sfia

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Water

Sofia
down to Earth

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Front cover image: Boating Lake, Regent's Park, London, photo by the Editor.
Back cover image: River Jordan, postcard by Kerimeh Abbud. commons.wikimedia.org.

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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.

Water

The title of this *Sofia* is *Water*, which is the chief component of human bodies and indispensable for all life on Earth. With climate change there is a risk of water shortage. As John Pearson writes in his *Going Green* column: 'On a global scale water systems have become stressed. Rivers, lakes and aquifers are drying up or becoming too polluted to use. In the UK we are beset by tales of excessive loss through poor maintenance, sewage leaks into watercourses and the like.'

A recent BBC programme reported that Uruguay is suffering its worst drought in 74 years and water shortages are so severe that a state of emergency has been declared; the authorities have started adding sea water to the public drinking water supplies. This has prompted widespread protests, in particular against the plan to build a Google data centre that will use millions of litres of water a day. Critics claim that the government is prioritising water for transnationals and agribusiness at the expense of its own citizens.

In Britain there were strong protests against prime minister Margaret Thatcher's plan to privatise water in the 1980s. Nevertheless, the privatisation went ahead and now our water is dispensed by private companies with a profit motive. Recently there have been reports of sewage seeping into the tap water.

In this *Sofia*, Edwin Salter writes about water 'Streaming Towards'. Next Tony Windross writes about baptism, saying 'to refuse to baptise a child (or to place such obstacles in the way, that it amounts in practice to the same thing) is bound to seem like a rejection – which of course it is.' In his *Summa* Thomas Aquinas replies to the objection that because baptism is such a noble sacrament why don't we baptise with wine instead of water, by saying that water is better for washing (wine is for drinking!). Dominic Kirkham writes on the significance of the crucifix and how the encounter with the Norse gods changed Christianity and created Christendom.

Below this editorial you will see a notice of SOF Network's annual Day Conference entitled *Faith for Now – Looking Back, Looking Forward* with speakers Anthony Freemen, Tony Windross and Linda Woodhead. There will also be opportunities for discussion. The notice gives details of how to enrol for it. We hope that plenty of people will come and it will be a splendid day.

SOF DAY CONFERENCE

FAITH FOR NOW: LOOKING BACK, FACING FORWARD

Speakers

Anthony Freeman

Member and Anglican Priest, who was dismissed in 1994 following his association with the Network and its thinking

Tony Windross

Member and Anglican priest, writer and popular speaker at Conference for many years

Linda Woodhead

Professor and Head of Theology and Religious Studies at Kings College London one-time student of Don Cupitt

10am-4pm on Saturday 20th July 2024

at St Johns Church, Waterloo Road, London SE1 8TY

Please pay in advance if possible. Cost for the day is £20.
The preferred method of payment is by bank transfer to:
'Sea of Faith', Sort code 30-94-74; a/c 5599260.
Reference: Your name + Conference
Or cheques payable to 'Sea of Faith' should be sent to
Stephen Williams, 157 Russell Road, Birmingham B13 8RR.

Streaming Toward

Edwin Salter

The unending change of our experience of life in the world is exactly caught by the observation of Heraclitus, the unrepeatable step into a stream. Of the ancient elements it is water that exemplifies fluidity. Of course transitions of state – solid, liquid, gas, plasma – are now very familiar, but for most of the history of human beings it is only water, including solutions and suspensions, that has been the familiar fluid. Aristotle is not clear as to his teleological reason why rain falls, but it is not as for theists who may give thanks for this boon because life is so utterly dependent upon water, our own bodies necessarily converting the pure to the contaminated.

Rain falls and rivers flow down: it might seem as though the purpose is to achieve stillness, repose without any striving. Perhaps part of the difficulty with imagining heaven is its perpetual perfection. The rewards of human life include helping others who have need, overcoming a personal limitation, sometimes hearing good news: but none of these can apply. (Alas, I imagine dementia, smiling without particular reason, the preceding smiles quite forgotten.)

The movement of water creates effects such as obvious erosion on land and beautifully curving anatomical features of living structures. The earliest indications that our planet was not created just as we see it but had an extensive history included ancient drainage patterns, multiple layers of sedimentary rocks and their sometimes remarkable subsequent curvature, rocks with intrusive filling of cracks. (Omphalos and Creationist thinking implies this evidence to be a curiously motivated disguise)

Early (18th century) geologists disputed the processes of change, Neptunists emphasising water and Plutonists fire, sedimentation and vulcanism. The biblical estimate (as Usher's 4004 BC)) of the age of our planet had only to seem beyond refute by any human record then available, and scientific estimates have increased from many thousands, to millions and finally billions (about 4,500M) of years.

We are currently only too aware that the present is no stable state, and that anthropogenic climate change (clear evidence long denied) may easily inflict change to match long ago extremes on our now vast human population. Fresh water becomes scarcer as glaciers and rivers redistribute to oceans and atmosphere.

Water droplets, themselves tending to spherical perfection (in zero gravity held thus by surface tension), provide the many shapes of clouds and make visible the fluidity of air. A calm surface of water in bulk is exactly horizontal and when dark beneath provided the first mirror. Disturbance of a water surface creates waves, varying in force from slight ripples to tsunami, that if unobstructed spread in circles all around. Waves have become crucial to scientific understanding but atomic theories, as of Democritus, Newton and Dalton, long dominated as sufficient explanations of mechanics and chemistry. A beam of light is very plausibly a stream of particles and refraction by a prism perhaps merely sorts them into colours: a rainbow is created by raindrops that reflect and refract sunlight back towards us. But diffraction, creating patterns like those of interacting ripples, supported the wave theory of Huygens.

The biblical flood, God's recognition of failure and condemnation of all except Noah, was followed by the covenant, the rainbow as the divine sign, and dramatically divides time into epochs, separating off the antediluvial period of Adamic patriarchs. Our human ancestors in Africa perhaps noted the yearly seasons by rain rather that our winter-summer and solstices. Sun and Moon create the periodicities of day, month and tides. When societies became more complex the need for timed activity, practical and ritual, developed and the water clock first served purpose.

As self-aware mortal beings we are only too conscious that time is directional. Living

organisms are small triumphs of organisation that inevitably fall apart into disorder just as heat disperses and entropy increases. Time was an independent concept along with mass, space and charge and these sufficed until the end of the nineteenth century. Then, rather dreadfully, came relativity. Mass, energy, and speed which is time and space, became interwoven by Einstein ($E = mc^2$ where c is the speed of light, so very little mass can become immense energy by an atomic fusion in the sun). Worse still, gravity becomes understood as a curvature of space-time that even bends light (confirmed when Mercury seemed shifted because its light was bent by the sun's gravity).

We generally expect the natural world around us to remain familiar through our short life spans and that any change will be slow and gradual rather like drawing an even graph line on paper. Neither sudden transitions nor chaotic states seem believable. But imagine the paper folds and curves so that the line can cross itself and the path can jump catastrophically. Or imagine a mathematical formula such that very tiny changes in one variable causes the overall value to leap about chaotically.

Is human life generally an experience that pleases us? If we were too susceptible to despair natural selection would have eliminated us. The religious faiths generally attempt good practical advice for their communities to survive and prosper. Added is the greatest of motivations, assurance (known only by revelation and so irrefutable) of an unending happiness, a heaven. The purpose of faith is to carry us, even through a night of doubt and sorrow, flowing onward.

Without such faith we can merely do our best and hope for some progress. The measures of economics and technology have little connection with natural values and both our physiology and our psychology are easily deceived: current wars, obesity levels and conspiracy theories illustrate our tendency toward disaster, darkly the Freudian drive of Thanatos. The arts seem more hopeful clues to the archetypes of humanity. Movement is inextricable from human life and expression, and dance provides examples.

