

sfia

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Carracci: Jesus and the Canaanite Woman (1594) en.wikipedia.org

Life for Each

sofia

down to Earth

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

CONTRIBUTIONS

The Editor welcomes submissions to *Sofia* – articles, poems, reviews and books for review. Articles may be edited for publication. Please submit unpublished articles that have not been submitted elsewhere, or if previously published, please state where and when. Copy deadline is the first day of the month before the month of publication. Contributions express the individual writer's opinion. They do not necessarily represent the views of the Editor or SOF Network. *The Editor would like to thank Penny Mawdsley for proof-reading Sofia.*

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Contents

Editorial

3 *Life for Each*

Articles

- 4 *The Body of Christ II: Death and Resurrection* by Stephen Mitchell
6 *Irony on the Via Dolorosa?* by Caroline Pickard
7 *Our Wounded Body Politic* by Frank Regan
10 *Religion and Politics in Latin America* by Francis McDonagh
13 *The Idea of 'Race' and its Origins in Slavery* by David Rhodes
17 *An Eco-Human Future* by Ian Harris

Poetry

- 3 *Same Root* by Dinah Livingstone
22 *St Cuthbert and the Otters* by Neil Curry

Reviews

- 23 Edward Nickell reviews *Queer Holiness* by Charlie Bell
24 Pauline Pearson reviews *The Power of Reconciliation* by Justin Welby
25 Dominic Kirkham reviews *Holy Anarchy* by Graham Adams
26 Kathryn Southworth reviews *My life, you see: Selected Poems* by Martina Thomson

Regulars and Occasionals

- 21 Letters to the Editor
27 *As I Please*. John Pearson says goodbye.

Front cover image: Front cover image: Ash tree.

powo.science.kew.org/

Back cover image: 'Another world is possible – A world with room for every world'. Zapatista motto. ivoox.com

sofia

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

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

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

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

Life for Each

The title of this *Sofia* is *Life for Each* – abundant life. This requires, first, that we should own our own life, not be owned by anyone else in any kind of slavery. But ownership of ourselves and our individual body is not enough for abundant life; we also need to belong to a fair and kind society, a body politic, and belong on terms of equal rights and dignity. These are ideal conditions which many individual lives lack and many societies fall short of.

Same Root

Earth is congenial to us
because we are all akin.
Indigenous, we belong.
Once seen as a goddess,
the great mother,
she is not beyond,
but a modest planet,
mortal like us,
a natural body,
here and now.

Pregnant, she generates
her own kind of life,
which, being gendered,
jigs, jives with possibility,
evolves over millennia,
emerges in us
with language in our genes,
but kindred spirits still
with a generic likeness
to her whole geo-economy.

The genitive is mutual:
we are hers and she is ours.
Her kind gift, her generosity,
is life: gentle, savage,
jaunty and precarious.
And ours is to voice it back
unceasingly in talk,
song, every genre,
and the answering upsurge
of poetic genius.

Dinah Livingstone

Articles in this issue address the title 'Life for Each' from different perspectives. Stephen Mitchell writes on 'Death and Resurrection'. Frank Regan, former editor of *Renew*, the magazine of Catholics for a Changing Church, writes about 'Our Wounded Body Politic'. Francis McDonagh, retired Andes Programme manager for CAFOD, writes on 'Religion and Politics in Latin America', from the fifteenth century conquistadors to date. David Rhodes writes on 'The Idea of "Race" and its Origin in Slavery'. And Ian Harris discusses the possibility of 'An Eco-Human Future', since life on Earth involves more than just human life.

John Pearson says goodbye to his *As I Please* column, in which he has been musing upon his own life and life in general. Most of these pieces have now been collected in book form, published by SOF this year (available online, see details sofn.org.uk/shop/shop.html).

This *Sofia's* front cover shows an ash tree. The giant ash tree Ygdrasil was the Nordic world tree, the tree of life. The tree of life beside the river running through the beautiful city at the end of the book of *Revelation* has *twelve* kinds of fruit; there are all different kinds of life, and the back cover shows a banner illustrating the indigenous Mexican Zapatista double motto: 'Another World is Possible – For a World with Room for Every World'. Abundant life also means a multitude of life styles, cultures and languages.

*

Please do write and send in articles you think would be of interest to *Sofia* readers for future issues. The magazine particularly needs more women writers.

If you receive your copy of this March issue in time (depending on the post), this is a reminder of the SOF Day meeting on March 4th 2023, at Essex Church (Kensington Unitarians), 112 Palace Gardens Terrace, Notting Hill, London W8 4RT. There is a £10 charge .

Please pay in advance if possible. Send your name and a cheque payable to Sea of Faith or SOF to: John Pearson, 3, Belle Grove Place, Spital Tongues, Newcastle upon Tyne NE2 4LH. Or pay £10 online at: sofn.org.uk/shop/shop.html. Please state the reference March 23. If you pay online, please also email johnsdpearson@gmail.com with your name for him to acknowledge your booking.

The Body of Christ II: Death and Resurrection

Stephen Mitchell

The older I become, the less inclined I am to watch violent films. It's not the blood and guts: I'm fascinated by operations and dissections and I'm not queasy. I just don't want to watch fictionalised abuse and terror anymore. It's strange, contradictory even, when I consider that each year for most of my life I've spent an hour, often three hours, reflecting on Jesus' death. Regularly, since I was a child, I've been immersed in settings of the Passion narrative by Bach and when I've led Good Friday Meditations, I've found them to be some of the most creative and inspiring moments of my ministry.

Some may say this all goes to show that Christians are more obsessed with death than life. Believers may not, today, indulge in the more extreme practices of self-flagellation but most churches do have images and statues depicting Jesus' body nailed to a gibbet. Some have Stations of the Cross spelling out in grim detail the journey to the scaffold. The gospel writers also focus on the last days and hours of Jesus' life. About a third of each gospel is taken up with an account of his arrest, trial and execution.

Perhaps this isn't surprising. After all, we tell and retell the tales of our loved ones' deaths. Lucy had Motor Neurone Disease and was finding it hard to breathe. The doctor said there was nothing he could do. She pointed to her letterboard: M-O-R . . . 'I can give you morphine,' he interrupted, 'but it will kill you'. She nodded.

I should say this conversation was not as brutal as it sounds. Lucy was a trained health visitor and had worked as a hospital manager. She knew, as he knew, what was being said and what was being asked. So hers was a 'good death', euthanasia, you might say. I confess too that when my wife died later that day, her breathing having been considerably eased, I had no idea what to do. Even after 40 years of ministry, and sitting by the bedside of many dying parishioners, sometimes administering the Last Rites, standing beside her corpse, I was lost. Fortunately there is a very good government website!

In the December issue of *Sofia*, I discussed some uses of the phrase 'the Body of Christ': its association with the community of faith, the church and its relation to the bread of the

communion service. Kathleen McPhilemy's poem, 'Pietà', followed my article, and reminds us that as we approach Passiontide and Easter, the Body of Christ becomes significant for believers in a very physical way:

She holds his body in her arms . . .
a man's body

It's a body that was subjected to mockery and torture, bearing wounds that have been the subject of devotion for centuries. Crucifixion is certainly not a good death, it's slow and painful. There have, of course, been many equally agonising and prolonged deaths and more disfigured and mutilated bodies, many never having been lovingly cradled. Any worthwhile reflection on the death of Jesus will bring to mind today's victims of abuse and torture. To recognise the cruelty that human beings are capable of, to see what we ourselves are capable of inflicting on others and acknowledging our own mortality is part of the process of facing the reality of human life, overcoming the fear of death and dying, and making the most of our lives.

After Jesus' death, and after his body had been taken down from the cross, Mary and her companions dressed this human body for burial. According to all four Gospels, Joseph of Arimathea took charge of the body and in Matthew's Gospel, has it laid in his own tomb.

Whatever our beliefs, respect for the corpse is a mark of our humanity. The ground-breaking TV dissection *My Dead Body*, shown earlier this year featuring Toni Crews, a young woman who died of a rare form of cancer, was remarkable not only for her bravery in giving advanced permission for the making of the programme, but also in the care and dignity shown by pathologists and students alike.

Far, far more important than any discussion about resurrection, life after death, immortality, the soul or reincarnation, is the practical business of dying well and care of the physical human body. All the more so, for those of us who believe there is no duality between body and soul and between life and life after death.

Today people talk about the soul and of their loved ones who 'have passed' and assume this is

all part of Christian belief. It isn't. Traditional Christianity also rejects this dualism. When I contributed a chapter to *God and Reality* (edited by Colin Crowder), I confidently asserted that 'The immortality of the soul has never been a Christian doctrine'. The publishers (Mowbray) were less certain and said they would have to check with Lambeth Palace. The text remained unchanged! Christian creeds and tradition prefer to speak of the resurrection of the body and even then, only at God's choosing.

For many inside and outside the church, it is thought that at the heart of Christian belief is the question 'What happened to Jesus' body?' Indeed some contend that unless one can affirm that this dead, human body came to life again in a physical way, one has no right to call oneself a Christian. This too is false.

There are two kinds of story in the gospels – accounts of an empty tomb, and stories telling of encounters with Jesus after his death. Even the House of Bishops of the Church of England recognised that 'scholarship can offer no conclusive demonstration' that Joseph of Arimathea's tomb was empty that first Easter Day and that 'the divergent views to be found among scholars of standing are reflected in the thinking of individual bishops'. This appears in their statement of 1986, *The Nature of Christian Belief* published after the row over the then Bishop of Durham, David Jenkins, who declared that the resurrection was not a 'conjuring trick with bones'.

The stories of the disciples meeting with Jesus after his death make the same point: Jesus was not resuscitated. Definitions of resuscitation include 'the instance of reviving someone from apparent death or from unconsciousness'. Resuscitation does not follow death but 'apparent death' or 'unconsciousness'. Christians believe that Jesus died and was buried and the encounter stories do not tell of Jesus being brought back to his original physical body. The Risen Jesus in the gospels certainly eats and speaks and is recognised by his followers, and (according to John) bears the wounds of his execution. But this body can do what no physical body is capable of doing – suddenly appearing and disappearing, passing through walls and flying up into the sky.

Asked if I believe in the physical rising of Jesus' body from the tomb, I respond by asking what exactly it is I am being asked to believe. What is described in the gospels is not a real,

physical body. It is a literary creation and therein lies the simple explanation for this 'glorified' body. To fulfil the evangelists' brief, the body has to be such that Jesus can be recognised and yet not allow the disciples to say, 'Oh! We thought you were dead. You've been resuscitated like Lazarus. Marvellous! How are you?' Nor must they say 'Oh no! We've seen a ghost, an apparition has come to haunt us.'

The Gospel writers are not seeking to describe, as newspaper reporters, the events of the first Easter Day. They wish to confirm that after Jesus' death, the disciples who had been demoralised and afraid discovered new energy and courage and the desire to talk publicly about the things they had seen and heard. The evangelists want to explain that the power they witnessed in Jesus' ministry was somehow present in their lives, that in their communities and celebrations, in breaking bread together and bringing light and power to those in darkness, they were experiencing what they could only describe as the presence and power of the Risen Christ. Christ, for them, is alive, he is risen, ascended, glorified and this is what their resurrection stories seek to express.

