrocious.

As a Puseyite, though inspired by the idea of a 'Black Christ', Cripps (and his flock) were not averse to adopting formal European attire and due ceremony, as witness a famous picture of his converts dressed in white wedding gowns and veils and white suits and ties. His material accomplishments, as a backward-looking idealist, might not have been great, but there is little doubt that he was respected by Africans, who came from afar to see him, and he was widely recognised, mostly after his death, as a secular saint. However, he was despised by most Europeans: a typical tale is of a farmer who offered him a lift but on discovering his opinions dropped him beside the road, many miles from town. It must be said that he rather exulted in his outsider reputation.

Cripps wrote pamphlets on the hut tax, a book on land segregation and innumerable letters to the newspapers, along with children's tales and a school story. And here we must make room for a few words about his poetry. He was old-

fashioned, a classicist, pedantic sometimes to the point of strangulation, a lonely English voice who made little use of vernacular terms or African myth or imagery inspired by the veld. He spoke of a 'hoe' rather than a 'badza', of Pan or Penelope rather than the Mambo kings or the M'limo. This is an example of his more accomplished work:

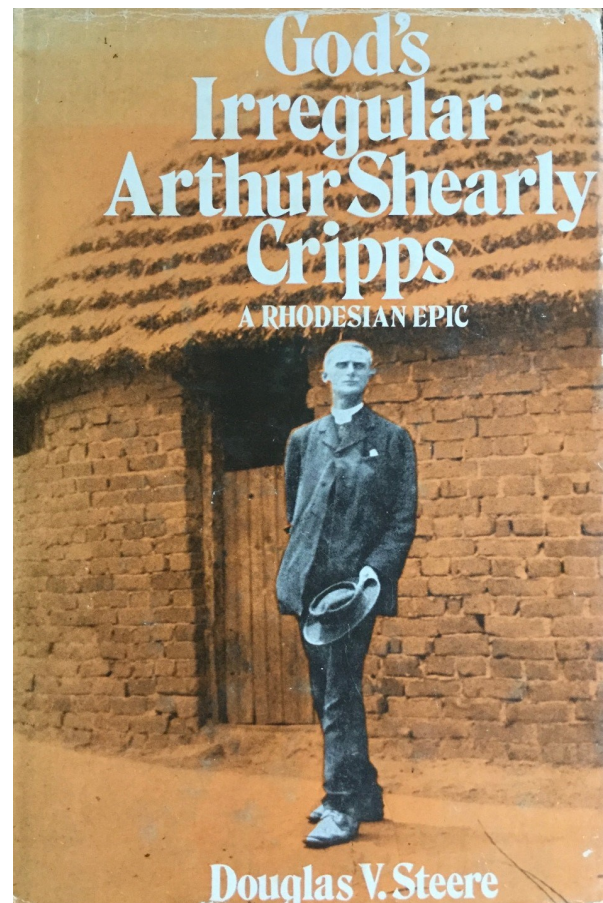
*Now go, a veldsore in each lifted hand,
Go with two blistered feet your altar's way;
With pity's wound at heart, go praise and pray!
Go, wounds to Wounds; why you are glad today,
He, whose Five Wounds you wear, will understand.*

The tormented poems composed during the war in East Africa meditate upon his mission, his patriotism, his homesickness, his wearied abhorrence of the slaughter. Frankly political, however, is this poem directed at 'our rulers of natives in Africa':

*He's but a child. You say so, do you not,
To prove his need of stripes, to prove your right
To lock his hand away, and to requite
His work with wages of a child? You blot
His franchise out. You mildly murmur: 'What
Use has he for a vote? His needs are slight,
His name upon a hut-tax roll indite,
And tax his blanket too, or cooking pot!
A child? He bears the burthen and the heat
Of grown men's war (How fast child-porters die!
Who forced their labour, halv'd their pay, let ply
The hippo-hide?) A child! Your task how sweet –
To speed on blood-trails child-askaris' feet,
And set babes' hands to murder, standing by!*

And here is a frequently-quoted refrain, one of many that reflect his isolation:

*Tell the tune his feet beat
On the ground all day –
Black-burnt ground and green grass
Seamed with rocks of grey –
'England', 'England' 'England',
That one word they say.
Now they tread the beech-mast,
Now the ploughland's clay,
Now the faery ball-floor of her fields in May.
Now her red June sorrel,
now her new-turned hay,
Now they keep the great road,
now by sheep-path stray,*



Cripps's political ally, incidentally, was Canon Edgar Lloyd, from humble background and trained at an SPCK college, who was stationed at Rusape from 1903 to 1936. He saw his duty clearly; he bore the White Man's Burden steadfastly; he made 500 mile journeys by donkey round the reserves.