Dancer Isadora Duncan. Image: kids.britannica.com

In places of worship, the processions and the gestures of the priest have the calm steady flow of certainty. Compare the curved arches and domes with decorative art motifs – Celtic to Nouveau – and contrast the cuboid practicality of a factory or the uniformity of a housing estate. Similarly, almost every great ceremony is a work of choreography. Community 'folk' dance ranges from a winding common path to intricate individual weavings. Movement is also 'impressive' and affects our thought and feeling (from the Sufi to dance therapy) but its importance may be exterior, addressing the spirits that explain and control our world. So rain dances may include mimetic elements to stimulate, even coerce, by magic. Theatre dance becomes a creative art but, conditioned by its setting and institutions, ballet arrived at a fixed vocabulary.

Then, about a century ago, there was a rediscovery of natural fluidity exemplified by the freedom of Isadora Duncan and the dynamic and spatial vision of Laban. Similar influences are clear in painting (Matisse, Kupka) and organic

architecture (Wright).

Spiritual proposals such as anthroposophy (Schwenk particularly celebrated the flow forms of water) flourished around the same time and prompted movement study and practice such as the sacred dances of Gurdjieff. In the psychology of Jung the oceans symbolise the boundless unconscious, rivers the directedness of the psyche, and true art escapes the limitation of the personal.

By odd coincidence, about the same time the wave began to triumph over the particle in science. Alpha-particles diffracted, electrons became probabilistic orbitals, the light spectrum was explained as electro-magnetic radiation, sine waves, that extended from X-rays to radio waves. Then on from wave equations to arrive at a quantum mechanics that (Feynman) nobody really understands.

Not least problematic, the mathematics of curved space-time may permit time travel, though Hawking trusted that there would be found some principle of temporal conservation. For continuity, it were best if any visitors from the future already know about their trip and its findings: but consider them returning to their future. Most profoundly mysterious is the apartness of God from time (my imagination again fails at creating unsatisfactory mankind, not to mention an entire physical universe, surely a strange experiment).

In religious texts such as the Bible, human aspirations and desires, good and bad, are ascribed both to persons and, more dramatically, to gods. Perhaps the divine end of time that is utterly apocalyptic is an intuition of our unconscious potential for destruction? We stream on.

Edwin Salter lives in King's Lynn and has worked in diverse fields including dance and psychotherapy, biochemistry and education, with recent writings on language, humanism and climate.

The Lesson of the Rain

When rain comes on, I get up and look out.
It is a spectacle, a miracle,
a blessing not in wise disguise at all.
I hear it first, soft patter as drops hit

the leaves of tall green trees, metal of cars,
touch every inch of pavement, tarmac, grass.
It starts to fall, keeps at it, comes to pass
in tiny particles of water. Stars

are not so close and local. Watch a patch
get wetter by the minute. Rain is certain
to draw its grey dense sheet across – curtain
of gloom, well known, a gentle pall. I catch

one raindrop, bring my arm back in, housebound
as drains sound musical, full of that stuff,
near vertical, sent down. It eases off.
I go back to my book, the whole day crowned

by ordinary rain, fleeting, complete.
Its course is not competing, falls and flows
till ground is drowned, as only nature knows.
It comes and goes. It makes me leave my seat

like gospel convert, caught up in the word
or football fan when well aimed ball goes in
or dancer with the answer set to spin
quick feet. I want to see what I have heard

to witness wetness, sustained pattern, slant,
velocity and saturation, get
the quality of it, as a poet
which goes deep, to the roots of tree and plant,

or sonic power to enchant. How rain
is not a sprawling symphony of noise,
maintains its austere form, its harpist's poise,
its stanzas regular. Rain keeps it plain.

I want to get up from my seat again.

Jeremy Peyton

Baptism

Tony Windross

I've long treasured the story of a young mother who'd moved to a new area, and took her little girl to the local church for the first time. They were met at the door by the Welcomer (sic) who pointed to the girl and said 'if *that* makes a noise – take it out!' What happened next is anyone's guess, and the story itself may be apocryphal. But (like all true stories) that doesn't matter. It's got the ring of authenticity, and I've certainly come across a number of church Welcomers just like that. It's the sort of thing the Church (and by that, I mean the Church of England, as I've little experience of the others) often does very effectively – by making it clear to those outside the club, that that's precisely where they are.

The way into the club is (of course) by baptism, but like all exclusive organisations, membership isn't something dished out lightly. For a child to be allowed to join, the parents may need to clock up a certain number of attendances at church services, followed by some classes, followed by an interview to establish the nature and depth of their personal faith. If those hurdles are successfully surmounted, the baptism service itself involves making a series of declarations and promises, each of which is a theological minefield. Only the truly committed are likely to get through – which is (of course) the whole point. It's something Basil Fawlty would have thoroughly approved of, as there is (in effect) a *No Riff Raff* sign outside each church. Or at least, outside the churches of true believers. Because it's those with the clearest (and fiercest) faith, who are the most insistent on doctrinal purity. And are the furthest from the old-fashioned idea (still enshrined in canon law) that baptism is available to anyone who lives in the parish – free of charge and no questions asked.

But the days have long gone when the normal thing was to 'get the baby done'. Partly because most people have long since lost interest in the Church; and partly because the Church has long since lost interest in most people. In 1982, there were 260,000 baptisms. In 2002 there were 160,000. And in 2022, 80,000. Only 8% of babies are baptised now, compared to 75% a century ago.

But there's nothing remotely surprising about this, given the way the Church, instead of welcoming the chance to be part of people's lives by recognising and sharing their joy, now tends to see the involvement of those outside the club on such occasions as (at best) 'mission opportunities'. And because that means there's always an agenda for 'making disciples', the religious integrity of the whole thing is sullied.

The problem (and it *is* a real problem) is that because religion is a way of responding to the most serious things there are, it's important (to those who find it important), that people take it seriously. But because many (maybe most?) of those seeking baptism for their children have no apparent interest in religion, almost by definition that implies they *don't* find it important. And if they don't find religion (and the things it deals with) important, it's not at all obvious (to put it mildly) how they *can* take baptism seriously. So maybe the Church is right *not* to offer Baptism indiscriminately?

To anyone who wants the Church to be as open and as welcoming and as available to as many people as possible, this very much goes against the grain. So is there any way to square this particular circle? To refuse to baptise a child (or to place such obstacles in the way, that it amounts in practice to the same thing) is bound to seem like a rejection – which of course it is. And one that is guaranteed to cause pain and anger on the part of the rejected family – together with a determination never to have anything to do with the Church at any point in the future.

Any religion worth bothering with, needs to take every opportunity to affirm and to celebrate. And the birth of a baby is *so* amazing, that the Church should surely jump at the chance to be involved. Religion is what people turn to at significant moments, even those who normally have no time for it. And because there really *is* nothing more special or more precious than human life, the arrival of a baby needs celebrating with all the stops pulled out.

The baptismal liturgy, with its special (and strange) words and actions, taking place within the special building that is (in principle, anyway) at the heart of the community, and where (in principle, anyway) all the Big Events of human life are marked, gives the occasion a dignity and a gravitas – that cannot be remotely replicated by simply having a family party in a room at the back of a pub. A celebration like that *is* important, because families really matter. But without a liturgical 'grounding' of some sort, it means the occasion is a lot less momentous than it could be.

Human beings are meaning-seeking creatures, and all our rituals are ways of finding (or imposing) meaning and value on ordinary (but in every case, always unique) life-events. The baptism service is a means of giving thanks for the birth of the child, and the safe delivery of the mother. It can be seen as a way of holding the child before God in awe and wonder – together with deep gratitude. And because (as non-realists are well aware) this can all be done without having to believe in any kind of external deity – that may be a way out of the difficulty.

If the basis of one's faith is a realist God (and all that follows, in terms of dogma and doctrine) then anyone with a different conception of God (or indeed, no conception at all) is very clearly not a member (or even a potential member) of your particular club. And until and unless s/he passes the tests for admission, there's no reason to let them in (and indeed every reason, on grounds of doctrinal purity, to keep them out). But if one's faith is far more open, far more plastic, far more flexible, with no rules around (or about) belief, then the idea of imposing some sort of restrictive entry test on others is both offensive and absurd. The only thing that matters, is that those looking to become members (or simply very loose affiliates!) have a genuine willingness to take it seriously.