Paul also makes it clear that resurrection, for him, is something that happens, indeed has already happened to members of his newly created church communities. 'We were buried with him by baptism into death' he writes, 'in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.' At times his language is audacious: 'We are always carrying around the death of Jesus in our bodies, so that the life of Jesus may be clearly shown in our bodies.' 'I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me'. For many this kind of language is meaningless and unhelpful and they want to return to more everyday speech. But however we choose to talk about death, and whatever rituals we use at the point of death, they must help us to grieve and face the reality of death.

In December's article I argued that the everyday chit-chat of some contemporary liturgies, failed to convey the richness of faith. The same is true of many religious and secular funerals. How quickly I have found the bereaved asking for A Celebration of a Life when I've gone to arrange a funeral. Indeed, but in that celebration they must also mourn a death. How easily



Titian: Simon of Cyrene helps Jesus. museodelprado.es

some say their loved one is in their hearts and life is now full of the many happy memories they made together. Yes, but those memories will also be of lost physical engagement and intimate touching. They tell me they rejoice with the deceased who is reunited with family, dancing again, joking and laughing as before. Perhaps, perhaps not, but it may take time, considerable time, to come to terms with hurts caused by those who were close to us and time to accept our neglect in their care and friendship. There must be space to be angry, time to judge, time to grieve.

At my Exit Interview (not, I hasten to add, with the international organisation founded by Philip Nitchke) I rather arrogantly told my bishop that I was looking forward to exploring a life of faith outside the Christian community. Don't get me wrong. Despite its many abuses, I love the church and its rituals and symbolism. It's been part of my life over seventy years and helped to make me who I am. I was certainly tired of administrating and re-organising fifteen parishes but I'd become increasingly fed up with explaining that religious language is poetic, weary of explaining to people both inside and outside the church what is and what is not part of traditional belief.

Now, in retirement I attend more funerals than I take and most are led by celebrants rather than priests. I have no objections to humanist celebrants, indeed I was one for a while, that is until the BHA discovered that I was a priest and banned me! Creating a ritual centred on the celebration of the deceased life is good but I miss the brutal reality of the words of the Burial Service. 'In the midst of life we are in death'. For the bittersweet nature of life and love, gives death meaning and makes it something infinitely precious to us.

Irony on the Via Dolorosa?

Jerusalem

Caroline Pickard

Beside the Fourth Station of the Cross along the route ascribed to Jesus on his way to crucifixion is an Israeli check point. We sat in the cafe opposite and watched as young Palestinian males were routinely stopped and searched, often up against the wall behind, as their ID details were taken by the military. Even a lad of about 12 or 13, passing with his family was subjected to this, reassured on release with an arm around his shoulder from his mother.

What was interesting, and to me shocking, were the reactions of some of the pilgrim groups as they passed. There were smiles, thumbs up for the

soldiers and selfies taken. We challenged one member of such a group asking why she thought the soldiers were there and got 'Yeah, well, yeah' and a shrug. Would it have been so very different two thousand years ago? Was the situation then, a violent military Roman occupation, so very different from the one imposed today by the Israeli authorities? And it's hard to challenge authority, religious or military; it's easier to ignore it. As it was then, so is it now.

I shook the hand of one young man as he was released and I felt just a little bit like Simon of Cyrene.

For several years Caroline has been picking olives in support of Palestinian farmers during the October harvest. She has experienced first hand the violence visited upon the Palestinians on a daily basis by the illegal Israeli settlers. carolinepickard6@gmail.com

Our Wounded Body Politic

Frank Regan

This winter of 2022-23 has shaken our society and awakened us to a situation in which the lives and welfare of millions of our fellow citizens are seriously at risk. As one who professes to be a follower (not a worshiper) of Jesus of Nazareth, I hear constantly in my heart words of his which I consider to be his most beautiful: 'I have come that you may have life, and have it to the full' (Jn 10:10). He did not come to found a new religion. He came to share our lives, to tell us that we are loved and together we can make life like a kingdom of peace, justice and joy (Romans 14:17). Today's situation is in danger of being one of death in abundance, a low hallmark of what it is like to live between hope and despair today in the sixth largest economy on the planet.

We live in an era in which things important to a healthy polity are in decline, not to say, fast deteriorating: ecosystems, quality of life, standards in public life, equality, human rights, decent pay, secure work conditions etc. Elections come and go. Nothing seems to change – except the offices of prime minister and chancellor. The gap between rich and poor, powerful and powerless has deepened. Government, be it here or elsewhere in the West, functions at the behest of social media billionaires, giant transnational corporations and banks, and vested interests of various sorts, personal or institutional.

Our Culture

Culture is a whole way of life, lived in family, neighbourhood community, the town or city, in close relationship to the earth and the wider society. The experience creates a process of spiritual and intellectual development. Thus develop society's values, customs, beliefs and symbolic practices by which men and women live together in harmony. And from the experience of harmony among citizens and of harmony with nature emanates a body of artistic and intellectual achievement. Our culture, then, is about our spirituality as a people. It is an organic expression of the values and beliefs by which we live and which we cultivate as something to be prized. It is also about the god or gods to whom we render cult.

Our Precariat

The vast number of strikes, the crisis in the NHS, the soaring cost of living all indicate a frayed cohesion. We are witnessing the rise of a 'precariat', a huge mass of people made vulnerable by their experience of 'precarity'. Income, employment, migration status, access to health care, social interaction have become life or death issues, leading to chronic insecurity. And it does not help the frame of mind of the precariat when they see extreme, in-your-face displays of wealth everywhere, especially in Westminster.

Our precariat has been increasing in size since at least 2010. They have been living under a political and economic regime whose unifying theme has been Austerity. This has meant that the quality of life of the great majority of this country has deteriorated to, in some instances, a grave extent. Austerity has been exacerbated by the war in Ukraine. Millions of families face staggering amounts of domestic debt. Our low wage economy is unsustainable. Even when there is a breadwinner in the household, bills for heating and cost of living in general are too burdensome.

Former Prime Minister Gordon Brown has written vociferously on the subject of precarity. He has prognosticated a 'winter of destitution' in which millions of children could tumble into poverty. He foresees the food bank as a core element of social welfare and economic survival with charity as its motivation. Last year at least 271,000 persons were homeless in England on any given night. 123,000 of them were children. Our political leadership speaks principally of growing the economy, ignoring the presence of millions who suffer under the present economic model. I am reminded of those who mourn (Mt 5:4). They dream of a new model, a new politics. They ache for God's new day.

This island is a beautiful country with its picturesque landscapes, iconic towns and cities and varied geography. The British are by and large talented, well-educated, tolerant and inclined to let be. But we are in a terrible economic shambles and we are badly governed.

This goes back to the rot that has infected our political culture. Perhaps its most egregious manifestation is what I often call The Big Lie. It would be tempting to name and blame one or two politicians most culpable of domesticating the Lie in Westminster. But if we go back a decade or so we recall the scandal of ‘cash for questions’, ‘cash for contacts’ and MPs’ expenses scandal. The Lie has grown since. Partygate is an atrocious example.

Sadly, our political culture has been corrupted by power and greed. The Lie has been ensconced at the core of our governance. The word ‘ethical’ has been expunged from the Parliamentary code with barely a word of objection raised. Only recently has an ethics advisor been appointed after many months of waiting. Of course, he has no power to prosecute, but he has delivered in the case of Nadhim Zahawi.

Incredibly, the persistent lying has become a wake-up call. The last few years have seen the rise of various movements and organizations insisting on telling their truth. The truth-tellers insist on being listened to and are willing to be disruptive and risk being prosecuted as criminals.

Justice and Truth

In his inaugural address two years ago, President Joe Biden invoked Saint Augustine when he said the ‘a people are a multitude defined by the objects of their love’. What are the common objects of our love? Are they not values and ideals like justice, honesty, integrity, equality, solidarity, generosity, truth, harmony and peace? And could we not add that those who come to our shores, even in small boats, also esteem those values and ideals? I shudder when politicians share their sick-souled dreams of planeloads of refugees being transported to lands where we can easily forget them and abandon them to their fate very often determined by people traffickers.

We shall do well to keep Augustine’s questions before us. What objects of love will bring us into harmony? Can we sustain civic peace that does justice even though there are deep, real differences between us, especially environmental, sex and gender, racial and social. Britain’s imperial past tempts us towards

domination and glory, to punch above our weight. We still hear colonial echoes of phrases like ‘watermelon smiles’ and ‘women looking like letterboxes’. Will we let our disagreements and our unaddressed prejudices sever our bonds of affection?

We long for justice, but justice is intimately related to truth: the truth of our real situation, the truth of virtue and probity, the truth of the human person, the truth of equity and, for some, the truth of God whose voice can still be heard in the sighs and clamour of the poor. That truth has almost vanished. Our political leaders have made that fact abundantly clear. We love the idea of truth and we respect our truth-tellers. But we tend to filter out the harsher truths and hear only those which flatter our false sense of who we are. The more recent political and social movements have raised the issues of truth which leads to justice. Our political leadership has not been receptive and, through legislation, seeks to quell the passion for truth and justice, thus silencing its voices.

Biblical Tradition

The Bible is our foundational text. In it we read of a God who saw and heard and felt the misery and oppression of an enslaved mass of people. God became the god of the history of their long march to freedom and a new land – march not yet culminated. Jesus of Nazareth is a son of that history. He inherited Israel’s prophetic tradition. A prophet is one for whom the concern for God’s holiness and concern for justice for the poor are one and the same concern.

Jesus appears in Nazareth, among his own, and announces good news to the afflicted and poor. He is sensitive to the vision of Isaiah. He saw God doing something new (65:17-25). God will create a new Jerusalem to be joy and his people to be gladness. There will be no more weeping over an infant recently born who dies within days. Joy will be Jesus’ particular gift. He says in John 15 that he told his friends the things he did so that their joy would be complete. Paul caught sight of the vision when he describes the coming reign of God as comprising ‘justice, peace and joy’ (Rom 14:17).



Homelessness protest shuts down Whitehall. kathduncan-equality-civilrights-network.co.uk

Besides being of the prophetic line, Jesus belonged to a legal tradition which had framed a law of Jubilee. The law decreed the liberation of slaves and indentured servants, the forgiveness of debts, the restoration of lands lost by failure to pay creditors and a year's rest for land exhausted by constant cultivation (Lev 25 and Deut 15). This recalibration of society is a challenge to us trapped in the quicksand of an economic model which, for instance, will grant to earners of one million pounds a tax rebatement of £55,000, equivalent to the average yearly pay of two workers.

Final Thoughts

One of the many things I learned from my experience of Peru (1967-1989) and of grappling with Liberation Theology is that the primary aim of politics is the protection of the vulnerable. Our biblical tradition is clear about that. In Psalm 72 we read:

'The king rescues the needy who call to him,
and the poor who have no one to help...
From oppression and violence he redeems
their lives,
Their blood is precious in his sight'.