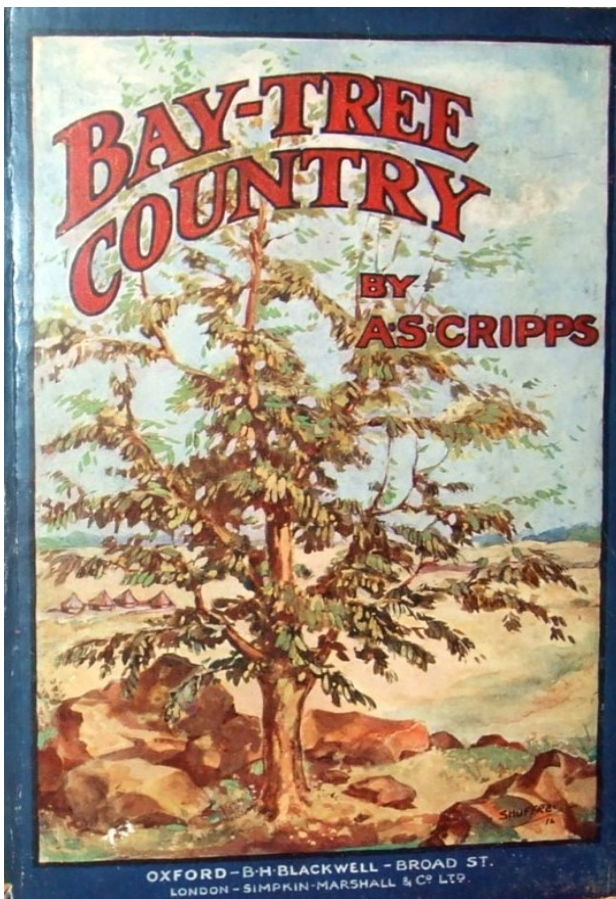
A third graduate of Oxford (this time Keble) and Cuddesdon College was Alan Moultrie Mylne, in turn serving at Rawmarsh, South Yorkshire, and then several parishes in Worcestershire before coming to Bulawayo as Rector and Archdeacon of Matabeleland in 1928.

No friend of Cripps was Bishop Frederic Hicks Beaven, indubitably the settlers' favourite, a passionate admirer of Rhodes and an apologist for the settlers. Beaven retired in 1925 and then the pendulum swung: his replacement was Edward Francis Paget, a flamboyant Oxford man from a clerical family who was politically liberal and wanted to be ordained at a mission station. (His style of preaching was a fire-and-brimstone caricature:

*Still it's 'England', 'England',
'England, all the way!*

I can remember listening to him at a service he was conducting for the newly confirmed at the Church of St Paul in Marlborough, Salisbury, in about 1955, fearful of catching my mother's eye, but to no avail. We collapsed in giggles.)

Whilst on the subject of religion I shall recall the terrible tale of Mrs Murphy's daughter, Ada – it says rather too much about attitudes of the time. When Ada was in her teens, and her mother terminally ill with cancer, in the late 1920s, she became pregnant by a married man. He refused to accept responsibility, and though Ada was a Catholic, as her father had been, and attended the Convent School in Bulawayo, her Church would not have anything to do with her. Nor would the Dutch Reformed Church, though that was her mother's faith. Even the maternity home would not accept her so she was forced to give birth at home with her dying mother (who was at least a midwife!) in attendance.



Mercifully the Salvation Army, newly active in Bulawayo, took it upon themselves to come round and check up on her. They were there to help Mrs Murphy deliver the baby, a little girl, and helped to get Ada a job as a waitress in a cheap Greek restaurant. Of course the scandal spread across the town. My grandmother Winnie was dead by then and at first the gossip was kept from my mother's, Ivy's, tender ears. My Aunt Violet, as undisputed head of the household (my grandfather too mild-mannered to intervene) was unbendingly censorious and forbade anyone in the family to see the disgraced Murphys. My Aunt Rhoda, however, broke ranks; unable to face the quandary alone she explained the situation to Ivy, a young teenager, and together they visited the old family friends, just before the baby was due. Thereafter they dropped round regularly. The story has a happy ending. Ada married a Greek, a new immigrant, and their daughter kept in touch with Rhoda.

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letters

Appreciating self-respect

Self-respect is not aggrandisement of the *self*; it's respect for the self – whatever that is or is not, etc. The emphasis is not on the self but on respect. It is not about *me*; it is not, for example, about some important official whom Ernest Rutherford, a nuclear physicist, once described as being 'like a Euclidean point: he has position without magnitude'. I once wrote a 20,000-word dissertation with the catchy title 'A Critique of the Principle of Respect for Persons'. 'Persons' included me - and everyone else.

The key historical figure here is Kant. He wanted to bring all under the domain of something he called *reason*. He didn't want 'feelings' to take centre stage in Ethics – nor did Buber later on. But, being a sensitive man, he realised feelings could not be kept out altogether – he identified a single moral feeling: respect. This he claimed was a feeling self-wrought by reason. It is rational at base.