And out of all the many baptisms I've had the privilege of taking (the vast majority involving non-churchgoing families), there's not been a single occasion when I had the sense that those involved were taking it flippantly. Whatever their religious inclinations or intentions, they were all deeply involved in the specialness (= holiness) of the occasion, with the baby at the centre of it lavished with the love and attention that is the right of every single human being.

Baptism needn't (and, I would argue, shouldn't) involve some sort of test of doctrinal orthodoxy. There's something both depressing and unhealthy about the way so many clergy seem to relish their role of gatekeepers for Jesus, as if the gospel message needs bouncers in attendance to make sure it doesn't get watered down or contaminated. But of course if their religious world view is based (as in many cases it certainly is) on a more or less literal reading of the bible, which translates into a confidence that feels able (and more than willing) to make clear pronouncements about the nature of God and all that follows from that, then they will be unable (and it really *is* unable, rather than simply unwilling) to carry out a baptism in good faith, if the adults involved don't share the same kind of world view. Which means that such clergy may not be being wilfully awkward, so much as prisoners of their theology.

In his *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein famously talked about how many philosophical problems are the result of people 'being held captive by a picture', with the result that they live in a kind of mental prison, a bit like the way a fly buzzes and buzzes around a fly-bottle, banging against the side. He saw it as his job to 'show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle', and whilst it's a matter of debate among philosophers as to how far he succeeded, it's worth thinking about whether the analogy can be applied to theology.

Because inevitably we've all got some sort of 'theological picture' that we live inside, some sort of mental construct that enables us to make sense of the world. But what if it actually functions as a prison? What if all we're doing is buzzing and

buzzing around inside it, banging against its transparent side forever? The question needs raising – not least because it reminds us that ours isn't (and can never be) the only theological game in town. Which is an idea that will (surely?) come relatively easily to non-realists, who will (or should) be a great deal less dogmatic about their theology than any realist is likely to be.

A more relaxed theology is going to mean a more relaxed approach to Baptism. Not in a completely indiscriminate 'anything goes' kind of way, but in the sense that there doesn't need to be any kind of theological enquiry made of the parents. Simply a sense that they are approaching it in a seemly and serious manner. It's this idea of there being a variety of different but equally legitimate ways of thinking about Baptism, that is *so* threatening to *so* many in the Church, whose default theological position is the cause of *so* many pastoral problems, when they turn away those who don't measure up theologically.

Font in St Brendan's Church, County Offaly, Ireland
Image: holyart.co.uk

Because we can't ever 'see' our own theological picture (as we're all the time living inside it) there's no way we can ever know if it's 'true', in terms of how closely it conforms to reality. So we need to give up on any claim to have found 'the truth' (in the sense of apprehending the nature of Ultimate Reality), and simply think of our personal theological picture as a story we tell ourselves about the way things are – whilst allowing for the distinct possibility that one day we might come across another story we find more persuasive.

Only those completely convinced about the veracity of their theological picture, will feel entitled (= obliged) to stand in judgement on the theological pictures of others. But because more and more of those in positions of authority in the Church *do* seem to have such supreme self-belief and self-confidence, a hardline approach to Baptism is fast becoming the norm. Fewer and fewer non-churchgoing people are interested in having their baby baptised, at precisely the same time that fewer and fewer clergy are prepared to carry out such baptisms. With the result being the precipitous decline in baptism numbers noted earlier. The Church is fast becoming a less and less welcoming place to more and more people. A place where 'clear teaching' is prized above all else. A place where questions that have taxed the greatest minds across the ages, find an off-the-shelf answer.

The degree of openness and generosity with which an individual church responds to Baptism enquiries, is as good a guide as any to the degree of openness and generosity with which it's likely to respond to the Big Questions of theology. Open Baptism and Open Theology go hand in hand – and each is now an endangered species. The insidious Alpha courses (with their all-smiling, pre-packaged answers to effectively everything) are the theological equivalent of Japanese knotweed, springing up everywhere, and undermining the long-cherished idea of the Church being freely available to all. Now it's well on the way to being about as open to everyone as the Ritz – and costing an awful lot more.

Afresh! Afresh! Afresh!

Frank Walker

Most days I take a circular walk round the village. I pause at the church-yard, sit on a bench and practise my morning meditation. Before me are rows of graves, many beautifully tended. I scan names and dates, soon aware that I have lived longer than most of these lovingly remembered villagers: a sobering thought. I have also been present when friends have been laid to rest here in this same good earth.

There is great sadness sometimes recorded on the gravestones, of children and youths who died much too young. There are also a few centenarians. This is serious earth, but ultimately its mood is not melancholy. The presence of scores of trees hundreds of years old makes this a place of life. They have lived through many wars, pandemics, disasters, revolutions, economic failures and depressions. They have asserted their own vitality, outlasting so many human generations. Harming no one, unhesitatingly they carry on their great work of freshening and purifying the air we all breathe. Every springtime they burst out in fresh green and then blaze with their beautiful flowers and later their glorious autumn colouring.

Apparently, so scientists now tell us, trees can communicate with one another through their intricate root systems. Left alone they will renew themselves. Truly they will never desert their post and every spring will cheer us with their ever-reliable resurrection: they 'come afresh, afresh, afresh!' Simply to sit among these trees is a blessing, a moment of joy.

Trees constitute one of the greatest and most lasting religious symbols, not confined to any one religion, and still inspiring to those who say they have no religion. Whatever you believe or don't believe, they shout, 'Life! Life! More Life!' and we are all the better for them. My meditation is very basic, simple, straightforward. I begin with the prayer attributed to Jesus, the Lord's Prayer. I learned it a long life-time ago and it instinctively speaks itself. It is ancient, brief, springing directly from the human heart. It has been uttered by billions throughout the centuries and still by billions today. It joins me to a vast assembly who cry out in their deepest human need. Because it can do that, I welcome it. I do not find it sectarian or out of date. We shall always need our daily bread and deliverance from evil.

All the same, I can understand why some are critical of some aspects of this prayer. Isn't it sexist in picturing 'God' as a male parent in an imaginary supernatural setting? (But remember, even Pope John Paul II, most conservative Catholic that he was, nevertheless surprisingly said, 'Heaven is not a place!') We need not take the words so literally. Jesus seems to have offered these words as a model, not intending the wording to be frozen exactly the same for ever.

In any case our English version is a translation and every translation is an interpretation: few today follow his original Aramaic. More than one version is possible. I have attempted an interpretation free from traditional religious phraseology. I do not pretend it is exactly the same as the historic prayer of the New Testament. It is just one attempt. It may well seem too wordy and I could wish for a fresher, more poetic version than mine. It is offered simply for consideration. Here it is:

> We are alive, alongside countless others with whom we share the gift of existence.
> We respect the universal flow of life of which we are a part. It forms and supports us.
> We account it the highest value, for without it we could not be: daily it bears us along.

Haslingfield Church, Cambridgeshire

We all make mistakes and need to put ourselves right and be accepted, just as we accept others who like us have missed the mark.

Destructive ways often attract us and we need to be freed from their alluring spell.
We welcome, encourage, support loving communities everywhere: they are the Beloved Community we long for.
Always we stand in awe of the power and the glory that surround, uphold and enthral us.

The recitation of the prayer of Jesus is like the unfurling of the flag of the Christian evolution in this harsh, cruel world that is full of horrors. We can sing it as a song of protest against this world's relentless evil.

After silently saying the prayer in the traditional words that come so spontaneously, I pray for healing and health for everyone, then for the peace of the world. I remember my children and grandchildren and their needs. I call to mind all I know who are in distress of body, mind or spirit, praying for their comforting, relief, renewal. Finally I fall silent, listening to the immemorial murmur of the trees: 'live afresh, afresh, afresh!'