A political leadership whose goals are growth and political control is a hollow entity which will crumble to sawdust when confronted with the death and destruction it has wrought. As a people we have been deprived of good upright governance. Sleaze has taken over. The rampant evil is not the outcome of serious maladjustments which lend themselves to tweaking and reform. The evil is cultural and systemic from its head, to its heart and to the narrowest capillary. W. B. Yeats in a prophetic moment wrote ages ago: 'the centre cannot hold...the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity...'

The historical task of radical change will rely for engagement on those who can think and act systemically, beyond structures for the dispensing of charity or assistance. We need good people who are politically savvy. Only thus might we avoid an apocalyptic calamity. 'Whom will I send?' asks Yahweh of Isaiah. It says somewhere in the Book of Wisdom that hope lies in the greatest number of wise people. Where are they?

Frank Regan is the former editor of *Renew*, the magazine of Catholics for a Changing Church.

Religion and Politics in Latin America

Francis McDonagh

In 380 CE the Roman emperor Theodosius declared Christianity to be the official religion of the empire. This was some fourteen centuries before Christianity came to Latin America, but the decree established an alliance between throne and altar, or perhaps better, cross and sword, that determined the impact of this religion on the New World.

In the fifteenth century CE, Christopher Columbus, for all his skill as a navigator, had fantasies that his first landfall, in Haiti, was one of the islands from which Solomon had brought riches to Jerusalem (1 Kings 10). Riches, of course, were the other element in the voyages of exploration that began around this time; one of the early reports we have of Columbus is that in 1478 he was buying sugar in Madeira. Religion, however, cannot be kept out of the story: part of the impetus for the voyages was the defeat of the Muslims in Spain, the *Reconquista*, and there were dreams of establishing a Christian kingdom in the Holy Land.

Religion was prominent in Columbus' 1493 voyage, and a group of Franciscans sailed with him. In Mexico, Hernán Cortés took advantage of the resentment of the peoples against Aztec domination, and after entering Tenochtitlán (modern Mexico City) in 1519, seized the emperor Montezuma and used conversion as part of his technique of domination. 'Conversion' is not perhaps the best word for the process, as Catholic missionaries tended to baptise local people in something like a production line, without dwelling too much on the content of the new faith. When local people did attempt to interpret Christianity in terms of their own world view, as in the case of the Aztec Juan Diego, whose original name was Cuauhtlatoatzin ('the Talking Eagle') who had a vision of the Virgin Mary, it took enormous efforts for the religious authorities to accept this as authentic faith.

The suffering inflicted on the indigenous inhabitants, and later on the Africans transported from their homeland, especially to Brazil, where



The Pan-Amazon Synod. Pope Francis meets indigenous people. secretariat.synod.va/

the local people were said to be too weak to work the sugar plantations, was generally taken for granted by the white population. There were exceptions, such as Antonio de Montesinos and the better known Bartolomé de Las Casas. In December 1511 Montesinos told the whites of Santo Domingo:

You are all in mortal sin. You will live and die in it because of the cruelties and tyrannies you inflict on these innocent people. Tell me: by what right and on the basis of what justice do you keep the Indians in such cruel and horrible servitude?

Montesinos and Las Casas agreed that the root of the problem was European greed. Las Casas wrote:

The reason why the Christians have killed and destroyed such an infinite number of souls is that they have been moved by their wish for gold and their desire to enrich themselves in a very short time.

But the Christians treated such criticism as a nuisance, and ignored it. The eventual movement for the abolition of slavery was not a specifically Christian one, but based on liberal, Enlightenment values. As the Latin American colonies gradually acquired their independence, Church and state were separated, giving way to secular republics.

The growing diversity of Christianity in Europe after the Reformation took time to be reflected in Latin America. One minor example is in fact political. During the time the Dutch seized control of Recife in northeast Brazil from the Portuguese, the Jewish community from the Netherlands built a synagogue in the city, but they were expelled when the Portuguese took back control.

Protestant missionaries did not begin to arrive in Latin America until the early 19th century, when the so-called 'historic' Protestant churches were established, Anglican, Presbyterian and Baptist. From the middle of the 20th century there has been a massive growth of Pentecostal churches, which range from huge organisations such as the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God to tiny local communities; this very flexibility may account for their success, when compared with the cumbersome and male-dominated structure of the Catholic Church.

The renewal in the Catholic Church promoted by the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) was

taken up with enthusiasm by the leadership of the Catholic Church in Latin America, which established a regional body, CELAM, and held a series of continental conferences over the next 40 years. The first of these, in Medellín, Colombia, in 1968 proclaimed the 'preferential option for the poor', and in 1971 the Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez published his *Theology of Liberation*, which gave its name to a school of theology that argued that Christians should be active in combating poverty and 'structures of injustice'.

Although this was rare, the ELN guerrillas had a number of priests in its ranks and the Colombian priest Camilo Torres died fighting with the ELN.

More widespread were the 'Christian base communities', which were an attempt to root the Church in localities and enable local communities to work out the practical implications of Christianity for their own lives. This movement was important in giving support to the strikes in São Paulo in the 1970s from which Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, Brazil's current president, first emerged as a national leader. These liberationist ventures in the Latin American church, especially Brazil, were viewed with suspicion by the anti-communist Polish Pope John Paul II, and he used his appointment of bishops to restrain it.

A symbol of John Paul's attitude was his finger-wagging rebuke of Nicaraguan priest Ernesto Cardenal, one of several priests who were ministers in the Sandinista government. Famously also, Oscar Romero, archbishop of San Salvador, and an opponent of the military regime in El Salvador, was shot dead in 1980 while celebrating mass, and six Jesuits from El Salvador's Central American University were also murdered by soldiers in 1989.

Jorge Mario Bergoglio, the Argentine cardinal elected in 2013 as Pope Francis, is not a follower of liberation theology, but he has called for 'a poor Church for the poor', and linked this with a concern for the environment, notably in his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'*, with its explanatory subtitle 'On Care for the Common Home'.

A sequel to this document was the synod on the Amazon region, held in October 2019. This looked at the situation of the region and its peoples, and included representatives of 16 Amazon peoples. As well as looking at ways in which the destruction of the rainforest could be halted, the meeting took a more respectful view of the cultures of indigenous peoples and their relation to Christianity, provoking allegations that

the synod was promoting ‘pantheism’. Also controversial for many Catholics were the proposal to ordain married men and to admit women to the diaconate, both measures that would enable the Church to function fully in such remote regions.

If the implications of the Amazon synod will take many years to come to fruition, a concentrated example of the interplay of religion and politics came in the Brazilian presidential election of 2022, which in the second round on 30 October saw Jair Bolsonaro, the president in office, facing Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, himself a two-term president from 2003 to 2010. Neither man is known for strong religious convictions, but both were raised as Catholics. But Bolsonaro found in the Pentecostal churches a constituency that shared his conservative views on homosexuality, gay marriage and abortion, issues on which Pentecostals are much more conservative than Catholics in Brazil.

During the 2000s Bolsonaro formed an alliance with Silas Malafaia, the leader of the Assembly of God Victory in Christ, a successful tele-evangelist, and took up these issues in Congress. Another important influence was his Congressional assistant, Michelle Reinato, a fervent Pentecostal, who became his third wife in 2013, in a ceremony conducted by Silas Malafaia. The alliance with the pastors seemed to be paying off: in the 2014 legislative elections Bolsonaro’s votes increased sevenfold. He completed this rebranding with a baptismal ceremony in the river Jordan conducted by a pastor and fellow Congress member. In the election Bolsonaro won in 2018, Pentecostal supporters distributed his election material outside churches.

The 2022 election was a greater challenge for Bolsonaro, with the polls a month before the election giving Lula a lead of 14 points. Bolsonaro once again showed himself to be a religious chameleon: two months before the first round of voting he attended a Catholic mass and received communion.

Bolsonaro did not lack support among Catholics. Despite the widely publicised differences between Catholic and Protestant voters, the creation of the religious Bolsonaro was partly the work of ultra-conservative Catholics. Ignacio Arsuaga, founder of the Spanish far-right group HazteOír (‘Make Your Voice Heard’), which has now expanded into an international English-language movement,

CitizenGO, came to Brazil in late 2013 to work with right-wing Catholics. Other elements of the Catholic far right include the Heralds of the Gospel, an offshoot of the older, traditionalist Catholic, anti-communist Tradition, Family, Property movement.

What unites these groups is a rejection of the Second Vatican Council and a loathing of Pope Francis. They have links with the long-time ally of Donald Trump, Steve Bannon. Bannon asserted that ‘Bolsonaro will win unless it’s stolen by, guess what, the machines.’ (Brazilians use voting machines at elections, and Bolsonaro has claimed, without any evidence, that they can be rigged.) Bannon has also described Lula as ‘the most dangerous leftist in the world, a criminal, a communist’. These ultra-conservative groups represent a minority of Brazilian Catholics, but their skilful use of social media gives them a disproportionate influence. One of the few Catholic voices speaking out publicly against Bolsonaro is the liberation theologian Leonardo Boff, who called this election ‘a choice between civilisation and barbarism’.

In one of his few comments about religion in the campaign, Lula said that Bolsonaro’s ‘greatest lie is to keep invoking the name of Jesus ... he uses the name of Jesus in vain in an attempt to abuse the good faith of the Christian women and men of this country.’ On 2 September the normally reticent Catholic bishops’ conference expressed their concern at ‘religious manipulation and the spreading of fake news, which has the power to destroy harmony among individuals, peoples and cultures, and threatens democracy. Religious manipulation, led by politicians and religious figures, distorts the values of the Gospel and distracts attention from the real problems that need to be debated and addressed.’

Lula of course won, though extremely narrowly, with a margin of less than 1%. There is evidence that the attack on the presidential palace, Congress and the Supreme Court on 8 January this year was in part organised by pastor politicians. If you talk to people in Brazil a month after Lula took office, you find that the poison of fake news – and perhaps fake religion – still runs through the veins of Latin America’s largest democracy.

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The Idea of 'Race' and its Origins in Slavery

David Rhodes

Woman, great is your faith

In September's editorial, Dinah referred to the story about Jesus and the Canaanite woman, asking if this shows that Jesus was being racist. The story, Mark 7.24, has Jesus wanting rest, but he could not escape notice. A Gentile woman came to Jesus, asking for her daughter to be healed. He said to her, *'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.'* She answered, *'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.'* He said, *'For saying that you may go – the demon has left your daughter.'*

I imagine Matthew pondering the story and adding a few details (Matthew 15: 21). He has the woman addressing Jesus as *'Lord, Son of David'*. He has the woman annoyingly shouting. And Jesus answers, *'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel'*. Jesus's final answer, *'Woman, great is your faith'* seems warmer than in Mark. These few details give the story more depth in both emphasising Jesus's mission to the Jews, and acknowledging his compassion for the Gentile woman. I also imagine Luke pondering the story and deciding to leave it out.

Is it just how people are?

The question 'Is Jesus being racist?' is more about what racism is than about Jesus's words and actions here. Since the pseudo-scientific notion of 'race' did not exist in the ancient world, then racism is not an appropriate description of what's going on here. You could dismiss that as a trivial point, as just semantics. But it's not trivial; I hope I don't have to convince *Sofia* readers that racism is a far from trivial issue – one that is literally a life and death matter to many in the world and one which (especially with the Black Lives Matter movement) confronts us, as mainly white SOF members.