He identified four characteristics of this ethical concept:

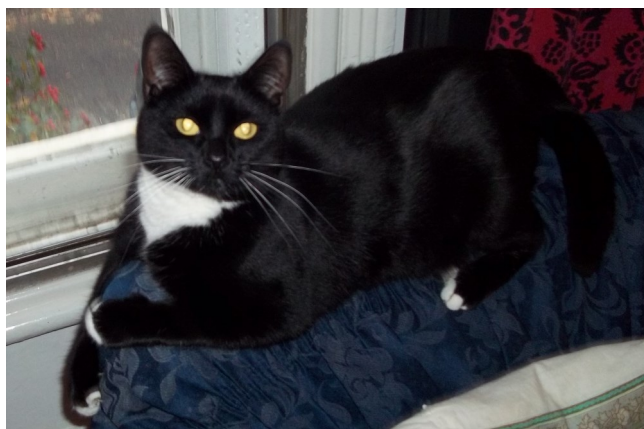
Only a person can have respect;
The unique object of respect is the moral law;
Respect is known a priori;
Respect for the moral law is the sole moral incentive.

Self-respect is simply respect for the person that is me – not my empirical self -as the core

of it. To paraphrase – respect your neighbour as yourself. (You do not have to love anyone. And further, '...there is no way to tell which sort of love we are feeling just by feeling it ...'). One cannot do one or the other – both come into play together or not. I may never understand fully what a person is, or what respect is. But that is not peculiar to 'respect' – all virtues are like that: we never quite get there but they lead us heavenwards.

Our attention is drawn to respecting others; to counterbalance that injunction we need the word/expression *self-respect*. The self in this context cannot be glorified, only respected or not. The word 'self' is a location identifier here; respect is for one and all. The germ of the intuition is in everyone and it can be developed further.

Jasbir Bhoda
Worthing



Going Green

John Pearson

How to begin what may be a one-off, or may be the first of a series of such articles? Where am I coming from, and what's this all about? Whilst my previous writings in *Sofia* establish some activist/Green Party credentials(*) I do not want this piece or its possible successors to be seen as speaking for any one political party or another. For climate change, and our responses – as individuals, communities and the wider world – the theme of this piece, should not be a partisan affair. Indeed, I suggest, the problems that we *all* face are made worse where one faction seeks almost to score points against another. The problem is a worldwide one. We in the UK, for example, should endeavour to reduce carbon emissions as much as possible as our contribution to a global solution, without making excuses for side-stepping the issue – proclaiming that 'We already do so much better than them' and so on.

For me, side-stepping, backtracking even, at the highest level is not just petty, but selfish and risky. It appears to me that both our own main political parties, (and so we as a nation), are gradually tweaking or even rowing back on previous targets, each party in their own way perhaps seeking an easily won popularity that might retain or win them power, as the case may be. Selfish – and playing with the risk that we shall fall way behind in meeting our own future targets, let alone those of the collective world. So, we have had public spats, party against party, about pollution charges (good or bad?); subsidies for electric cars or charging points (good or bad?). We have had licences granted for massive future oil extraction which seem strongly counter-intuitive (created by one party, opposed by some in politics but sanctioned by the 'opposition') and so on. Nuclear power is heralded by a number of players as an essential stop-gap, but is an extremely costly and long-term solution which engenders threats of a different and more indestructible pollution. Wind farms, offshore or onshore, solar panels and tidal generators are all treated as ping-pong balls, bouncing back and forth in popularity. For me, any of these last three would be better options than the above.

I have always seen carbon offsets as a cynical solution – a crime almost: covering one's own extremes by token gestures or trade-offs which scratch the surface but detract not a bit from the global doom with which some threaten us. Forget the token gestures, cut the carbon. Instead of coyly seeking to compensate for the two or three sun-seeking flights abroad each year which some of us may take we should be taking just one, one every two years maybe, and gradually weaning ourselves off non-business flying altogether. The cost to the climate would be far less were we to travel by train, whenever possible, and this can be achieved collectively and by far more persons, thanks to the Channel Tunnel, to most parts of the European continent and beyond. My own Grand Tour (*Sofia* 125) was accomplished with not a plane in sight, and afforded far more sights, sounds and memories than the two-hour flight from London to Florence could ever have.

As to what is happening in my own neck of the woods, the far North, I attended a public meeting recently, an update by the campaign group opposed to the proposed North East Incinerator. (First visited in *Sofia* 139.) It seems to be going ahead, notwithstanding the costs it will have for the wider community; the financial costs to the budgets of those Councils buying into it, paying for it. What becomes of the services they may have to cut to provide the funding? There are also the health costs to the communities within which it will be sited (due to polluting exhaust smoke etc.) and the crippling effect it could have on re-cycling alternatives. Councils will be less keen to champion and facilitate the latter – needing instead to find rubbish to fuel the incinerator – rubbish which will include the kind of waste that will increase the pollution still further.

Recent nationally and locally managed schemes (not least the now notorious HS2) suggest that construction costs on the above will be exceeded by the time completion is achieved, and could double? (As a former Quantity Surveyor myself I just do not see how one could

spend £350 million even, on a single industrial plant, essentially a large boiler house!). With even higher capital costs to recoup what will be the effect upon the finances of the rest of the local economy? How can this still be going ahead? The Outline Planning Approvals have been given. Only a very sound case against it will now prevail. Perhaps the worst case scenario is that this gets built and begins to operate. The second worst is that the scheme is abandoned once the £300 million has been half spent – money totally wasted which could have stayed within the region, enhancing existing services, recycling included. Possibly, the best is immediate cancellation, at the design stage, whilst the monies lost could still be relatively small.