I know all this is but one infinitesimally tiny part of our deep desire for peace and healing. It is not magic, simply human. Are such prayer and meditation useless? If purely self-regarding, can they become pointless fantasy? A helpful answer to these questions was given two and a half thousand years ago in the opening words of the Buddhist text *The Dhammapada (*The True Path of Life):

'What we are today comes from our thoughts of yesterday and our present thoughts build our life of tomorrow: our life is the creation of our mind.'

These words may take us back to the original teaching of the historical Buddha. Good thoughts are seeds that may grow into good actions. Jesus's prayer reflects humanity's universal longing for peace, healing, justice. Without this longing humanity would be inexpressibly impoverished and unrecognisable.

Thirst

My body mostly water
now I remember that stream
Exmoor red bed boulders
intervals in its falling music
filling my Camden ears
locked limbs to flow with it
and so to heal my heart
whose systole/diastole
these two loved places are
in Britain – one pastoral
retreat, the sacred wood,
a natural baptism,
the other dusty familiar
full of faces
meeting of possibility
for pillars of gold metamorphosis,
speaking to each other
the beautiful city.
And the rain falls
on the just and the unjust
in its bounty.

No, the land is cursed,
the body politic
despised and neglected.
Now that soft grey cloud
the common good
becomes the start of a billion pound
production line. It is sold
as well as our soil, minerals,
energy, skills, telecommunications,
for private profit called
plc but cynically
not for the public.
Citizens have queued at standpipes
for what they feared was contaminated.
The very act of selling it
already slips in poison
and our bodies mostly
built of it. Sold. Fools' gold.
Unhope. Land of my heart
we are unclean, we stink.
What skylark water will wash our body?
Sweet heaven
what shall we drink?

The H2 Owner

Is your water really safe?
Defend your family
with a Highbrook Filter.
Only £125.50 for the under-sink model.
Removes nitrates, lead, aluminium
and other harmful chemicals.
Pure to be sure.

Highbrook was so successful this year
it was able to diversify and expand
into waste disposal
on land it bought, very reasonably,
from South East Water plc
near the happy valley reservoir.

Some of the waste was toxic
and inclined to leak but of course
this helped maintain public anxiety
and boost sales in filters.

With foresight at the flotation
Highbrook had also acquired
a major shareholding
in Derwent Water plc and when
pollution rumours – always denied by the Board -
increased in the South East
till fear levels rose, overflowed, drowned
the belief that home filters
could cope with so many possible poisons
then simple: Highbrook Derwent
moves in for the kill
and sells its water
in millions of bottles
to households in Kent,
Sussex, Surrey and London.

The City is bullish:
this business is doing fantastically well,
naturally, it makes sense.

Dinah Livingstone

Dinah Livingstone wrote these two poems to support the protests against privatisation of water when Margaret Thatcher was prime minister in the 1980s.

Reconsidering a Crucifix

How the encounter with the Norse gods changed Christianity and created Christendom

Dominic Kirkham

Francis J. Thompson was one the minor poets of the Victorian era and a devout Roman Catholic who became addicted to opium and though considered by some to be a mystic was also said to suffer from religious mania. In so far as he is remembered at all it is probably for his poem *The Hound of Heaven* in which he reflects on the sense of being pursued by God whose presence is immanent in all things. Not long ago, in 2002, the *Boston Globe* (USA) described it as, 'perhaps the most beloved and ubiquitously taught poem among American Catholics for over half a century.'

Thompson was born in Preston, Lancashire, in 1859. A very withdrawn and bookish youth for a time he aspired to the priesthood and studied at the diocesan seminary before dropping out, then studying anatomy at a Manchester medical college from which he also dropped out. Becoming increasingly unstable mentally from his addiction to opium he moved to London for treatment where, between periodic homelessness and vagrancy, he continued to write poems.

A Monastic Experience

Realising Thompson's increasingly distressed state his publisher and acquaintance, the well-known Catholic propagandist Wilfrid Meynell, arranged for him to stay at a monastery in a remote part of rural Sussex near to where his wife had recently purchased a country retreat. It was whilst living at Storrington Priory that Thompson had a particularly creative period and amongst his many poems was the *Ode to the Setting Sun.* This is in part reflects the impression made upon him of the large crucifix that stood in the monastery grounds, on which the graphic figure 'hangs in dreadful pomp of blood.'

This is indeed a large and impressive figure, at over 8ft high, that captures the death throes of Christ in a most gruesome and realistic way. One feature is the right index finger pointing to heaven and to which Thompson makes oblique reference in his poem, 'Long beam lies steady on the cross. Ah, me!/ What secret would thy radiant finger show.' At the time the crucifix stood in the monastery grounds so in the evenings, from a certain perspective, could well have seemed to be pointing at the setting sun.

Just in case you are wondering how I know all this it is because for over a decade I too lived at the same monastery. By then the figure of which Thompson wrote was affixed to the cloister wall where it had been repositioned from its outside setting after an attempt, so I was told, by local youths trying to cut it down. I would often take visitors and pilgrims to view the crucifix and even had a handout made with a photo of the cross and the ode as keep sake of their visit and this central icon of the Catholic faith and devotion.

Like Thompson, in the evenings I would often wander on the low hill outside the monastery which afforded spectacular views over the Sussex countryside as well as a panorama of the heavens in which view the glorious spectacle of the setting sun, sublime enough to trigger mystical ecstasy. This did indeed provide a cosmic setting for the poetic imagination.

Communing with a Crucified Body

In this context we may note a particular detail of Catholic ritual. Though the Mass was traditionally the central ritual of the church, in eighteenth-century France this was becoming eclipsed at the royal court in Versailles and in popular devotion by Benediction, the rite in which the consecrated host is exposed and venerated in a monstrance. This ceremony lent itself to theatrical displays and ceremonial processions with the monstrance providing a show-stopping centrepiece, often being a marvellous work of craftsmanship in gold and silver depicting a radiant sun with the consecrated host placed in the centre. It does not take too much imagination to see the symbolic symbiosis of the Son King who reigns in heaven and the Sun king who reigns on Earth.

This whole ritual had begun to appear in the twelfth century as a way of linking the *imagined presence* of the figure on the cross to a *real presence* of that same body in our midst. The link is made between the sacrificial death on the cross made real through the sacrifice of the Mass so that the living body of Christ can remain amongst his people to worship.

It can come as something of a shock to realise that for a thousand years there was no such thing as a crucifix in the church – a cross yes, but a crucifix, or cross with a body (*corpus*) on it, no. A dead Jesus is nowhere to be found. The emergence of the representation of the dead Christ reflects a decisive

Christological and cultural shift of understanding that took place in Western Europe in the centuries immediately prior to the eleventh century.

One may wonder why this change had come about. We may hazard a guess. Central to the beliefs and mythology of the Germanic tribes of Northern Europe that existed beyond the frontiers of the Roman Empire was the 'World Tree' or 'great pillar', the *Irminsul* (in Old Saxon). This was the cosmic tree – also known as *Yggdrasil* – which, according to shamanic lore, linked the Earth to the heavens and is the tree on which the supreme Nordic god, Odin, (also known as Irmin, Yggr or Grimm) sacrificed himself to gain all-knowing wisdom.

In his military campaign to 'convert' the Saxons Charlemagne destroyed the Irminsul that stood in the Holy Wood (*Osnina*) in the great Teutoburg Forest replacing it in 783 with a church. (Likewise, in Sussex many of the parish churches dating back to Saxon times were built on the sites of previous ancient British groves and at Ditchling one can see the old sacrificial stone of the Druids set in the church-yard wall.

This was confrontational conversion in a most dramatic mode. But it was not the only method. Another more subtle way had been advocated by Pope Gregory the Great (590-604) in advice given in a letter to Mellitus, the first bishop of London, *Epistola ad Mellitum* (601) suggesting pagan shrines be cleansed and converted to Christian use rather than destroyed. It does not take much imagination to link 'The wood of the cross on which hung the savior of the world' (according to the Good Friday Liturgy) with Odin (also known as Irmin or Yggr) who was believed to have done exactly the same thing on the Irminsul.