One white supremacist response to the challenge of racism is to trivialise it by discounting the historical circumstances of racism. This is the 'people have always been racist'

approach: people have always preferred people like them, have been rude and unkind to other groups. So, the reasoning goes on, that's the same as racism today, it's just how people are, and those on the receiving end should get over it.

But racism isn't just how people are. It has specific roots in specific social conditions of oppression. Racism is about power. The concept of race is a direct product of colonialism, empire and slavery. The non-scientific idea of race arose quite specifically as a justification for slavery; race is not just a question of people having some different physical characteristics (skin colour especially) – it is about superiority of one 'race' over others. It's the colonial story and it justified slavery.

The concept of 'race'

The concept of 'race', as we know it, arose in the seventeenth century, was reinforced by Enlightenment ideas and the collusion of the churches in the eighteenth century, and was used overtly in the colonial expansion of the nineteenth century. Before then, the word referred to a community or kinship group with common ancestry, but with no implication of superiority.

The first significant numbers of African people were brought to the Americas in the early 1600s, working alongside European indentured servants and enslaved Indigenous people. As the Indigenous people escaped or died of disease, and as the indentured system became economically unviable, enslaved Africans became the main workforce, especially in plantations. From the 1660s slavery became hereditary and slaves were formally the property of their owners. The massive rise of capitalism and its wealth was fuelled by the slave economy of the colonies, and, as ever, the dominant social system required its justifying set of ideologies.

Slavery did not happen because of racism – plantation owners and capitalists don't care what colour the skins of their sources of profit are. Racism grew as a justification for slavery. And

racism requires the concept of race. As US author Ta-Nehisi Coates says: *'Race is the child of racism, not the father'*.¹

'Scientific Racism'

Eighteenth century 'scientific' and 'biological' explanations of apparent differences consolidated the concept of 'race'. Influential writers argued in favour of polygenism – the theory that different types of humans were created separately, with black people as a different species. Voltaire, comparing Caucasians to those with dark skin, claimed they were different species:

*'The negro race is a species of men different from ours as the breed of spaniels is from that of greyhounds. The mucous membrane, or network, which nature has spread between the muscles and the skin, is white in us and black or copper-coloured in them.'*²

Historians have suggested that Voltaire's support for polygenism was shaped by his financial investments in French colonial companies.

Thomas Jefferson, the American politician, scientist and slave owner, is credited with significant contributions to scientific racism. According to an article published in the *McGill Journal of Medicine*:

*'One of the most influential pre-Darwinian racial theorists, Jefferson's call for science to determine the obvious 'inferiority' of African Americans is an extremely important stage in the evolution of scientific racism.'*³

The Enlightenment passion for sorting and categorisation reaches its summit in the work of Carl Linnaeus (1707–1778), the Swedish physician, botanist, and zoologist. This is from the Linnean Society:

*'One of the origins of scientific racism can be traced to Linnaeus' work on the classification of man, which had devastating and far-reaching consequences for humanity. His work on man forms one of the 18th-century roots of modern scientific racism.'*⁴

For Linnaeus, there were four separate 'varieties' of humans with separate characteristics: European white; American reddish; Asian tawny;

African black. There is no scientific basis for 'race' – it is entirely a social construct.

Some 'did you knows'

The legacy of slavery and colonialism in the form of racism is uncomfortable to lots of white people, as I am aware from many conversations. Here are some typical reactions:

1. 'Did you know that slavery has always existed – it wasn't just us?'
2. 'Did you know that Black people were involved in the slave trade?'
3. 'History is history – why don't we just forget and move on?'

Points 1 and 2 are of course true, but completely miss the point.

'Slavery has always existed'

Slavery takes many forms and has indeed existed since Neolithic times, since the advent of class societies. Moses sanctions the acquisition of slaves from neighbouring nations (Leviticus 25.46). Ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome were built and sustained by slaves. But there was no attempt to justify slavery in terms of 'race'. People became slaves mostly through destitution or capture in war. And our argument is not that the Atlantic slave trade was uniquely 'bad' – but that racism developed as a justification for the slave trade. Having said that, the mass enforced transportation and enslavement of Africans, and the specifics of chattel slavery, was a unique crime. According to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, 12.5 million Africans were shipped to the New World.⁵

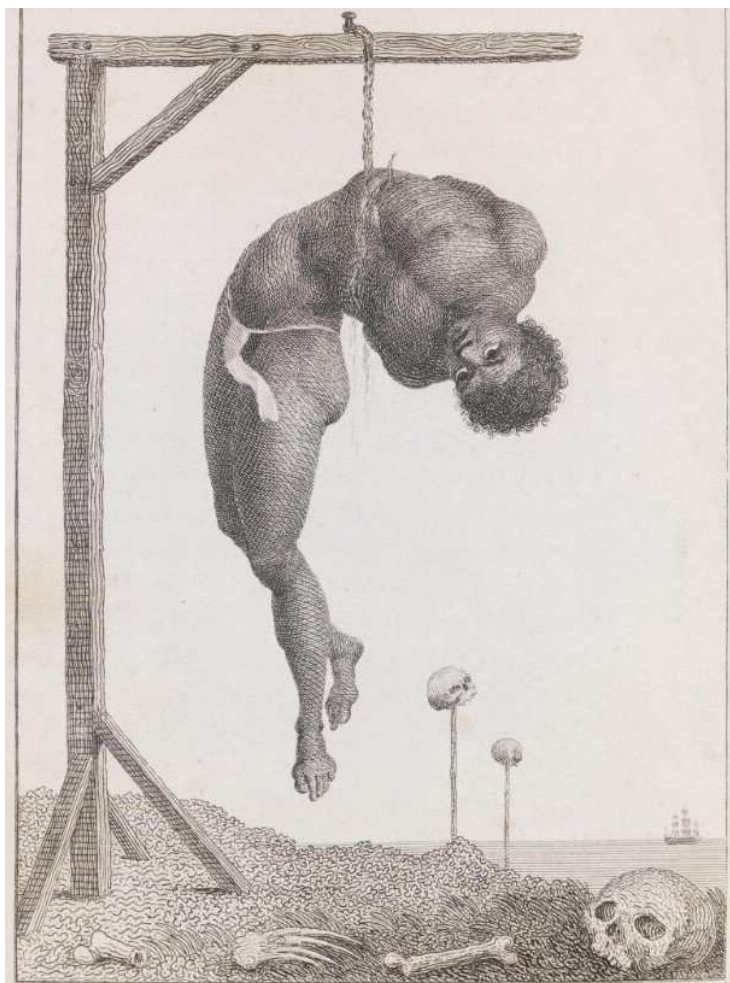
'Black people were involved'

And those who point to the involvement of Africans in slavery miss the point. It's often used in the sense of 'well lots of blacks were involved so why blame white people?' The slave economy is not about 'race', it's about class. It is one class using the enforced labour of another for production of profit. To repeat, European capitalists don't care whether the labour is black or white. But in the case of the transatlantic slave trade,

racism was used as a moral justification for the atrocities.

African states were class societies whose elites benefited from slavery. The slave trade was, as we all know, a triangular trade involving Europe, Africa and the Americas. For most people, knowledge is depressingly low – and for the one point in the triangle – Africa – it is practically zero.

In St Peter's church, Dorchester, there's a big plaque commemorating the brutal suppression of a revolt by enslaved people in Jamaica in 1760, known as Tacky's revolt – Tacky was the most prominent of the leaders killed in the suppression. The plaque is covered up now, pending its removal to the Dorset Museum next door. ⁶The process leading to its removal attracted some publicity locally and the *Daily Mail* tried to do its woke culture war thing. It led to a Church of England Consistory Court judgement (church bureaucracy is arcane, but it gets there) and contributed to the commendable C of E report and guidelines on 'contested heritage'.



William Blake: *A Negro hung alive by the ribs from a gallows.*
collections.vam.ac.uk

All this prompted a close look at the history of Tacky's revolt, and by chance an excellent book on the revolt had just been published by Vincent Brown, Professor of African and African American studies at Harvard University.⁷ Vincent Brown kindly helped in the discussion with the C of E hierarchy. A major point of the book is that the events in Jamaica cannot be understood without looking at the history of Africa – in this case the 'Gold Coast' and 'Slave Coast' (Ivory Coast, Ghana, to Nigeria) – the second point in the triangle. There were several states in competition for wealth and resources, with the Asante becoming a regional superpower in the late seventeenth century. The states were class societies, with a bottom class of unfree people with certain traditional rights. The demand for chattel slaves for transportation was disruptive, with wars increasingly being fought to obtain slaves (rather than slaves from defeated nations being a sort of by-product of war). Tacky, the leader of the 1760 revolt in Jamaica was part of

the elite, and traded slaves with the British before himself being defeated, captured and enslaved.

My point in briefly mentioning the situation in Africa is twofold. First, to emphasise that slavery is a class-based institution, not inherently to do with 'race'. Slavery does not come from racism – racism arose from slavery. Second, it's not a case of admitting that 'Black people were involved too, you know'; on the contrary it is important to understand the history of African societies in the slave trade – avoiding that is colonialist history – blindness in portraying Black people just as helpless victims.

'It's History now'

My third example of white reaction is the 'it's history now, let's move on' approach. What a snake-pit that is; there's so much buried in that reaction! In 2020 the National Trust issued a report looking at the way its properties were linked with colonialism and slavery, which would

seem a perfectly reasonable question for an organisation involved with heritage and history. A proposal was floated to put a notice (3ft by 2ft maybe) in its properties (some of which are massive) asking, and answering, the simple question: ‘where did the wealth to build and maintain this property come from?’ Sounds reasonable.

The reaction from the right-wing press and the right-wing commentators was one of fury – ‘self-hatred’, ‘ruining our heritage’, calls for boycotts and court action, and so on. These people understand perfectly well how colonialism and racism are linked to their privilege and power – they don’t need a lesson in that, they want to suppress the debate.

The history of racism matters because it’s still with us – it matters today. To understand the source of racism is the start of combatting racism. Whenever a Black person is subject to racism (slights, jokes, educational disadvantage, police violence) that person is suffering not just a personal insult but is part of historical injustice. Racial injustice, or institutional racism, is not ‘history’.

Vast inequalities of wealth and power, both domestically and internationally, cannot simply be explained by slavery; but it is certainly an important factor. And given the link between slavery and racism, that imbalance of wealth and power reinforces racial injustice.