Large scale projects such as the above, nationwide or worldwide may, sadly, be the make or break issues. However, we *all* have it in our power to act in good conscience as individuals, responsibly and appropriately, to conserve and, where possible, to renew resources – for the common good. Whilst many will not do the ‘right thing’, let the rest of us avoid the ‘We already do so much.’ We all have some measure of free will, so at a personal level, we can avoid paving over our front gardens, thus helping the eco-system, – we can re-cycle as many materials as possible, we can champion a world in which goods are repaired rather than replaced, we can embrace the move towards electric cars, we could make more use of public transport, cycling, walking. And if we must have cars then let’s share them.

Councils have a responsibility to provide improved and/or additional bus services, particularly in rural areas, if the rest of us, hardened car-users in some cases, are to be persuaded to abandon our trusty gas-guzzling steeds, or even electric. In facilitating the widespread move to electric vehicles this must not just encompass electric buses but establish many more publicly available charging points for cars. If need be, they should be given extra funding by Central Government so as be able to do this.

Climate change is one of those ‘What did you do in the War?’ type questions. It is said, with good cause, that we owe it to future generations to act responsibly, to slow down and, if possible, reverse the seemingly irreversible slide into world destruction. World destruction may



London plane trees greening the city.

seem an overly-dramatic forecast, but to some authors and activists, such as the redoubtable Greta Thunberg (arrested as I write this for her part in a ‘Stop Oil’ protest!), it is not. Most of us as we read this can take some relief from the fact that we survived Covid relatively unscathed – a worldwide crisis which killed nearly seven million people, 230,000 in the UK alone. But the potentially devastating effects of climate change will be less easy to counter; certainly there’s not the possible quick fix of an injection or two. Climate change, if not appropriately countered, could see the deaths, directly or indirectly, of billions. As this all kicks in we shall be challenged by our grandchildren, rightly: ‘What did you do about Climate Change, Granddad – plant a few extra trees and just got on with life?’

Whether we have particular political or religious beliefs and allegiances or none, we should lay all that aside. As noted, this should never be about us and them; everywhere, and everyone is ‘us’!

* *Vote Catching* (Sofia 120). *Talking Rubbish*, *Recycling* (Sofia 139). Book Review *The Climate Book* (Sofia 149)

Francis McDonagh reviews
Confounding the Mighty. Stories of Church, Social Class and Solidarity,
edited by Luke Lerner,
SCM Press (Norwich, 2023). 176 pages. £19.99.

This is a valuable collection of essays, not least because the various contributions, despite inevitable overlaps, complement each other by bringing out different aspects of the themes they discuss. There is in fact one underlying theme to the book, class or perhaps more accurately the class system embodied in the system of production in most of the world. The book focuses on the impact class has on the clergy of the Church of England, this hierarchy that ‘dare not speak its name’ at the top of which is ‘the model of “the white (English) middle-upper class Christian gentleman”’ as the ideal Anglican priest. It is tempting to label the book ‘theology from the council estate’, as many of the contributors make a point of saying that this was where they started life – indeed the editor, Fr Luke Lerner, maintains that he is still ‘a working class person’. Nonetheless this emphasis is simply part of the book’s aim to push back at the conventional image of the Anglican Church.

Ruth Harvey movingly describes the discrimination people from working class backgrounds can be exposed to. At a drinks party in her tutor’s rooms she is already feeling out of place when her tutor comes over and says: ‘I’ve been meaning to say, Ruth, I should change that accent if I were you. Nobody will take you seriously sounding like that.’ Another aspect of this attitude is the assumption that students from a working class background, once ordained, could only serve in working class areas. Eve Parker quotes such a student: ‘I had a tutor who told me I could only serve on estates because of the way I spoke and how I dressed.’

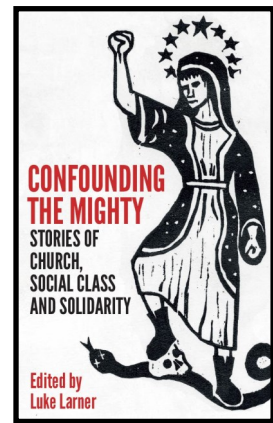
A particularly interesting example of class pressure is Victoria Turner’s examination of the history of the Iona Community. The Community, she says is probably best known today for its retreats on the Island of Iona, its Celtic spirituality and link to the land. The founder of the Community, George MacLeod, was from a privileged Edinburgh background, but became conscious of this privilege while serving in the First World War. After the war, having trained as a Church of Scotland minister, MacLeod was appointed minister in the Glasgow district of Govan, where 80% of the population were unemployed. The shock left MacLeod with a

‘hopeless depression’, and in 1933 he went on a trip to Palestine with his father in an attempt to recover.