And this is exactly what we find in the seventh century Anglo-Saxon poem *The Dream of the Rood,* where the tree (rood) is depicted as being felled to be the instrument of the saviour's death and goes on to describe how it suffered the nail wounds, spear shafts, and insults along with Christ to fulfill God's will. This poem is attributed to the poet Caedmon whom Bede describes in his seminal work *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* as the country's first poet. After the tenth century the writhing figure on the cross, depicted in ever more gruesome detail and with ever more paranoid obsession, becomes the central icon of what was entailed in the struggle against the evil of this world.

So the similarity with which Odin on the Irminsul and Christ on the cross could be viewed should come as no surprise. In fact such synonymity of seemingly different figures and events has been a feature of belief throughout the history of Christianity. For example it is no coincidence that the cult of Mary as *theotokos* (God bearer) should be centred on Ephesus that was also the ancient cult centre of the goddess Artemis with even their great festivals being on the same day (August 15, the Feast of the Assumption) with many of the liturgical texts almost identical.

The Coming of the Warriors of the Cross

It is no coincidence that at this time in the eleventh century we see the emergence of a new phenomenon, encouraged by monastic leaders of militarised monastic orders of warriors of the cross or crusaders, though the term 'crusade' was not invented until the end of the fifteenth century. The First Crusade was launched by the former abbot, Pope Urban II, in 1095. This marks a significant escalation in the militarisation of Christianity. If sentiments once devoted to Odin and the Irminsul could so easily be transferred to Christ on the cross, then so too could those of his frenzied warriors seeking glory in Valhalla be transferred to their Christian liege-lord. The hammer of Thor could now be the replaced by the cross of Christ which now became interchangeable with the sword. The emergence of the *auto da fe* marks the creation of a persecuting society, Christendom, remote from anything that Christ may have actually preached.

It is often difficult, and controversial, to question or challenge the imaginary narratives (myths) that have become linked to specific historical, or supposedly historical accounts. So familiar can we become with things that we no longer really 'see' them. So, the suggestion that historically, Jesus did not die *for us,* nor did he even *just* die, a word that indicates a natural process, may seem preposterous. But the reality is that he was murdered! His death resulted from a surprise abduction and then arraignment before a kangaroo court resulting in a pseudo-judicial execution that was itself a crime. At a basic level the crucifix is the reminder and symbol of a crime.

The only remaining records of the crime is of course the gospels. Though these were written well after the event and each carry indications of a distinctive and often complex formation - with their authorial ascription only being attributed in the third century BCE - within their theological elaboration they do retain evidence of an original and common record of the crucifixion. When we look at the overall nature of the first of the gospels, Mark, we see a simple twofold structure of a record of the events and sayings of Jesus as he journeyed in and around Galilee and the record of his death in Jerusalem to which one third of the text is devoted.

In this composition one thing that has often been noted is its rather disturbing abrupt ending with the finality of a body being laid in a tomb. It knows nothing of any further events, or resurrection narrative, that would become seminal for the new faith of Christianity. In this text the last recorded words of Jesus on the cross are of crucial importance: *Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani.* What is clear and noteworthy of the final words of Jesus is that they are a poignant expression of abandonment and even despair.

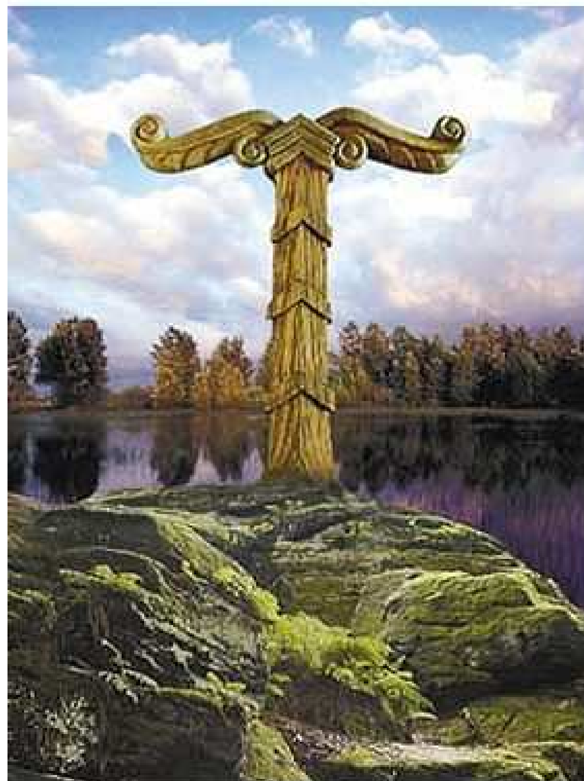
The words indicate a self-understanding by Jesus that others have obscured: that his death in Jerusalem was indeed unexpected and took him by surprise. His expectation and teaching had been that, 'The time has been fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand.' (Mk 1:15). These are apocalyptic words that the current age has run its allotted course and its end was imminent. The last words from the cross indicate that the new messianic era for the restoration of the kingdom of David had proved an illusion.

Back to the beginning

I began this reflection with reference to the poet Francis Thompson and the Ode he wrote that was partly inspired by the crucifix he saw in the monastery in Storrington and also by the dramatic sunsets that can be observed from the cemetery hill. Before that, as a child, he lived for some years, between 1864 and 1885, in the small Lancashire mill town of Ashton-under-Lyne just as few miles from Manchester, then a great industrial town. This was in fact the first great industrial town of our modern industrial age and where its workers lived and died in almost unimaginable poverty and squalor, highlighted in the tract of Frederick Engels, *On The Condition of the Working Class.* This work fed into the more famous writings of Karl Marx promoting a new vision of radical communism.

No doubt Thompson would have visited this vibrant new city and if so he would have passed along the Ashton Old Road and past the newly established catholic parish (1846) of St. Anne's Fairfield. It was here, alongside the road, an imposing new church was then being built, a distinguishing feature of which is its fine brick spire rising over 100ft and into which is embedded a large stone crucifix of similar size and remarkably similar to the one at Storrington.

I know this because I grew up in a house on Ashton Old Road. Subsequently my parents moved to another house just a little further up the road and opposite the new parish school with its adjoining playing field. This is where I now live and in the evenings I often like to wander across the field, which is at a slightly higher elevation than the surrounding area, to marvel at the panoramic vista of the heavens



Example of a reconstructed Irminsul

that the site provides. Beyond the surrounding tree line and across the roof tops of the terraced houses one can gaze upon the setting sun as the blood red orb, surrounded with its glowing cauldron of clouds, sinks below the horizon. The only other noticeable feature is the church spire that pierces the horizon like a giant figure pointing to the heavens! Sometimes it is as if the setting sun is pinioned by the slender steel cross that tops the spire. But to what now does it point?

In the light of what I have written above one may think its time is past, its message obsolete, and that the heavens are now empty: 'God is dead'. But this would be a mistake. If anything, our modern understanding helps to refocus our attention not on the significance of a death, or murder, but of a life – a whole new way of human interaction based on an attitude of respect, service, generosity and care that have seldom characterised the affairs of human societies. They remain an almost unattainable ideal, as distant as the glowing orb of the setting sun.