If you come down to Dorset, you might drive along the A31 between Wimborne and Bere Regis. You will drive next to a wall that seems to go on for ever, punctuated by some fine gates with statues of stags. I think of the wall as stuck together not by cement but by African blood. It hides the 700 acre garden and deer park of probably the wealthiest landowner in the Commons and the largest individual landowner in the county – Richard Drax, MP for South Dorset. The enormous family wealth comes from slave-based sugar plantations in Barbados and Jamaica, and Drax still owns Drax Hall, a 250-hectare plantation in Barbados. The comparison between Drax’s wealth and the life of most Barbadian people is not ‘history’, and that is what is motivating the demands from the Barbados government for reparations, starting by handing over Drax Hall to the people of Barbados.⁸

The issue of reparations is both simple and complex. It’s simple because there is a straightforward moral imperative. If you have done somebody wrong, the right thing to do is to acknowledge the wrong, to apologise, and (critically) to do something about putting it right. And since we (relatively well-off British people) have benefited from the wrong, we share responsibility. But, certainly, the form that reparations should take is far from straightforward, as the recent report by the Church of England (10 Jan 2023) acknowledges.⁹

Other types of racism

In this article I have concentrated on racism as it manifests itself towards those of Black African heritage, and its links to transatlantic slavery. Of course there are different types of racism, and I am absolutely not arguing that any one type of racism is worse than any other. Hatred directed at South Asians, Irish, Chinese – all have different historical specifics. But they all share the legacy of colonialism and empire. Anti-Semitism and prejudice against Gypsy, Roma and Travellers are different types of racism again relating to power and oppression. They all have specific histories. Their roots are in colonialism – personal attitudes are but a manifestation of these roots.

Notes

1. Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*, 2015
2. Voltaire, *Works of Voltaire, Vol. XIX (Philosophical Letters)*, (1733)
3. *A Brave Old World: An Analysis of Scientific Racism* Joel Z. Garrod 2006
4. linnean.org/learning/who-was-linnaeus/linnaeus-and-race
5. slavevoyages.org/
6. For more on the campaign around the plaque: For-web-publication-The-Coromantee-Wars-of-1760.pdf (dorsetuncovered.org.uk)
7. *Tacky’s Revolt – The Story of an Atlantic Slave War* Vincent Brown 2020
8. For more on Drax and Barbados: C4 film on Barbados & Drax Hall – Dorset Uncovered
9. This article contains a link to the report for the Church Commissioners: C of E setting up £100m fund to ‘address past wrongs’ of slave trade links | Anglicanism | [The Guardian](http://TheGuardian)

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An Eco-Human Future

Ian Harris

A growing number of prophets have warned of the pressures that human activity is putting on the planet's systems and resources. Among them are Rachel Carson, Arnold Toynbee, Martin Rees, Thomas Berry, Brian Swimme, locally Lloyd Geering and Dave Lowe, climate scientists, United Nations panels, NGOS – all calling passionately for humanity to turn away from destructive technologies, life-styles and values. Turn away: the biblical word for that is 'repent'.

Sketching the scene all too briefly, *homo sapiens* has taken the biblical advice to be fruitful and multiply so much to heart that the world's population has mushroomed from around 1.6 billion in 1900 to 8 billion today. Meanwhile advances in farming and industry have produced not only the standard of living we enjoy in the West, but also technologies that pollute air, water and soil on a grand scale, deplete the ozone layer, warm the oceans and make them more acidic, and generate climate change. In the name of progress and economic growth, developers raze rainforests, destroy long-established communities, and wipe out whole species of life.

Burning fossil fuels is tipping the balance against our children's future. According to James Hansen, a leading climate scientist, carbon dioxide is pouring into the atmosphere at a rate equivalent to exploding 400,000 Hiroshima bombs every day. The gases form a greenhouse blanket around the Earth that distorts the balance between solar energy coming in and Earth-generated energy escaping from the atmosphere. We're already seeing the consequences in hotter, longer and more frequent heat waves and droughts, fiercer bushfires, harsher winters, wilder storms and flooding, and melting permafrost and glaciers – on one day in 2019, according to Nasa, Arctic glaciers lost an estimated 12½ billion tonnes of ice. The Antarctic is also carving ice at an alarming rate. The polar glaciers are disappearing six times faster than in 1990, and sea levels are set to rise, some say by three metres, by the year 2100.

A multitude of organisations campaign to reverse the process, but governments seem readier to listen to economists arguing for growth at all costs ahead of ecologists pleading for sustainability. Governments promise much, but continue to dither. A *Guardian* investigation revealed in May this year that the world's biggest fossil fuel corporations have 195 projects on their books, most of them already under way. Each would detonate carbon bombs of at least a billion tonnes of carbon dioxide. 'Unchecked greed,' says the *Guardian*, 'is driving us ever closer to the abyss.' Thomas Berry, an American monk and eco-theologian, dismally sums up: 'Our ultimate failure as human beings is to become not a crowning glory of the Earth, but the instrument of its degradation.' A new word has come into the language to describe what's happening here: 'ecocide'.

The idea developed in Christianity that the Earth is a 'vale of woe'. Human fulfilment does not lie here, but in the soul's release from Earth into the bliss and purity of heaven. Spirituality is other-worldly. That idea has been given new life by fundamentalist Christians wedded to neo-conservative economics, especially in the United States. So when the Bible says 'Have dominion over everything in nature', by hokey, they will – that's the way to economic growth, jobs, prosperity and riches.

It's not so long since the US Secretary of the Interior during Ronald Reagan's presidency, James Watt, was eager to give developers unlimited access to national parks and resources. His reasoning was that the Earth 'is merely a temporary way station on the road to eternal life. It is unimportant except as a place of testing to get into heaven. The Earth was put here by the Lord for his people to subdue and to use it for profitable purposes on the way to the hereafter.' President Bolsonaro of Brazil echoed that when he contemplated burning the forests of Amazonia, mused on the mineral resources that may lie beneath and said: 'Let's use the riches that

God gave us for the wellbeing of our population.’ Bad theology has a lot to answer for.

Of course the big mining, manufacturing and agricultural companies don’t rely on a theological argument to pursue their interests. Making money is reason enough. But common to both the idea of the Earth as a ‘vale of woe’ and the modern economics-above-all-else approach is the view that nature has no intrinsic value: it is there to serve us, its masters, in whatever ways we wish. Why hold back? Spirituality has nothing to do with the Earth.

Here we should acknowledge that Christianity has unwittingly played a role in the development of such destructive thinking. Our Judaeo-Christian heritage got rid of all the animistic gods and spirits that kept people’s rapport with the natural world respectful. This was liberating because it was the emergence of a monotheistic worldview that freed scientific inquirers to explore without fear of upsetting any deities or haunting spirits. And look at the human progress – and I mean that quite seriously – that has flowed from that!

Nevertheless, that view of the natural world as sitting there waiting for humans to conquer and quarry won’t do any more. In this present era we’re being catapulted into a paradigm shift in human understanding. We’re being forced to go right back to first principles and redefine the relationship of our species to the Earth. The benefits of that relationship have to be mutual, not all one-way in our favour. The evolving modern consciousness of the way humans might relate more positively to the Earth grows out of a new story of how we came to be here in the first place. That transforming story, which takes not six days but 13.7 billion years to unfold, is the great gift of science to our understanding of the planet and everything on it. It exalts the Earth and gives us an exciting new perspective on our place within the wondrous miracle of life.

Our new story tells us that along with the universe, along with this planet, along with all the life forms present on Earth, we humans are products of stardust and time. From the Big Bang at the very beginning, Earth has been continually evolving, geologically, physically,

biologically, and human life is a unique part of that process – not above it or below it, but an intrinsic part of it. We’re not creatures poised halfway between demons and angels and with the potential to go either way: we’re earthlings. Earth is not a mundane stepping-stone on our way to a realm beyond death.

Our life here is almost certainly all the life we shall ever know. It’s here that we must find meaning and purpose. It’s here we must work out our salvation, which means finding our wholeness as creatures of the universe. It’s here we must make sense of God, and find a spirituality that fits with all this. Many who claim the name ‘Christian’ now find they are subtly changing the way they think about God, including a huge shift in our consciousness of power. Once God, conceived theistically, was assumed to have all the power. Only God was almighty. Only God was all-knowing, Only God was all-wise. Not quite any more. Humans now have knowledge unimaginable to previous generations and power to manipulate genes, cure once-deadly diseases – and destroy en masse with nuclear and biological weapons. Where we fall short is in the wisdom to marshal all that knowledge and power for the betterment of our species, and of the planet that we share with all life.

We must rid ourselves of any lingering notion that the human species is free to lord it over nature. We have to replace that with a living awareness that we’re but one strand – an important strand, but still only one strand – of the grand reality of nature, and every strand is to be nurtured and valued. We’ve become used to the word ‘humankind’ referring to our own species: there’s another new word embracing this wider, all-encompassing dimension: ‘lifekind’, which must include the planet on which lifekind depends.

It’s fair, though, to acknowledge that although we’re basically a product of stardust and time, just like everything else, the human species has developed one unique attribute: we are the consciousness of the planet. The consciousness; but not yet the conscience. We make up what the French priest and philosopher Teilhard de Chardin called the noosphere, that envelope of



Orangutan mother and baby. Many animals depend upon forests.

awareness of the Earth, and increasingly of each other, in a way no other life form shares. And it's that very attribute, our consciousness, that's now being challenged to respond to what has emerged as the great salvation/destruction question of our time:

Has our Christian heritage anything useful or distinctive to offer? I believe it has – as long as we're willing to expand our understanding of religion and spirituality to embrace the new story of creation, the new challenges, the new responsibilities that our new millennium presents. For me, the role of religion is central because, properly understood, it touches every aspect of our lives as individuals, societies, and denizens of planet Earth. It's not some kind of spiritual clip-on to so-called 'real life' experience, nor even to do with a supernatural dimension to life (though some will insist on seeing it that way). It's something integral to our very being. It joins the rationality of our left-brain *logos* with the imaginative creativity of our right-brain *mythos*.

An Italian orientalist and religious historian, Carlo Della Casa, defines religion aptly as 'a total mode of the interpreting and living of life'. That total mode obviously begins with our immersion

in the material world, and builds from there. We see that clearly in Christianity, for at the heart of Christian faith lies the concept of the Incarnation – that is, God or Godness enfleshed in our human and material world. That means we live within a 'divine milieu' (to borrow a phrase from Teilhard de Chardin), which I think of as an active, all-surrounding, constant, force-field of love. The social gospel, important in my own Methodist upbringing, preached to raise ordinary people out of poverty and despair in this life, and give them a new dignity within society. Excellent as far as it went, but missing was concern for the Earth on which life pivots. A modern spirituality needs the gospel as 'good news for the poor', but it also needs more.

Of course, the scale of the climate crisis demands much more than each of us doing a bit better with our household waste. Government action to curb fossil fuels, protect key environments, penalise pollution, limit population growth, re-orient business towards carbon neutrality – all that and more are urgently needed. There are mountains of reports and recommendations in this area, but here I want to focus on the positive role that spirituality can play. First, and crucially, let's reorient our theological or

philosophical approach from being human to being eco-human. This is the bedrock for evolving a new dimension in our spirituality, and so towards a new humanity. Lloyd Geering touched on this when writing of *The Greening of Christianity*: ‘Ecological spirituality,’ he says, ‘will focus on the nature of our relatedness, not only to one another as humans in human society, but also to all living forms of life in the ecosphere, and to the forces of nature.’ Relatedness. That’s the key word here.

As for a new humanity, isn’t that what Christian faith is all about? Traditionally the focus has been on new individuals, their lives inspired by the archetypal Christ of love, grace and transformation, and by a vision of a new society, a society living by the highest values we know, of compassion, justice and love. In Christian shorthand, that’s the kingdom of God on Earth. Today, however, a society centred on our relatedness as humans to human society is not enough, and perhaps the supreme calling of the church in this generation is to broaden its vision to give equal emphasis to a spirituality that relates us to all living forms of life in the ecosphere.