Subsequently trainee ministers would spend summers on Iona alongside craftsmen, rebuilding the abbey. The rest of the year the trainee ministers would work in disadvantaged industrial parishes. Over time the focus of the Community shifted to young people with summer youth camps on the island, reaching their climax in the 1940s and 1950s.

In 1943 the Community received funding with which it set up a Youth Trust. As part of its work the trust set up a Community House in Glasgow which sought, says, Turner ‘to explore faith, politics and real-world issues through debate, fellowship and creativity’. A Community member said of it: ‘You had criminals, borstal boys, Divinity students, students from the university, people off the street for lunch. Everyone.’ The radical political climate in the immediate postwar period led to tensions with the funders and the wider Iona Community, and the Community House closed in 1977. In 1982 John Bell and Graham Maule set up a project known as Columban Houses, in which young people would train on Iona in the summer to live in communities on council estates to work with disadvantaged young people. This work too ended in the late 1980s.

A slogan Luke Lerner highlights is ‘not to mourn but organise’. Christian communities must not just think about social justice, but do something about it. This can mean working with trade unions, but what he sees as a more fruitful path for local churches is supporting trade union organisation, forming cooperatives and credit unions, and campaigning for a Real Living Wage. But there is a caveat, expressed by American pastor Dennis Jacobson: ‘Society is pleased to have the Church exhaust itself in being merciful towards the casualties of unjust systems.’ The ultimate aim is to change the systems.



reviews

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*.

Edward Nickell reviews *Experimenting with Religion: the New Science of Belief*

by Jonathan Jong

Oxford University Press (Oxford 2023) Hbk. 159 pages.

Why do people believe in gods, souls and rituals? The answers are trivial to some: either god has revealed it, or, this nonsense gets taught to children. People who are interested would hope that these questions can tell us about humanity. Rev. Jonathan Jong doesn't claim that experimental psychology has all the answers, but he explains how it can get us closer to them.

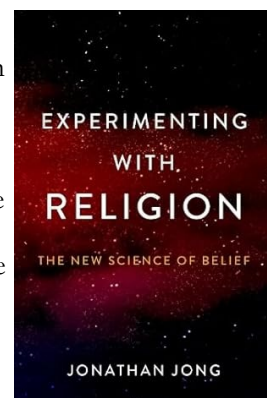
Jonathan Jong is an experimental psychologist and an Anglican priest in rural Chichester. He was previously an assistant priest at the very high church St Mary Magdalen in Oxford, where he is still editor of their 'School of Theology' website at www.theschooloftheology.org. Jonathan first converted to Christianity as a teenager in Malaysia, spending several years with Evangelical Methodists and at a Pentecostal church.

The book presents seven psychology experiments but describes many others in passing. One such highlight is an experiment which gave seminarians either psilocybin or a placebo before their Good Friday service. The 'shroomed' seminarians were more likely to report transcendent, ineffable experiences – but perhaps surprisingly, were no more likely to report experiencing the presence of God. I wonder if any *Sofia* readers have their own insights to offer here?

The topics of these experiments are summarised pithily in the chapter titles: Does thinking cause atheism? Are children creationists? Is God like Superman? Do children believe in souls? What does God know? What makes an effective ritual? And, Does death anxiety drive religion? When I opened the book, I was most looking forward to seeing the experiment results. I am the type of person who normally skips or at best skims the methodology section of a paper. By the time I closed it, I found I was just as fascinated by how the experiments were run.

Taking one question as an example: Are humans predisposed to think of the world 'teleologically' that is, as being designed or created? Working with doctors, I'm aware that knowing the science does not make teleological explanations disappear: 'the virus wants to hide', 'we have gut flora to help our digestion.'

The experimenters tested this in children, using a puppet that asked them questions about objects, people and animals, for example, 'What is the clock for? What is the mountain's peak for?' with children responding either that it was a 'silly question', offering an explanation, or that they didn't know. The experiment has been adapted and repeated: in different countries, with adults, with scientists, asking in different ways and under time pressure.



reviews

Children often gave teleological explanations to natural objects (60% of the time) as well as biological parts and human-made items (80%). Adults were a bit better, but still offered animals and natural objects functional explanations 30-40% of the time. Scientists were better again, but even they, under time pressure, would slip up on 30% of answers. People in less religious countries seemed a bit less inclined to teleological answers, but the effect was still there. As with all the experiments in this book, the results pose their own questions. If humans instinctively see the world as created, is that why we then imagine a creator? Is the experiment right, would we get the same results if we ran it again?

This last question runs throughout this book, because the field of experimental psychology has been undergoing its own crisis of faith: 'the replicability crisis'. Over the past decade, attempts to replicate the most famous psychological experiments have failed to produce the same results, calling the original findings into question. Jong delves into these problems throughout the book but without leaving the reader discouraged. There is serious work to be done, but we shouldn't give up on psychological understanding entirely.

According to Jong, it isn't just the psychologists who have work to do, but all of us. While physicists can tell us about observations and theories about the universe, and psychologists can tell us what they observe about the mind – we can't 'outsource' the work of interpreting these deliverances of science. We all must dabble in philosophy to work out what the science means for our own world view.