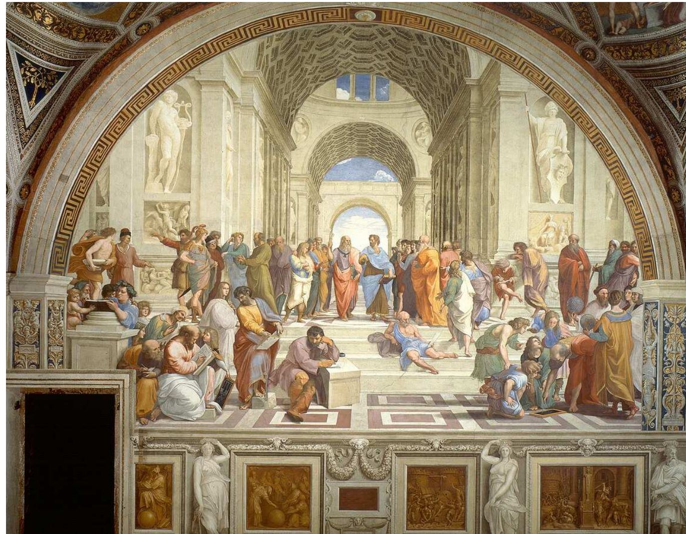
As I conclude this reflection I am struck by a front page headline in the paper after a church survey that states, 'Britain isn't a Christian nation now.' I demur. Rather I would say that the whole epoch of Christendom is slowly coming to a term, like the ebbing tide of a sea of faith, but that this itself paves the way for us to return to face the challenge of the original teachings of Christianity. It is to this that the finger on the crucifix still points with its warning of the cost of discipleship.

Theology and /or Philosophy

Jasbir Bhoda

Somehow thinkers in Ancient Greece began to pay direct attention to the *physical* world – and to logic. In time they labelled their enquiries 'philosophy' – no other culture has that word; Plato wasn't happy with this label but he didn't come up with another either. Rudolf Steiner came up with 'Anthroposophy'.

Socrates, Plato and Aristotle followed one after the other and the subject got established. Christianity was imbued with philosophy right from day one – or was it on the third day? There was Paul to contend with and some philosophers became Christian; then there was John of the Gospel and the author/s of Revelation. Next, there were Platonists like Justin (Martyr). The high point was reached with Augustine – he actually fulminated *against* the philosophers! The latter weren't coming up with anything interesting; Justinian put an end to their *logic-chopping*.



The School of Athens
Fresco by Raphael in the Apostolic Palace, Vatican City
Image: wikipedia.org

Henceforth philosophy would come under theology – a new subject developed by Christian thinkers. The philosophers didn't revolt, they just carried on with their arcane enquiries within the parameters set by their superiors. A thousand years went by – Aquinas made his contributions during the latter part of that period (13th century).

Without meaning to, Descartes launched a revolution which is continuing – philosophy found itself completely independent. Since then philosophers have continued saying nothing. They do that best. 'Assemble reminders' as Wittgenstein reminded his students; 'a philosophy book could be written which consisted of jokes', etc. His mother tongue was German – he was being entirely serious.

Or it is, can be, 'how to do things with words' (J.L. Austin). They leave important matters to religion – which accounts for and defends itself theoretically through theology. Philosophers take interest in that and develop *philosophical* theology; theologians do that too, e.g. Prof Vernon White. Philosophers go further and come up with philosophy of religion. There is plenty of work to do even though philosophers don't like being asked what they do. The 18th century developed natural theology – this *leads* to God.

Now that colonialism is almost over other cultures have started claiming that they have philosophy too – they mean they have been doing similar things under other label/s. True, but they haven't bothered to distinguish those other pursuits from philosophy – they don't like being told they don't even have a word for it; there is plenty of philosophical material in their cogitations and writings. There has always been philosophical thinking in general and meta-physical speculation, even in oral cultures. People have looked up at the sky and wondered. *That* can lead to poetry, music or philosophy; most cultures have been content to explain through stories. But Plato took a stand against Homer – fiction is lies, it takes us away from truth. Was he right?

But then everything is grist to the philosopher's mill – one can philosophise about anything as long as no other way has been found for studying those issues. What is to be labelled, or called, philosophy will always remain a philosophical issue, etc. What is true is that it became distinguished in Western culture. It eventually became a university *subject* with Kant becoming its first professor. What *is* philosophy? That is, unlike theology, itself a philosophical question, so keep on philosophising about it. Or read *The Analytic Ambition* by William Charlton.

Jasbir Bhoda studied philosophy for six years at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne in the 1970s. He'd like to thank his first professor. Karl Britton.

Going Green

John Pearson warns about water shortage

'Save Water, bath with a friend'. Most readers will remember those instructions, said tongue in cheek (or maybe not) back in the mid to late summer of 1976 – the time of our own most serious drought here in the UK. Long hot months (with temperatures of 90 degrees F for 15 consecutive days from late June to early July) led to the inevitable hosepipe bans and a plethora of hints for saving our limited reserves of water; put a brick in your toilet cistern to limit the amount of water flushed away, use old washing up water to fill that same cistern, similarly, use washing up water on the plants, and so on. We were advised to use no more than five inches of water in the bath (ten inches for two, presumably ?). Big Brother was watching us – with cars patrolling the streets on the lookout for infringements of the hosepipe ban. There was a steep fine for the guilty; the sum of £400 (£2,600 in today's money). I myself was the proud new owner of my first second-hand car. It sat gathering dust in the street.

Undoubtedly, the drought of 1976 was a serious one – 1975 being the fifth driest in the twentieth century, so serious that the Prime Minister of the day appointed Denis Howell 'Drought Supremo'. Consideration was even given to creating large scale water de-salination plants as possible sources of fresh water amid fears that the problem had set in for the long term. Ministers passed a 'Drought Act' in August to the accompaniment of a renewed flurry of previous leaflets, newspaper advertisements, radio and television advice and even some road signs. Perhaps someone, or something, in the Heavens took notice, for within days of the passing of the Act it rained – at first a trickle but developing into some serious downpours through September and October, gradually replenishing the stocks in reservoirs. Presumably the general populace, who had grumbled about how dry it was and all the restrictions, now began to grumble about how wet it was!

'Water, water everywhere, nor any a drop to drink – so said Coleridge in his poem 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner' . So my father might have said as I headed off for India 25 years ago, albeit for a different reason. He tended to be somewhat suspicious of things in foreign lands – especially the water.

Water covers about 70% of the Earth's surface, but fresh water, the stuff we drink, bathe in, irrigate fields with (and wash our cars with, those who have them) is in fact rare. A mere 3% of the world's water is fresh, and two thirds of this is tucked away in glaciers or unavailable for use in some way. Consequently, it is said, 1.1 billion people worldwide regularly lack access to sufficient water, whilst 2.7 billion (26 % of the total population!), suffering a shortage for at least one month each year. For many who do have access to water its quality is very poor, proving a breeding ground for disease. Up to 2 million people, most of them children, die each year from diarrhoeal diseases alone. I'm sure we've all seen the advertisements and appeals for help in the media? In Britain of course many died from cholera in 1866, chiefly in East London , where discoveries by Dr John Snow regarding the significance of clean drinking water eventually put an end to the disease.

On a global scale water systems have become stressed. Rivers, lakes and aquifers are drying up or becoming too polluted to use. In the UK we are beset by tales of excessive loss through poor maintenance, sewage leaks into watercourses and the like.

Of course in some cases access to fresh, healthy drinking water hidden underground can be addressed relatively easily, where there is the funding and the expertise available. So, in India, I have seen wells being dug, providing isolated villages with water for drinking and the more effective irrigation of simple crops. Purposely overlooking my father's reservations, above, and the bottled water carried by some of my companions, I accepted the glasses of water offered me by the villagers we met. Sometimes it was all they could afford to offer a visitor and to them, in such a hot land, it was a precious gift to give, even with a new well.

Climate Change (born of the continued pumping of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases into the atmosphere) can affect rainfall and this may be increased if the problem is not

addressed, patterns of weather and water causing drought on one Continent and, ironically, flooding on another. Here in the UK we see how in a long hot summer some regions are starved of water whilst in others, usually less accessible and/or less populated, there can be a glut of the stuff. Proposals have been made for a 'National Grid'-style network of large, heavy duty pipelines to re-distribute supplies effectively so as to meet varying regional needs. This last still looks a long way in the future however, not least as it would require serious co-operation between numerous controlling companies, each zealously guarding supplies and profit margins!