In opening ourselves to this, there’s wisdom to be drawn from indigenous communities who’ve come close to achieving that in their own environments, such as the Omaha and the Maori. As a secular Christian, I see no problem in conceiving of a *mauri*, a life force, at work in an ocean, a river, a mountain, the forests of Te Urewera – a life essence to be respected, a life energy we can live alongside, respond to and enjoy. To the Maori that’s the *mauri*, and it’s everywhere in the natural world, in birds and animals, the plants in your garden, the soil, each has its own *mauri*. Allow that in your thinking, and you’ll find yourselves subtly, profoundly, changing the way you relate to an ocean, a river, a mountain, a forest, your pet, your rose garden, your friends, yourself: ‘an indivisible community of all living systems, sharing a common destiny.’

You might ask: Am I trying to sell a new animism? Have I joined those who call for a re-sacralising of nature, reviving old gods or creating new ones after the monotheistic religions swept them away? Absolutely not. I’m just urging a re-

set towards a new balance between us humans and all of nature, not a wholesale flip that would undermine not only the spirit of scientific inquiry that has served us so well, but also our Judaeo-Christian heritage. I shy away from acclaiming Tangaroa as god of the ocean. But how about Tangaroa as symbolising the life force of the ocean?

In *Sacred Nature*, published in 2022, Karen Armstrong, an English scholar of all religions, offers some suggestions towards a spirituality befitting an eco-human future. First, she says, take your ego out of the centre of your being: ‘Many of us are eager to achieve spiritual enlightenment of some kind, but often we don’t realise that this entails the loss of the self that we so busily and inventively preserve and promote.’ That’s also key, of course, to living with compassion. As to nature, she suggests we begin simply by ‘looking closely at our immediate environment, making ourselves aware of the magnificence of trees, flowers, birdsong and clouds, until they are no longer just a backdrop to our lives but a daily marvel’.

When that’s embedded we are ready steadily to expand our consciousness, rippling out to make room for all our fellow-beings, beyond our own ethnicity, our sex, our nationality, our politics, our religion, and our species. We are one in a global world. These are steps towards achieving a new balance between humanity and the wholeness of the natural world – a balance that will spur us, in Thomas Berry’s words, to ‘renew our human participation in the grand liturgy of the universe.’

This is a shortened version of the Sir Lloyd Geering Lecture Ian Harris gave to the New Zealand Sea of Faith Network’s annual conference in October 2022. He was founding chairman of the NZ SOF Network’s steering committee in 1993 and is now a life member. He edited the *New Zealand Methodist* newspaper, was Director of Communication for the NZ Presbyterian Church, and with others initiated the Ephesus Group. The full lecture is available at: tinyurl.com/I-Harris-Lecture

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The Body of Christ

Warmest congratulations and grateful thanks for yet another really excellent edition of *Sofia* (146). Here is my letter on your main theme *The Body of Christ*. 'The Body of Christ' is a metaphor, isn't it? Or is it a bureaucratic organisation that's very fussy about who is or isn't legally in it? Or is it more than a metaphor? What does it refer to?

At a SOF conference in Leicester a few years ago a Unitarian friend of mine, the late David Arthur, told us of an experience he had during a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. With a great crowd of pilgrims he attended mass conducted by the Cardinal Archbishop in the vast basilica. Speaking most clearly and emphatically in many languages the Cardinal said, 'I invite every one of you to come up and receive the bread. I invite you whether you are Catholic, Protestant or Orthodox, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist or Hindu. I invite you whether you say you have no religion or say that you are agnostic or atheist. I invite every one of you.'

This was the last thing David had expected from a Spanish Cardinal and he was deeply impressed. So am I. Was the Cardinal showing us that the Body of Christ is, more than just a metaphor: Blake's 'human form divine', Lear's 'unaccommodated man . . . poor bare, forked animal'; Gerard Manley Hopkins's 'jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch matchwood, immortal diamond'. As you say, 'a vision of humanity's fulfilment.'

*Frank Walker
Cambridge*

The Syrophenician Woman

In my view, the Passion Story apart, the story of the Syrophenician woman is, for SOF purposes, perhaps the most important story in the gospel of Mark. Read in the context both of Mark's claim that Jesus never taught without parables, and the discussion around the parable of the Sower, the story of the Syrophenician woman has a number of distinguishing features.

It includes the only example in Mark of a remote healing miracle, all the other miracles involve touch. Mark puts into Jesus' mouth a phrase explicitly drawing attention to the precise words used by the woman: '... for saying these words...' Jesus changing his mind when challenged to do so? What words exactly? The woman took Jesus' insulting response, likening the woman and her daughter to 'dogs', and immediately

turns it back to him, challenging Jesus for her own purposes. That challenge is one to which Jesus responds fulsomely. Mark's Jesus is a rabbi searching for



those who can turn a trope at the drop of hat. The very first recruits are invited to become 'fishers of men'. Those who are entirely at home within figurative language are able to act as the yeast in the dough in the creation and sustaining of the realm of heaven.

One of the strengths of this magazine has been its insistence on the significance of poetry, alerting us to the power of metaphor and imagination to further the possibilities of understanding human potential. Long may the Network continue so to do.

*David Lambourn
Bungay.*

Monarchy

Although I enjoyed reading John Pearson's account as he reconsiders his attitude towards the monarchy, I cannot agree with his implied conclusion that the lifestyle of members of the Royal Family is privileged and something to be envied. Being born a senior member of the Royal Family carries with it the loss of the normal personal freedoms available to ordinary citizens. I cannot imagine a life in which every aspect of one's private life is lived under the scrutiny of the public gaze and subject to their judgement at all times.

I like the idea of living in a Monarchy in which the head of State is not a political appointment but a ceremonial position which carries with it the weight of hundreds of years of tradition. As John says, ceremony is something we do rather in well. I am grateful that there are Royal Personages willing to accept the obligation to stand as figureheads so that I can experience the formal celebration of great state occasions. Long live the monarchy!

*Carol Palfrey
North Walsham, Norfolk*

Pope Benedict XVI

I first became aware of Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) through his writings, when at college and seminary in the 1960's – 70's, which impressed me with their erudition. This view began to change after years involved in ecumenical work seeking to build relationships with other churches and working towards agreed doctrinal statements. Concern changed to consternation when numbers of Anglican 'refugees' opposed to the ordination of women priests started to turn up in our parish. It soon became apparent that for these embittered souls there would be a warm official welcome to the church, but there would be no women at the altar of

the Catholic Church nor even discussion of the issue.

Instead of discussion apodictic statements became the norm, such as the one that caused much mirth at one deanery meeting in which Buddhism was characterised as a form of 'auto-eroticism': when people wondered what this could mean the Dean quipped, 'An undue love of motor cars!'

Disdain for discussion became the hallmark of Cardinal Ratzinger's tenure as head of the Inquisition – renamed the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) but unchanged in its secretive medieval procedures. Perhaps the most notorious case for the CDF under the direction of Cardinal Ratzinger (as he then was) was its remarkably inept confrontation with so-called Liberation Theology and theologians. Having

met a number of these impressive figures, including bishops, one comment that stands out in my mind is that this was not about theology but power. The centralisation of power in the Vatican trumped every other consideration regardless of how destructive this was to the church.

As Pope Benedict XVI, Ratzinger's legacy is of a timid man once burned by the experience of Nazism then blinded by the glare of Modernity who sought guidance by looking in the rear-view mirror, while content to dismiss half of humanity with misogynistic drivel. Such is the supposed light of the world!

*Dominic Kirkham
Manchester*

St Cuthbert and the Otters

'Down he went towards the beach and out into the sea. At daybreak he came out, knelt down and prayed. Then two otters bounded out of the water and tried to dry him with their fur.'

FROM: Bede's Life of Cuthbert.

Reading Bede, we tend to think
It must have been guilt drove him to it,
His own sense of sin that sent him
Out into those waters, an act
Of penance, of contrition,
And self-inflicted too.

But what if

It was one of those nights
We sometimes have in late July
When it's really too hot to sleep,
And he'd stepped outside for a breath of air,
And then decided to wade about
In the waves for a while, and feel
The sand between his toes.
And what if there'd been a full moon
Above the silhouette of Bamburgh
And glints of phosphorescence,
And his prayers had been of thanks –
Thanks for the cool, soft breeze
And the sound of the waves
Dragging at the shingle; thanks too
That he'd been granted this great
Ocean at all, let alone a pair
Of lively little sea otters
To play about with?

And what if he was
Laughing, yes, and thinking of singing?

Neil Curry



Image: reddit.com

This poem was first published in *Acumen* 104 (September 2022). Reprinted with the author's permission.

Edward Nickell reviews

Queer Holiness

by Charlie Bell

Darton Longman and Todd (London, 2022). Hbk. 224 pages. £16.99.

Note: Reflecting the book, 'queer' is used as a blanket term for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer and Intersex (LGBTQI).

Queer Holiness is a timely update on the endless Anglican debate on sexuality from Charlie Bell, a prominent campaigner on Twitter for equal marriage. In 200 pages – rather than 140 characters – Charlie concisely summarises the main arguments, the meagre progress and the human cost of it all – principally to queer people but also to those around them. The book offers a glimpse of the lessons the Church could learn from queer theology.

Same-sex marriage is the main conservative-progressive battleground in the Church of England, and as a gay Anglican I have skin in that game. But as *Queer Holiness* points out, the fundamental underlying disagreements are about how to read the bible and the role of human knowledge and experience in doctrine. Many members of the SOF Network may find they have something at stake in that.

Some conservative Christians, self-titled as 'Bible Believing Christians', argue that scripture alone (*sola scriptura*) should determine doctrine. Many Anglicans understand scripture through tradition and reason (*prima scriptura*), with reason including scientific knowledge and human experience. Conservatives see the contemporary understanding of sexuality as part of a sinful, worldly culture. Their certainty in scripture and opposition to this culture are a testament to their faithfulness.

Queer Holiness argues that this approach is more bible-abusing than bible-believing. One example tackled is the practice of 'proof-texting': taking verses out of context to bash an opponent. Proof texting, by implication, suggests that the person doing the selecting 'has more to say than the totality of the inspired word of God'. Instead, we should look at the overall narrative of the scripture.

Theology needs to take human knowledge seriously, including what science has to say about sexuality and human wellbeing. As well as being a campaigner and clergy person, Charlie is a clinical psychiatrist, so he has some authority on the importance of relationships to well-being and the toxic effects of repression. This book doesn't just look at the harms caused to queer people, but at the impact of the culture of secrecy and dishonesty on their families, friends and the wider church.

The bizarre situations created by the church now have their own jargon, explained patiently in this book. For example, Conservatives prefer the term 'same-sex attracted' to gay – as it conveys a condition not an identity. There are

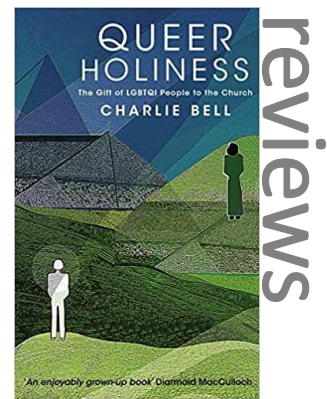
'Side A' gay Christians, who believe that gay relations are compatible with Christian ethics, and 'Side B' same-sex attracted Christians, who hold to a 'traditional' ethic meaning they are either celibate or may, knowingly, have a straight marriage and family.