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

David Lambourn reviews
The Covid Pandemic and the World's Religions: Challenges and Responses

George D Chryssides
and Dan Cohn–Sherbok (editors)
Bloomsbury Academic (London, 2023). 256 pages. £16.99.

I have learned much from this book – much that I ought to have learned long ago. It will be of particular interest for those with an interest in inter–faith matters. There are two voices from each of the following religious groups: Judaism, Catholic and Protestant Churches, Islam, Hindu, Buddhism, Shinto, Sikh, Baha'i, Jain, African Traditional Religion, Zoroastrian, Unitarian, Jehovah's Witness, and Christian Science. It was a personal disappointment to me that Quakers were not included.

The contributors were asked to face five questions:

1. How does your faith explain why such events occur?
2. How has it affected your religious practices?
3. What changes has it necessitated?
4. What differences might we expect once the pandemic is over?
5. What have we learned from it?

Helpfully, there is an early section which offers a short biographical introduction to each of the contributors, together with a table of the acronyms used. The first chapter is a 'setting-the-scene' chapter, giving a brief historical sketch of the relation of religions to plagues over a period of some three millennia. It is couched in a vocabulary which does not encourage any search behind the questions and responses which make up the rest of the book. The perspective thus described is a traditional one: the world is one which 'we have been given', not one of which we are a part. But it also makes a telling comparison by asking the difference between pandemics and global warming, which latter 'should be comparatively simple to address because we ought to know both that it is our collective fault and that we have the means to cure it, scientifically if not yet politically.'

What emerges is a number of stories giving the reader a variety of pictures which in turn are then available for further questioning. The editors have, so to speak, collected the data of their research and have made it available for us, the readers. A final chapter summarises the contributions and, except for some minor points, the editors have not told us what we ought to conclude – they have treated us as adults

who are able to ask our own questions and form our own conclusions.

There are a number of common themes about practice and unsurprisingly, there is also a common theological theme

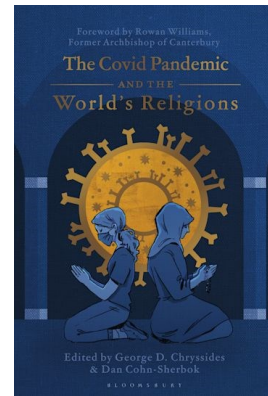
– that of theodicy, the attempt to justify belief in an all powerful god who will allow such plagues and pandemics. This immediately reminded me of the most recent book I reviewed in these pages: *Unknowing God* by Linda Woodhead and Nicholas Peter Harvey, which takes a radical look at what they term as the 'omni-god', an examination which contrasts sharply with the introductory chapter of the present book.

Rowan Williams' foreword refers to the contrast between the liberty of individuals to dispose of the stuff of this world and the wisdom required for a collaborative attempt to strengthen one another's security. He continues: 'The pandemic mercilessly exposed the different levels of vulnerability experienced by different sorts of community, with those already disadvantaged often bearing the heaviest loads. For many, it was an eye-opener as to the gross inequalities running through supposedly advanced societies, showing clearly how power was gained and perpetuated by some at the expense of others, and how the poorest regularly pay most in our transactions.'

Although the introductory chapter points out that the Covid pandemic has been a matter of worldwide concern, identifying 'the sheer numbers involved, the political difficulties, the failure to take warnings to heart and the rush to provide vaccinations and other preventive measures', it does not consider any possibility of change within any religion, nor the possibility of changed relationships between religions, and that in spite of the commonalities which have emerged.

A friend has pointed out that the Covid pandemic is perhaps the first occasion when all religious groups have faced a common experience and that this might provide a unique opportunity to reconsider the relations between them and their shared roles in gaining what is to be learned. This book, read with power in mind, would support such an opportunity.

David Lambourn is SOF Network Treasurer.



reviews

Dominic Kirkham reviews
Reconfiguring
A Collection of Post-Christian
Thoughts and Theologies

by Maria Francesca French
Quoir (USA, 2023). 229 pages. £15.65.

This book of writings follows on from the author's previous best-selling study of radical theology, *Safer than the Known Way*. The book's 40 brief chapters are an exploration of further aspects of radical theology and have no overall cohesion other than to provide 'a theological imagination for the future' that addresses a whole range of cultural and religious issues. These varied tentative and personal reflections - often accompanied by reference to the work of some distinguished theologian or thinker - have been written over a period of two years (2021-2023) during which the author triangulated life between various locations in the USA, England and France.

The reflections are generally acute and well-informed, and her scriptural knowledge is impressive. For example, an early chapter on Hell (Ch 2) puts us right about the difference between Sheol, Gehenna, Hades and The Abyss.