Image: permaculture.co.uk

Severe droughts are not unheard of – from those in biblical times through to the present day. For many continents 2023 was characterised by excessive warmth. 2023 was the warmest year on record for North and South America, the second warmest ever for Asia and Europe and the eighth warmest ever for Australia. Across the year drought areas included Southeast Asia, Mexico and the southern United States. A number of regions are forecast as likely sufferers from drought in 2024 – the changed water cycle being attributed to the transition from 'La Niña' to 'El Niño' (opposing climate patterns) against a backdrop of overall increasing sea temperatures. To prove there is an opposite extreme, 2023 also saw waterlogged wheat, ruined orange crops and the like, the result of hurricanes and flooding.

Crop failure can have serious economic effects - not just local but extending to the world economy. As an example the BBC cite the olive-growing areas of Spain (traditionally responsible for 70% of European consumption of olive oil and 45% of that worldwide). Lack of rain in these areas has an enormous effect on the volume of oil being produced, with knock-on consequences for its price on the market. The shortage of rain actually falling on the crops was matched by corresponding falls in reservoirs. Elsewhere, wheat production is 7% down in Canada, with corn, soybean, hay and other commodities affected in the USA – all with economic consequences. Agriculture uses 70% of the world's accessible freshwater, but some 60% of this is wasted due to leaky irrigation systems. Many countries that produce large amounts of food – including India, China, Australia , Spain and the United States – have reached or are close to reaching their water resource limits.

A drier world does not just have immediate consequences for fresh water supplies, but the knock-on effect can be devastating, not just for food production, and also for wildlife, as witness the great losses in Australia's recent bushfire crisis. It is estimated that here as many as five *billion* creatures suffer, losing their lives and/or their customary habitat.

The deprivations, destruction and losses listed above are truly shocking and something which many of us, myself included, may take for granted as we clean our cars or water the plants. Perhaps we should have more concern for those less fortunate than ourselves – taking at least some simple measures to conserve water, not just by putting the brick in the cistern but a water butt in the garden to catch run-off water from the roof for re-use. Instead of that smart paving covering 100% of what was once a front garden, leave at least some lawn and some borders, allowing rain to enter the soil and, in due course to re-enter the water cycle, rather than running off into the drains and being, in effect, lost to the world.

Have a care. 'One man's meat …' as they say. In this case, one man's car wash or row of prize leeks (I am an honorary Geordie) is another man's drinking water!

A Penn'orth

Penny Mawdsley asks 'Blessed are the Wealth Makers?'

An article bearing this title, but without the question mark, by Hugh Rayment-Pickard appeared in Church Times on 20th July 2012. I had saved it and came across it recently. Rayment-Pickard is now the Co-Director of the Professional Teaching Institute, University of London, which supports teachers and, in turn, pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, to acquire University places.

The article encourages readers to look positively at money-making rather than to hold it in patronising disdain, as the Church has often been wont to do – as the 'filthy lucre' of Tyndale's New Testament. The article begins by citing that 23 million people work in the private sector (27 million in the second quarter of 2023) and of this number retail provides 4.8 million jobs (2023 figure 3.54 million). It reminds us that the wealth created via taxation from this group helps substantially to pay our public servants and provides our vital infrastructure services.

The Church of England is of course as involved as any other institution with money making at all levels. Collection plates are filled from the wealth created by all the church's parishioners. Cathedrals sell access to their sacred buildings, either directly or occasionally, by operating shops and restaurants. Churches rent spaces to user groups, and the Church Commissioners now hold £10.3 billion worth of investments (updated 2023), albeit in recent years choosing more ethically and financially sound ones than in the past. But, says Rayment-Pickard, 'For all this, the Church instinctively regards money-making as sinful, at best as a necessary evil'. It's not just the usury to which it once objected, let alone paying tithes. 'Visions of the heavenly kingdom imply a gift-economy in which everyone will be provided for through a fair sharing of God's abundance'. There would be no need for money 'as with final stage Communism', writes Rayment-Pickard, 'we will contribute according to our abilities and receive according to our needs'.

Activities like business and trade have been long regarded in some 'respectable' circles as sub-ethical and contrasted with 'moral' professions like teaching, medicine and the Christian ministry. The concept of the welfare state may further discourage us from questioning too deeply from where the money for these services we freely use actually comes.

We should remember that the all thriving businesses give their individual employees work, dignity, purpose and economic security, but we should not be afraid to criticise examples of greed, exploitation and gross materialism when we come across them.

The New Testament provides examples for a theology of human flourishing. The Parable of The Talents, as Rayment-Pickard points out, encourages us to make a profit from our endeavours, and God is likened to a successful businessman in his dealings with workers. Many Christian traditions provide further examples of good working practice to follow, amongst which are the Roman Catholic social teaching principles, and in the one-time Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple's 1942 'Christianity and Social Order'. The 19th century Quaker and other Nonconformist entrepreneurs and other philanthropists in Britain, and the Shakers in the USA provide good examples of living out ethical work principles. The Cadburys in Birmingham gained a reputation for fair pricing, honesty and reliability, and actually found that their outlook gave them a competitive edge.

Since 2012 the world has moved on and the press have often drawn our attention to the global businesses which have not paid their fair share of taxes. Certain service industries too, some of which are now part or wholly privatised, have not behaved ethically. Although the Government has known for a long time that there were serious queries about the 'Horizon' system which they had introduced to the Post Office and that postmasters and mistresses were complaining about it, they have given numerous further contracts to the company which supplied the system without thoroughly investigating the one set up by the Post Office.

Rayment-Pickard's article concludes by making a plea for us all to 'shrug off unexamined prejudice against money-making and to present people with a positive vision of what it means to create wealth for the common good'. I fear though, it won't be so easy for the public to disabuse itself of the idea that generally public services are wholesome, whereas traded services are contaminated by the profit motive.

reviews

Edward Nickell reviews *Unknowing God: Towards a Post-Abusive Theology*

by Nicholas Peter Harvey and Linda Woodhead

Cascade Books, Wipf and Stock (Eugene OR, 2022) Pbk. 215 pages. £15.99.

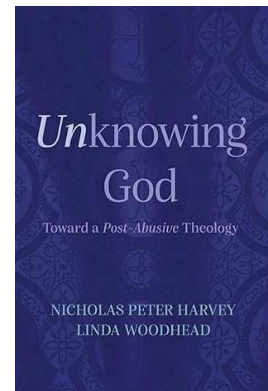
Unknowing God conveys the decades of life experience, wisdom and friendship shared by the authors. Their insights, written 'in the midst of life', come not just from their own backgrounds (Catholicism for Harvey and Anglicanism for Woodhead) but also what they have learnt from their encounters with other faiths and none.

Each of the 26 collected essays could be read on their own, but read together they build a comprehensive warning to the church. The book's title is a reference to 'The Cloud of Unknowing', a medieval mystical text teaching that to experience God required forgetting and unknowing our certainties. These essays let go of God as an all-knowing, all-controlling being and the associated fearful and controlling theologies, in search of something more compelling.

This book is not a journalistic account of Church abuse scandals. Instead, it examines theology or beliefs and highlights the potential for these to become abusive, to others and to ourselves. The authors look at abuse in all its guises, not just abuse in the legal sense. This includes more subtle harms.

I recently completed the Church of England's safeguarding training – mandatory for me as a Parochial Church Council member. The training was rigorous but something felt missing. This book identifies that gap: it is the failure to understand how theology can harm. The Church has failed to explore how its theology is a contributor to abuse, instead falling into the easy assumption that church life was just a coincidental backdrop. It is frustrating to see this opportunity being missed.

One essay warns that 'Critics of religion often focus on the dangers posed by a dark and wrathful God who can be used to justify violence, without realising that a God of light and love can be just as dangerous.' Modern Christian ethics sometimes 'thins out' into 'abstractions about love, community, covenant, peaceableness and so on … with little to offer by way of concrete guidance.' Post-abusive theology should not simply raise questions to the level of incontrovertible abstractions but should engage with real life and be less closed to non-Christian sources and more self-critical.