It's more complicated for queer clergy, who are allowed a celibate civil partnership but lose their job for getting a civil marriage. Yet, sex outside marriage and open secrets are tolerated... The dishonesty goes to the top, where bishops who support change fear speaking out publicly in case it is seen as causing disunity.

The Church of England has just been through a two-year national conversation on sex and gender. This month, the bishops have introduced proposals including blessings and new guidance for clergy, but not marriage. As Charlie told the BBC: 'This isn't over. If the bishops think this will resolve the current situation they are very much mistaken.'

I think the Church will die before it changes. The Church's sexual ethics are already irrelevant to most people. Even my Church friends have asked me when I'll get married, thinking it had been legalised back in 2014! I'm not sure if I want marriage, despite being a wedding celebrant myself. Perhaps queer people should avoid the expectations and baggage of heterosexuals. I'm fortunate to be in a relationship which is deeply loving and joyful, regardless of its recognition from heterosexual society. But I would like to have the choice.

Queer Holiness makes a compelling argument for the importance of knowledge and reason alongside scripture. This book was about sexuality, but let's remember that the Church's position in many other respects, such as the supernatural, is far more out of kilter with contemporary knowledge. Perhaps if Charlie can bring knowledge and reason to bear in his field, there might be hope for the Church to rethink other matters.



Edward Nickell is a wedding celebrant for Humanists UK and is Secretary and Deanery Synod representative for his local Church of England parish.

Pauline Pearson reviews

The Power of Reconciliation

by Justin Welby

Bloomsbury Continuum (London 2022). Hbk. 304 pages.
£14.18.

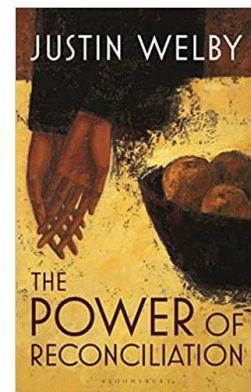
I did not expect to enjoy reading this book, or to find it one which could be recommended to colleagues in church and secular settings. But the vast majority is written in an engaging style, with content illustrated by real examples, and I have already told at least two colleagues in different contexts about it.

The book is introduced with a thought-provoking poem (unattributed), followed by reflection on the Stalingrad icon, likening the fragility of the incarnate child to the fragility of reconciliation. Reconciliation ‘must transform the lives of the weak, it must protect and it must go on trying’. The sections of the book are set out. The aim of the book is ‘to encourage peace-building at all levels... turning the abstract idea of reconciliation into something that can be done throughout life’.

Part 1 opens by defining reconciliation – the transformation of destructive conflict into disagreeing well. The way in which Welby seeks to apply the term immediately seems broader than I initially expected, as he mentions not only war and family conflict, but also competition, politics and climate change. He points out that reconciliation is hard because there are many immediate challenges whereas payoffs are long term. Some of the hindrances to reconciliation can be the difficulty of sacrifice by those with power or advantage, balancing honour and shame (particularly in a context of social media), and the importance of attention to neurochemistry. Also, as with antibiotics, recognising that one should ‘always complete the course’ – in other words, *continue* to pay attention to the issues, not seek a quick fix.

Welby asks where resources might come from to overcome the structures which so often overwhelm people. He suggests five. First, moral imagination – looking at new and previously unimaginable possibilities. ‘Can ... we imagine an alternative ... that takes us on the hard and stony path of peace?’ He indicates that this is the responsibility of leadership. Second, and probably most fundamental to reconciliation, is what he calls a holistic focus: a focus which *is top down, middle out and bottom up all at once*, all linked and inclusive. Third, partnership is critical: assembling a team. Fourth, reconciliation requires a commitment to truth and transparency. Fifth, reconcilers must embrace complexity:

simplifying complex issues leads to ‘misdiagnosis and wrong treatments’ – suggesting ‘it’s a religious problem’, or ‘a tribal issue’ or similar. Welby notes that you cannot heal what you haven’t understood.



reviews

Part 2 suggests that peace-building is about the heart. The Coventry model is outlined based around 6 words: researching; relating; relieving need; risking; reconciling; resourcing. Those who act as facilitators need to stand in the middle and extend their arms to everyone – and to work in the background – as servants. Each of the words is then unpacked in a chapter.

Looking at researching, Welby asks what would a good outcome look like? What do you want (is it peace?) The identification of those who matter is critical, because a seat at the table gives legitimacy. Scale also matters. To make reconciliation happen needs relationships founded on love: active love which breaks down barriers. This requires time and commitment, loving and keeping distance. Love should not be blind; suspending judgement must not become the toleration of injustice. Relieving need must be about radical difference. Love may be expressed through all sorts of agencies, in partnership. There are different risks in each way forward. Mitigating risk is about developing resilience among those involved. Reconciling is a long journey. It requires a fresh approach to justice and a realistic search for truth. The most important question is how to approach the demands of opposing parties for truth and justice.

Part 3 focuses around ‘The Difference Course’, and its underlying principles. These are being curious, being present, and reimagining. Then three examples are explored at a high level: climate change, racial and ethnic differences and populism. Welby notes that ‘safety for our future is not found by seeking it, but by engaging with those who challenge us.’ This book is well written and addresses issues of importance to most who work with people and communities. It is a good starting place in addressing conflict. I commend it to you.

Pauline Pearson is Vicar of St Columba’s Church,
Wideopen, Tyne and Wear.

Dominic Kirkham reviews

Holy Anarchy

by Graham Adams

SCM Press (London 2022). Pbk. 240 pages. £15.71.

This book is a densely argued and widely referenced theological study of some 230 pages that challenges our understanding of society and God. It presents a radical interpretation of the gospel message of Jesus. Instead of a traditional theology or *theo-logos* focused on *being*, it offers a *theo-poiesis* in which God is the 'poet' of an ever-becoming world based on experience, transformation, and movement, bringing new ways into being. The chapters are buttressed with challenging Questions to Ponder. Of himself the author, Dr Graham Adams, writes: 'I am a theological educator, with particular interest in missiology, especially as shaped in the context of Empire'.

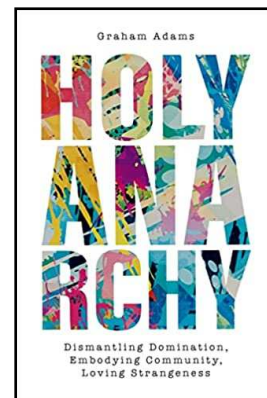
I will mention but two authors out of the many that are referred to in the text, Hegel and Caputo: the former as a marker for the expansive depth of thought to be found in this book; the latter, John Caputo, is a widely respected contemporary US theologian best known for his theological focus on 'the weakness of God', a pivotal theme of this work in challenging traditional notions of divinity. Instead of power and glory, it emphasises 'the weight of small things' – seeds, yeast, childlikeness, the humble – that challenge 'the structures of imperial or temple-state oppression.'

For Adams (following Caputo) the 'kingdom of God' encountered in the gospels is a form of 'sacred anarchy', where 'weak forces play themselves out in paradoxical effects that confound the powers that be.' Humble people and simple acts of kindness have major consequences, a view Adams elaborates by referring to the Butterfly Effect of Complexity Theory whereby small perturbations ripple through a system/universe to deliver unexpected change.

From this perspective, 'The kingdom of God is a domain in which weakness reigns'. This is not how we normally think of a kingdom – a more perceptive word may be 'kin-dom' – but one that sets aside 'the idolatry of divine strength' in favour of Holy Anarchy, where 'anarchy' is understood in the literal sense of 'an-archy' as the negation of 'ruling over.' Divinity becomes an instrumental element in the ferment of change, rooted in diverse and marginalised communities.

Elaborating this theme are some key words and phrases: domination, oppression, solidarity, power structures, imperialism, de-colonisation – all words that for Adams provide the context for a proper understanding the ministry of Jesus. A passage from

the radical feminist theologian Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza neatly ties these concepts together when she describes the authentic church as 'an anti-imperialist egalitarian movement that seeks change for all those living on the bottom of the kyriarchal pyramid of domination.'



reviews

Clearly the critical approach of Adams is about challenging/subverting traditional ecclesiology and theology. One reason given is that traditional 'ontology' focused on *being* is too easily aligned with the idolatry of divine strength: this misrepresents God's will or rule that is not a 'ruling over' but something quite different, 'More akin to 'solidarity' (as opposed to 'rule') 'in the midst' (rather than 'over').' An expression of this is the crucifixion, in which Adams sees God not as the 'God of the crucifiers [but] the crucified': Jesus 'died for the cause of divine generosity-of-spirit that the System sought to close down.'

One implication of this approach is that it addresses the 'moral conundrum' of a powerful God in a world where 'so much transformation is needed but missing.' It also leads to a distinctive understanding of truth. Here Adams distinguishes two kinds of truth: 'truth-in-process' that is open and expansive – 'relating lovingly to all-comers, without precondition, the very epitome of empathetic truth-in-process' – and 'truth-in-hand' where 'we deny wider realities, complexities and ambiguities' in favour of an edited grasp of reality focused on preserving 'purity'.

In the wake of the recent UK census highlighting the decline of Christian belief in England this book is a welcome reminder that there is more to Christianity than often presented in traditional churches. Adams' radical alternative compliments the work of the scholars of the Christianity Seminar in the US that has revealed how different the first two centuries were before Christianity became a distinctive imperial, state religion expressed in forms we now take as normative (cf. *After Jesus, Before Christianity*). In a sense the challenging teaching of Jesus was indeed anarchic in its power to disturb: as Adams has it, he was 'The Lamb that roared'.

Dominic Kirkham's books include *From Monk to Modernity* (SOF Network 2015) and *Horror and Hope* (Wipf and Stock, Eugene OR, 2021).

Kathryn Southworth reviews

My life, you see:

Selected Poems

by Martina Thomson

Hearing Eye (London 2022). Pbk 72 pages £9.

Martina Thomson died in 2013, aged 88, leaving many unpublished poems. This book has been put together as an act of love by members of the poetry workshop she attended led by Jane Duran, and by Hearing Eye which published Thomson's previous pamphlet and translation.

Thomson came late to poetry. Born in Berlin, she and her family moved to England where she trained at RADA, married the writer and tv producer David Thomson and became an art therapist and potter. Art, especially still life, stone and clay, represent an equipoise to which the writing aspires: as the epigraph to the frontispiece says, 'Let words so settle down'. Memory, too, settles down in the sensitive and skilful way in which these poems have been selected and ordered, bookended by 'Lilac' and 'Lilac Corner' where the scent of lilac recalls the child who buried her bakelite dolls from Nazi trespass.