However, the author's favourite theme is, 'that life is worth living' (Ch 31). 'Rather than believing some big Other in the sky is working it all out for us, we now have to accept agency and responsibility for ourselves' (Ch. 40). The key question is not whether a religion may or may not be true, but what kind of transformation can we bring, what sort of intention and purpose will we bring with us in our work of exploration. (Ch.39)

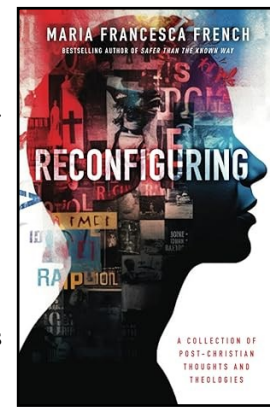
The general tenor of the work is that of a faith journey, revisiting and 'reconfiguring' previous convictions and topics with the benefit of a deeper, later understanding. Knowledge is seen as evolutionary: 'It is about being humble enough to know that your first experience isn't the ultimate one.' Thus theology is a constantly moving target led by faith and when we lose our religious imagination for what could be true our theologies become too systematized, even sterile. (Ch 31)

A subject of particular interest to the author is language. The word 'god' is assumed to have a clear meaning understood by all, but that is clearly not the case. She asks, 'Why is it that it seems acceptable for

everything to change except the language to describe what is indescribable?' Here she follows Carl Raschke's call for a radically new kind of thinking, 'what heretofore has been 'unthought'.' The *unthought* is something neither rational nor irrational, but 'the 'undergoing' of an 'experience with language,' in so far as language 'befalls us, strikes us... transforms us.' (Ch 32). This deconstructionist, or apophatic, approach reminded me of the medieval mystical work, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, though this is not referenced.

Towards the end of the book French writes of the post-Christian milieu, 'Our reality has been fundamentally changed forever. We can never go back to the way things were.' In the light of such a 'deficit' the essential for her is, 'What do I do with this deficit?' She insists the best response to our new situation would be just to *rest*: 'we need to sit in the emptiness and just be.' (Ch. 40) We need to learn more about ourselves and our desires rather than the ones a specific type of 'God' wanted for us. It means to engage life in all its glorious complexity and accept responsibility for ourselves.

The book concludes with the author's account of a trip to the Catholic parish church where she grew up - before she moved on to Evangelical and Post-Evangelical phases of her life. Showing up in the middle of the day she expected to find the church to be open, but it was locked. This spoke of a changed era no longer a time when one could expect churches to be open just to call in for a moment's reflection or solace. If religion has now become more of a marginal pursuit, no longer at the focus of human concourse, one wonders if radical theology is capable of filling the resulting gap or providing the consolation for which people have long turned to religion. Or is it just a new form of Gnosticism?



reviews

Robert Boucnik reviews

(Un)certain

by Olivia Jackson

SCM Press (Norwich 2023). 256 pages. £19.99.

'Uncertain' is a collection of explanations from ex-believers for their loss of faith. Each individual deconstruction of faith is taken from a survey designed to reveal the various triggers that cause a certain type of faith to be questioned and/or rejected. The survey is dominated by the American, Evangelical community so although the focus is coherent it may be a bit narrow. What repeats is how serious emotional or psychological issues are dealt with in this community, either by church leaders or church goers.

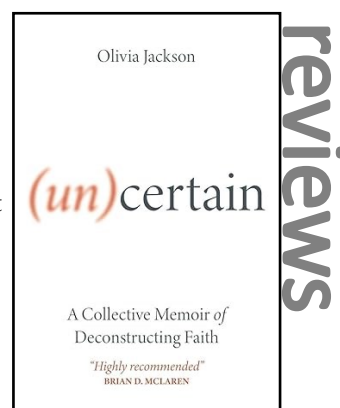
There is negligible mature, open-minded support, instead an exhortation to accept the caprice of a providential God. All events are God's will, part of the grand design or natural order, so remedies require appeasement to God. This explains how a mother who had been up all night with her child in a hospital ward was asked by a local Church leader, 'did you take communion?', how a missionary suffering from PTSD was asked by a senior leader, 'is there sin in your life?' and autism, trauma symptoms and even sexually abused children are frequently treated by having their demons prayed out. All problems and misfortune, whatever their nature, are put down to a mixture of lack of faith, not praying hard enough or innate sinfulness.

It is strikingly clear that the God that rules in these fundamentalist circles is very much the God of providence, who ultimately provides no help at all, and when this becomes clear faith breaks down. But other things also trigger deconstruction. The 'male God' is addressed in one chapter, and how this affects not only perceived gender roles, but how it allows the perception of women as Eve-like temptresses to persist. This false masculinity is a basis which leads to women being blamed for arousing the animal in men, the responsibility lies with women not to provoke a bestial response, as explained by *Austin*: 'I often feel that women have to bear the shame that men are feeling...'. There are many examples of homophobia, class snobbery and a racism rooted in the colonial aspect of missionary work, all of which culminated in the recent widespread support for Donald Trump in the Evangelical community. Many of these deconstruction stories repeat that the believers and the missionaries are basically good-hearted or well-meaning, although the ultra-conservative nature of much of the politics within these circles is driving more people away. One individual who contrasted the

pacifistic, harmonious aspects of Christianity with the 'Christian soldier' archetype was told, 'You're not a Christian anymore.'