Another essay describes the fiercely debated understanding of resurrection over the history of the church, for example between bodily or spiritual resurrection. Over time, belief in the resurrection, whatever that meant, became viewed as a test of faith or a 'doctrinal shibboleth' not to be doubted or questioned. While people are as interested as ever in questions about the afterlife and the dead, Christianity no longer offers space for those conversations. 'How ironic, that Jesus' resurrection, so transgressive of the boundary between the living and the dead, became a barrier that kept them apart.'

The final essay in the book asks, 'What's wrong with playing God?', exploring the relationship between humanity and environment. Some people view creation as complete, finished in Gensis or the formation of the universe, with the role of humanity being only to revere / understand through science and not to meddle. The essay tells the story of Emma Marris, an ecologist working to restore an area to it's 'natural state', requiring the destruction of all the alien plants and animals that had been introduced. Faced with an area of outstanding beauty, Marris realised her colleagues only saw a man-made landscape to be removed. To Marris, it had a beauty and integrity of its own even if it wasn't the original ecosystem. We couldn't disconnect ourselves from the environment or distinguish the 'real' nature from the rest.

I sent this essay over to a friend who suffers from climate anxiety. Recently, we were hiking in Taiwan and he told me he couldn't enjoy the forests because the trees were non-natives planted by Japanese colonialists. He has no interest in religion at all, but replied instantly that the essay 'perfectly sums up everything I've been thinking recently.'

Unknowing God will find an amenable audience in the Network and I sincerely hope that those with power and influence in the church are similarly receptive. Based on how it helped my friend, I think that wider society could benefit from its rich and deep understanding of how blind and rigid orthodoxy to bad ideas can abuse us all.

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reviews

Dominic Kirkham

Mary and Early Christian Women: Hidden Leadership

by Ally Kateusz

Palgrave MacMillan, (London , 22019). 312 pages. £19.99.

I bought this book out of curiosity having seen a very favourable review that stated, 'This is one of those books that everyone concerned about the place of women in the West should read'. At its heart it is also something of a mystery: of how women disappeared from the original prominent roles they held in the church.

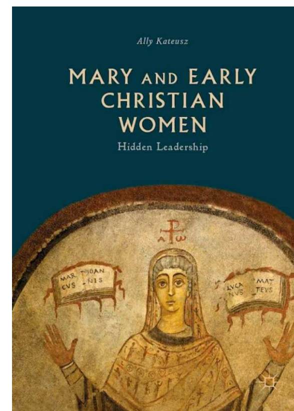
What I found particularly attractive about the book was not so much the abstract argument as the graphic presentation of historical visual evidence of the roles of women in the early church, evidence that reflects the conservative nature of art in preserving early representations of liturgical roles that were later denied. And the evidence is indisputable. It is wide-ranging, to be found in mosaics, catacomb murals, ritual objects, not to mention written references.

The surviving artistic representations of women, sometimes intentionally defaced or obscured, leave no doubt as to their prominent ministerial roles in Christian communities in the first four centuries. As Kateusz notes, 'zero iconographic artifacts have survived from the fifth century or earlier that depict a Christian man alone at an altar table in a church, that is, without a woman also there.' (p.161) In contrast there are numerous clear representations of women in liturgical roles wearing distinctive liturgical and episcopal garb such as the pallium, still the distinguishing mark of a bishop..

It is interesting that in 113 CE when the Roman governor Pliny sought to learn more about the strange new movement that he would call 'Christian' it was to women that he turned, calling them 'ministers'. For several centuries the gender of official titles was ambiguous: canon 14 of the second Council of Tours (567) confusingly instructed that 'A bishop (male) who has no bishop (female) may have no women in his entourage.'

Which brings us to the enigma at the heart of this book: given the prominence that the early Jesus movement that became the church gave to women as one of its most distinctive characteristics – that there was to be no more division between male and female (Gal 3:28) – then why and how did this change?

From the second century we can see male church leaders such as Irenaeus and Tertullian increasingly decrying women's liturgical roles as 'heretical'. There are clear signs that this view did not go uncontested. The discovery in 1988 of a large stone panel (3 1/2 feet by 6 1/2 feet) in Istanbul that clearly showed a dual gendered celebration taking place in the Hagia Sophia was dated to 434 and enables Kateusz to link it to a controversy raging at the time between the patriarch Nestorius and a prominent virgin Pulcheria over the struggle by women to preserve their traditional liturgical rights.



It was a struggle that was replicated in numerous Christian communities across the empire and as late as 829 French bishops (male) were complaining to Louis the Pius about women who continued to distribute the Eucharist despite the fact that, 'We have attempted in every way possible to prevent women approaching the altar.' Through the careful comparative analysis of numerous manuscripts Kateusz is able to show how at the hands of monastic scribes women were gradually 'edited out of texts or 'anonymised': the fourth century church history of Eusebius had six times as many named women as similar histories a century later.

The value of such evidence and a book like this is that it reveals how dramatically 'traditional' church history has been distorted to substantiate a bogus 'orthodoxy' in which women have simply been 'cancelled' – something that in the context of contemporary gender controversy we can perhaps better appreciate. Clearly some men disliked sharing leadership roles with women (like the BBC once regarded women unsuitable to be news readers as 'they lack authority' – *plus ça change*?) and it is these men who would in time be recognised as the authoritative 'fathers' of church tradition. Thus by the time Christianity had become an imperial religion, a misogynistic momentum of patrological prejudice enabled the practice and testimony of the previous centuries to be all but obliterated.

It is ironic, given the continued resolute opposition of the Catholic Church to women's ordination, that some of the best evidence of this is in Rome itself, even in St. Peter's basilica, if you know where to look, as Kateusz obviously does. For example the liturgical scene on an ivory reliquary depicting old St. Peter's Basilica (from the mid fifth century), shows a man and woman flanking an altar

Women's Liberation Movement Match in London 19 71. Image: Science Museum

(over the tomb of St Peter!) clearly officiating jointly in a ritual.

Other fascinating depictions show women officiating in liturgical roles, prominent amongst whom is Mary in clearly episcopal garb (as in the Lateran baptistery Chapel of San Venantius – that also shows evidence of later erasure). Not so much the iconic submissive hand-maiden of later popular piety or doting domesticated Madonna of Renaissance art as an authoritative, presidential figure who stands in the midst of the community with arms raised in prayer, a role later reserved exclusively for male celebrants.

This should not surprise us. As Kateusz notes, 'Almost all the house churches named in the New Testament are identified by the name of the women who apparently oversaw them.' (p.154) The letter of St Paul to the Romans ends with his commendations to the many women who ministered alongside him (Rm 16) and who in the case of the Roman church, as with so many churches, were instrumental in its foundation and organisation.

In this list we meet Phoebe of whom the Greek word 'prostatis' is used, for which the Latin equivalent is 'presidens', 'the one who sits in front' - the root of 'preside' and 'president' - that was the key role in the Eucharistic celebrations of the early church. This was long before the word 'priest' was used – a word associated with pagan temples. The status of women such as Phoebe is usually diminished to that of a 'deacon', or 'one who serves'.

What is surprising is how all this came to be explained away over the centuries, if necessary by defacing the evidence. Kateusz presents evidence from the church of Santa Prassede, Rome, where a mosaic shows very clearly the title 'Episcopa' written above the head of a woman with the name 'Theodora' printed along side it. What it also shows is that the mosaic has been altered and the last two letters removed so as to indicate the person was male. This has also been the fate of the apostle named in a letter of Paul as Junia but often translated by the addition of an 's' – as a 'correction'! - to make it male. Shockingly, attempts to conceal and deface artistic evidence at the hands of church authorities has continued into the twentieth century.

The modern clamour for the inclusion of women in ministerial roles can be depicted as some sort of attack by militant feminists or secularists on the divinely established hierarchical order, and often is by disgruntled 'traditionalists'. But as this book makes clear it is rather a demand to return to the church what was originally one of its most distinguishing features: the prominent role it gave to women at every level of its organisation. The value of a book like this one is that it helps us to see what is hiding in plain sight and always was. It's just that, for all sorts of visceral prejudices, some choose to refuse to see it.

River Jordan