In the poem 'Tristanstrasse' Thomson recalls the rattle of milk-cart over cobbles, a sound replaced by the click of black boots in the street and the disruption of innocent lives. Milk is a leitmotif. Recollection of the name 'Jim Galt' brings back evacuee holidays in the Cotswolds. The poet evokes the sights and smells of the dairy farm as if in a painting; the men who worked it, the colours for which there are 'a hundred and seventy names' and the landscape imagined as a canvass or a cloth she wants to lay on her face for 'the comfort' of such a memory of innocence. It is the milk which especially embodies that quality, from 'the solemnity of place', the spare whiteness of the dairy and its cool air, to the 'mothering smell at dawn and at dusk'. Similarly evocative is the poem Thomson dedicates to her grandmother, 'Zucker und Zimt', where the making of Apfelstrudel is 'the work of a master' artist, the warm dough held in the hands 'as a potter holds clay', the kneading 'a rock-a-bye motion', the scalloped edges 'growing pearly, precious, a baby-skin, see-through'.

Physicality is celebrated as much as personality in the poems about Thomson's family. In 'Sundays' she remembers the ritual of bath and shower, her mother's breasts 'apples', her aunt's 'pears' and her father's sex covered by a floating flannel he refused to remove when she asked: 'but he was easy in the

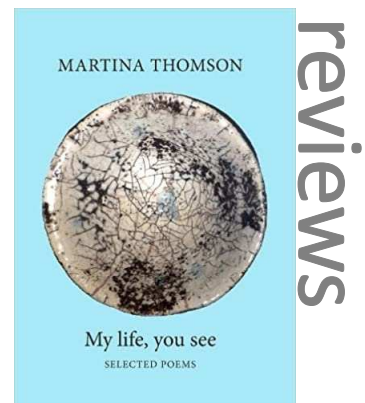
bathroom, sang/
his Russian songs
and teased me
and I liked it'.
Places, too, are
personal icons,
like the thrill of
Paris in 1955,
where the poet is
high on the smell
of Gauloises and
garlic: 'Living and
breathing was

exultation,/all was seductive'. At the other end of life, the exultation is different but no less. So in 'Walking with my Son Ben on Hampstead Heath' the pair have not managed to climb the hill but 'when we'd walked /around the pond, it was a circle made'. Such achievements, like the ordinary rituals of living, are not trivial. 'A Western Woman's First Things' enumerates the small gestures and rituals of getting up each morning in meticulous detail, with the deliberation required by an elderly woman.

Life aspires to the condition of art. 'In Praise of Stillness' describes a room where the occupant's absence 'laid a patina on clutter', making peace out of chaos, turning 'mess into still life': 'I step into a classic composition'. Whether it be her mother's book-binding, her own pottery, Paul Nash or Chagall, the achievement of craft is a quickening that is both mental and physical. It cannot be rationalised and is instinctive, a 'stirring in the wrist', something recognised when seen. In entering into Thomson's poetry, we embrace experience, evoked through her life story and through the precision and clarity of her language. The last two poems take us from advancing years and decrepitude where the poet has 'stepped into an alien body, like a 'cutout from the camps', back through the childhood lilac orchard and the transcendence of white blossoms that seem 'like paradise'. It is a story both of loss and celebration.

The editors Jane Duran and Sue MacIntyre have done Thomson and the reader an immense service in their loving and skilful arrangement of this volume. Hearing Eye, too, must be commended for the high production values of an altogether lovely book.

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



As I Please

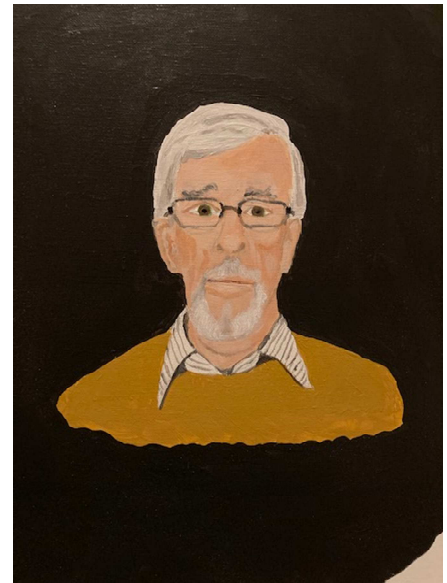
John Pearson says goodbye.

The original ‘goodbye’, dating from the 1570s, was godbwyne – a contraction of the farewell phrase ‘God be with ye’. Saying goodbye; a casual farewell, *au revoir*, a parting from person or persons one may or may not see again or a deathbed farewell? Personally, I indulge daily in the first and as yet have been spared the last. (Both of my parents died in a care home, and I was only informed afterwards). Most, I suppose, fall somewhere in between.

At any parting of the ways, of whatever sort, it is possible to say too much or, worse possibly, not enough. I remember my last visit, as it turned out to be, to see a great aunt in her rambling old house in Rotherham, over 50 years ago now. I was sent upstairs to see Aunt Ethel, a lady into her 80s, was bed-ridden and lay in the gloom of her bedroom, lit by weak sunlight through a gap between the curtains – no artificial light. It was like an audience with the ageing Miss Havisham – lost in her past. Born before 1890, Ethel had lived all her days in this house, seen both younger brothers leave it for the Great War, never to return. In the garden stood large statues carved by her eccentric father. Tongue tied, a callow youth of 17 or so, rather than asking if I might read her brothers’ diaries and letters which I knew to be on her shelves I just exchanged pleasantries until I could make my shy escape. I remember thinking how, as I left the room, I was looking on this woman, flesh and blood link with a fascinating past, for the last time. I sense now that we both felt it. The moral of the tale perhaps; if you have questions to ask, then do ask them, before it is too late.

Saying goodbye can be bitter-sweet and has been captured in literature, fictional or otherwise, on film and in songs without number. So, putting a brave face on it, we have, from the First War ‘Good-by-ee, Good-bye-ee – Wipe the tear, baby dear, from your eye-ee’ (1917). In the Second, support was given by Vera Lynn’s ‘We’ll Meet Again’ (1939). Further hope was offered by the same artist in the ‘White Cliffs of Dover’ (1942).

Final departures from this life have provided some classic last words of course. In 1936 King George V, before being dispatched by his physician, Lord Dawson, with two



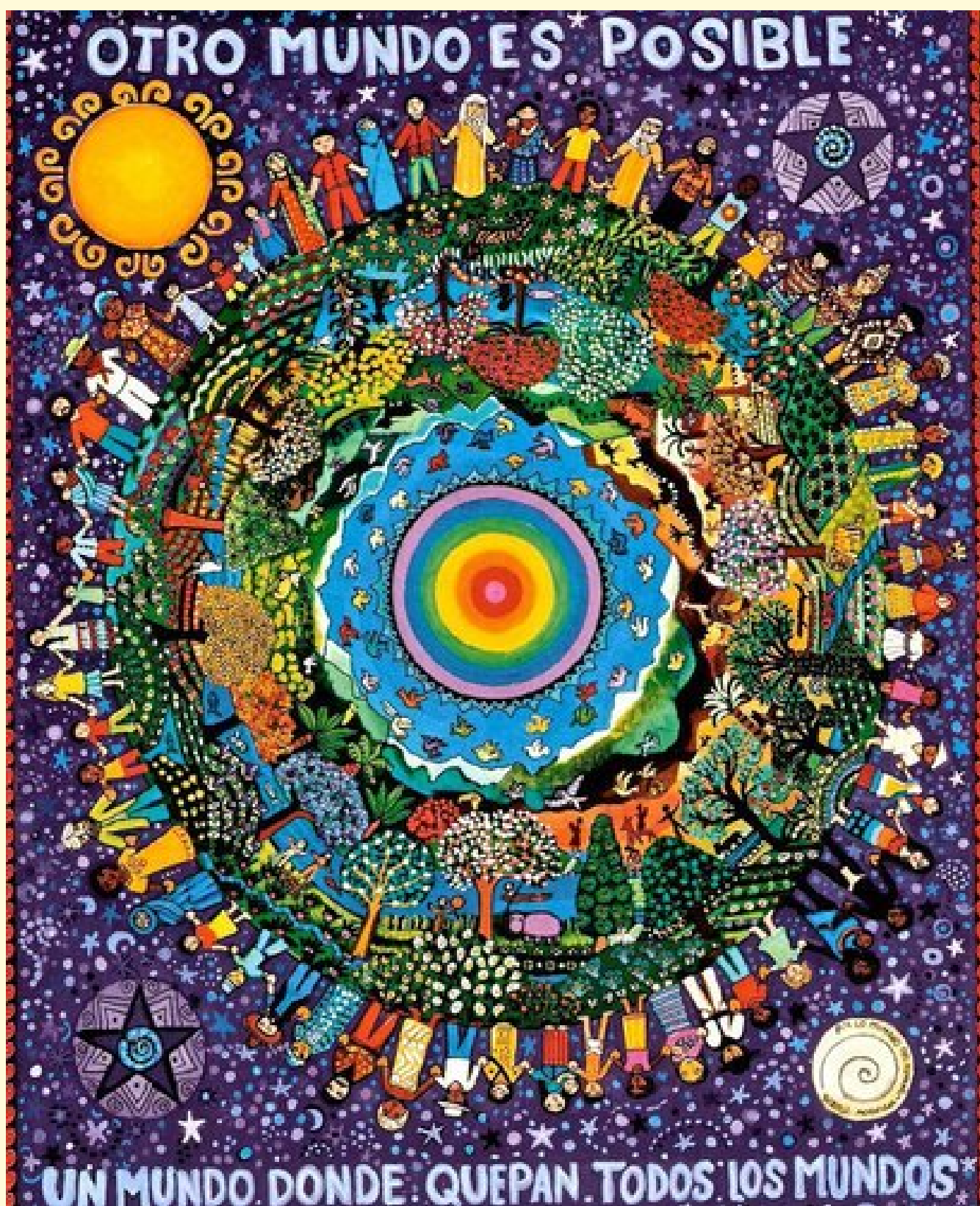
lethal injections (so he might die in time for the morning papers) is reported to have left us ‘Bugger Bognor’. Oscar Wilde, in 1900 left us with the lines: ‘My wallpaper and I are fighting a duel to the death. One or other of us must go’.

As we have seen, there is, more often than not, a certain sadness in saying goodbye. But I do not wish to end this piece on a sad note – rather, as my more usual, I hope, playful self. Watching a recent stage production by the Peoples’ Theatre, Newcastle, of Noel Coward’s *Brief Encounter*, I was reminded of a sketch from the late 90s TV series ‘Goodness Gracious Me’. In the original the illicit lovers make stilted last farewells before their separate trains leave the station. In ‘Briefly Encountered’, the wonderful parody, the fond farewell is rudely interrupted by a chai (tea) vendor, a woman selling toy trumpets and balloons and then by a blind beggar. Finally, the heroine suggests she has a seat booked on the roof of the carriage (a very Indian mode of travel). The hero offers her a ‘leg up!’ I strongly recommend the clip if you can find it.

In the late 60’s John Ebdon presented and commented on excerpts from the sound archives – a favourite of mine. Each week he would end his musings with the words ‘if you have been, thanks for listening’.

In my own case, after nine years of musings, I have decided to pull the plug on my stint as author of *As I Please*. If you have been ... thanks for reading. So, that’s me, saying goodbye.

Another World is Possible



A World with Room for Every World