The book juxtaposes brief extracts from the ex-believers' stories with personal commentary from the author who underwent her own deconstruction. The extracts are revealing and interesting, although the same point is sometimes made over and over again, and although there is extra breadth and depth in the author's comments there could have been more exploration of the causes of fundamentalism, both the credulousness of the followers and the sense of entitlement and exceptionalism of the followed. The psychology and emotions of all who have deconstructed are treated with sympathy and consideration, but there is relatively little space devoted both to the people they are escaping from and to what degree these issues of control and shaming exist in other fields, such as politics or the daily workplace. However, the lay out of the book gives the narrative to the interviewees rather than the interviewer – a commendable aim.

The first part of the book addresses how and why people left their Church and/or faith. The second part looks at the stumbling blocks to deconstruction, and the conclusion shows the new individual paths ex-believers took to reconstruct. It is here that the book makes its most telling points. One person found spiritual paths truer to their spirit in Buddhism and shamanism: 'The Church is trying to hold onto something they don't really own or hold.' Each journey leaves behind a prescribed, personal, judgemental God of definite answers, and is replaced by a respect for each individual spiritual journey and a space where questioning is welcomed. God as mind becomes a God who lies somewhere between entity and concept. Margaret from Canada summed up the book's message: 'I hope we're doing more sitting round the table, breaking bread together and seeing each other's humanity first and not each other's ideologies or politics.' Though the book may focus too narrowly on the US Evangelical Church, the tales are at times both harrowing and inspiring, and highlight the need for forums where spirituality can be discussed freely and without fear or shame.



reviews

Robert Boucnik is a Maths teacher from Hastings.

A Penn'orth

Penny Mawdsley says Inner Lives Matter

In the same way as 9/11 has become a 21st century memorable date for the West – and to many areas beyond it, and 7/7 has become another, especially for Londoners, 7/10/23 in our British calendar will be a date that not only the Israeli nation but the Jewish diaspora beyond it will not forget. As for millions of others around the world the current horrific happenings in the Middle East, unfolding with frightening rapidity as I have been putting this piece together and threatening to involve other nations in conflict, this overwhelming international crisis is uppermost in my mind for its many likely ramifications into the other major areas of current world concern. But here in my ‘penn’orth’ I want to look briefly at how we value and nourish our individual inner or spiritual lives.

In the February/March 2023 issue of *Philosophy Now*, when the war in Ukraine had not yet dropped to its lower position as a British news item, I came across an article in English by Maryna Lazareva, an associate professor and Head of the Department of Humanitarian Education at Lviv National Environmental University. It was a cautiously optimistic take, clearly written before the Ukrainian conflict, on how Western lives had actually been improved in some significant respects since the coronavirus pandemic, when many people in the West had come to realise how their inner lives had deteriorated over recent decades without them noticing it.

The article, ‘Virtual Disillusion’, recounts the numerous ways that the ever-increasing pace of Western life, albeit starting before the year 2000, has meant for many people – and not just urban dwellers or youth – among other things, an increased disassociation with the natural world, and a life where traditional social bonds – between generations, within wider families, in the workplace, and in the local community – have further and further fragmented, to the detriment of healthy human relationships and the functioning of societies. Lazareva picked up a partial recovery from this trend in the Ukraine, as the strict ‘lockdown’ of society there lifted, a partial recovery that some of us recognised here too, where many people were desperate to socialise in various ways and return to the workplace, for example, rather than work from home, and to get out into nature, exercising in the



Friends with mobile phones. commons.wikimedia.org/

open air. But I, like Lazareva, would argue that our society as a whole still has a lot more to recover from as far as its inner or spiritual life is concerned.

One of the questions we need to ask ourselves, I would suggest, concerns our regard for ‘performance’ to those we value in our lives, and by whom we, in turn, wish to be valued. This may not extend far beyond the family, but for many it is the peer group (not just for teenagers), work colleagues, fellow retirees, or various members of community ‘WhatsApp’ groups or those circulated with the annual ‘round robin’ seasonal letter. For those who slavishly use one of the many social media groups to daily exchange ideas or photos, some folk clearly spend excessive time on them. Why has this behaviour become so compelling and important, and what would the time they now spend on this have previously been spent? This is not to decry many of the uses of social media, like the excellent ‘marketplace’ for encouraging the re-use of discarded items by others.

For many, every life event has now become an essential shared snap as part of the competitive fairytale dream to show one ‘has a life’. ‘Keeping up with the Joneses’ has reached new levels, often behind the scenes causing considerable and unnecessary financial distress for those who have lost sight of what really matters in life. Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) recognised in his 1927 *Being and Time* that people frequently chase the wrong values. Instead of ‘feeling their own being’, focusing on their own inner self, they dissolve into the absurdity of the public world, and dissociate themselves from all thoughts that can disturb their peace, including the existential ones of death, despair and loneliness. They need to face up to these things, rather than disappearing more comfortably into the virtual world. Have we room for improvement ourselves?



The Tree of Life in the New Jerusalem