

*sfia*

No. 152 June 2024



Jesus heals on the Sabbath Day

*Resistance*

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

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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 Please submit unpublished articles that have not been submitted elsewhere, or if previously published, please state where and when.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 this Sofia.*

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

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

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

# Resistance

The title of this issue of *Sofia* is 'Resistance'. The front cover shows Jesus resisting the oppressive legalism of the Pharisees and healing a man on the Sabbath Day. The back cover shows the Home Guard in the comedy *Dad's Army*, resisting Hitler who was threatening to invade Britain.

Our first article is by David Boulton on the Quakers. In the seventeenth century when they were founded, he says, they not only resisted the established church and 'hat honour' to one's betters, but also music, sacred or profane, and indeed all the arts as 'worldly pleasures'. That position has been somewhat moderated today.

Next Francis McDonagh writes about 'Compliance and Resistance in Latin America', where the Church was imposed by colonisation and has quite often sided with oppressive rulers, but also where liberation theology was born.

Don Cupitt was born on May 22<sup>nd</sup> 1934 and in his article 'Don Cupitt at 90' Stephen Mitchell looks back

over Don's Cupitt's course as he 'came out' to resist a supernatural God and wrote *After God: The Future of Religion*.

We have an obituary by his wife for the Reverend Hugh Dawes, one of the founders of the Progressive Christianity Network in Britain (as well as being a SOF member). In her 'Penn'orth' Penny Mawdsley writes about forgiveness. And, following his last piece on 'Water', John Pearson's 'Going Green' is on wine.

Below this Editorial there is a notice about the SOF Network Summer Day Conference in London. The speakers will be two SOF Network stalwarts, Tony Windross and Anthony Freeman, as well as Linda Woodhead, Head of Theology and Religious Studies at Kings College London and one-time student of Don Cupitt. We hope you will be able to come.

## SOF DAY CONFERENCE FAITH FOR NOW: LOOKING BACK, FACING FORWARD

### Speakers

#### Anthony Freeman

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

#### Tony Windross

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

#### Linda Woodhead

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

**10am-4pm on Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> July 2024**

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

Please pay in advance if possible. Cost for the day is £20.

The preferred method of payment is by bank transfer to:

'Sea of Faith', Sort code 30-94-74; a/c 5599260.

Reference: Your name + Conference

Or cheques payable to 'Sea of Faith' should be sent to Stephen Williams, 157 Russell Road, Birmingham B13 8RR.

# Resistance by name

David Boulton

What's in a name? Actually, quite a lot. A name gives us identity, whether for the individual or the group. Our personal names are usually given to us by our parents, but a group may struggle to find its identity and name it. That's what happened when a resistance group born in the middle of the English Civil War in the 1640s began to dream of creating the republic of Heaven on Earth.

When George Fox got involved in 1647 with a group of ex-Baptists who shared his idea of God as an Inward Light they had a leader, Elizabeth Hooton, but as yet no identity and no name. Fox, who soon replaced Hooton, called them 'shattered Baptists'. In search of a better name they tried one borrowed from European sectarians, 'Children of the Light', but some of them preferred 'Friends in the Truth'.

The name 'Quakers' appears first in a 1647 tract which refers to 'a sect of women [not the Fox group] who come from beyond sea, called Quakers, and these swell, shiver and shake, and when they come to themselves... they begin to preach what hath been delivered to them by the Spirit'. In 1651 another tract complains that 'We have many sects now abroad, Ranters, Seekers, Shakers, Quakers, Creepers, Enthusiasts'; and the same year, when Fox and his followers were examined on a charge of blasphemy, judge Gervase Bennett called them Quakers because Fox had bidden him to tremble at the name of the Lord. Fox was by then referring to his group as 'a society of Friends', but the derisive name 'Quakers' was soon defiantly adopted, linked with Friends in what became the Society of Friends (Quakers), to which was added much later the word Religious to distinguish it from secular Friendly Societies.

So what is my point? If you have missed it, so too did this team of dreamers. While they struggled to find their identity and name, it was



George Fox

staring them in the face. They were Resisters. Resisting was what they did, and they did a lot of it. They resisted the national Church, its hierarchy, its 'hireling priests' who sold the gospel for a living; its buildings, which it mistakenly called churches; its printed prayers and hymns and psalms; its symbols, sacraments and scented rituals; its frocks and furniture; its apostolic claim to hold the keys of Heaven.

They resisted its theology and christology: the notion that the Bible was the infallible, inerrant Word of God, with all its justifications of enslavement, ethnic cleansing, patriarchy, misogyny and blood atonement. They resisted the enforcement of tithes and 'Easter reckonings', the taxes that financed the whole unholy edifice. They resisted holy days (including Christmas) since all days were holy, and the saints' days had become party days. When they were persecuted for their resistance, they responded with non-violent resistance to their persecutors.

And that was only half of it. Their resistance to the established religion of their time led on to a resistance to the social norms of a rigidly class-based society. They resisted hat honour and bowing the knee to one's betters, as they were sure their betters were no better than they were. They resisted the 'thee and thou' that encoded conversation between gentry and commons.



Early Quakers. Image: [quaker.org](http://quaker.org)

They resisted titles and the livery that advertised high status. They resisted inequality in death as well as life by insisting that every Friend's gravestone be the same size and shape.

After 1660 they resisted military taxes and the machinery of war. Music, sacred or profane, and indeed all the arts, were rigorously resisted as worldly pleasures. When the musician and composer Samuel Eccles became a Quaker he burned his violin. Neither Shakespeare nor Milton, Purcell nor Byrd, spoke to their condition. Their identity was Resistance. Resistance would have made a better name.

Inevitably, of course, such an intensity of resistance to religious and social norms could not be sustained for ever. Bit by bit it weakened. The men and women who had set out to turn the world upside down encountered the resistance of those who were determined to keep it the right way up. The Children of Light / Friends of Truth / Quakers became a nonconformist Christian denomination. Complicity and respectability replaced much of the movement's early resistance – markedly in acceptance of the arts – but the mature Religious Society of Friends

(Quakers) remains today resistant to religious creeds, hierarchies and the ignoble army of mitres: resistant too to militarism and the causes of war. Contemporary liberal Quakerism includes those who are resistant to supernaturalism and declare themselves Godless for God's sake.

Perhaps it is time for Sea of Faith to work out its own understanding of what we feel compelled to resist in institutional, outmoded religion and its relation to the wider society. As the unknown author of Ecclesiastes tells us, there is 'a time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence and a time to speak'. As Sea of Faith takes a new turn, now is surely time to speak out, upping the volume, about what we resist and what we want to put in its place. Time, then, to take the fight to the hirelings and literalists in high places and low pulpits.

It's not to be resisted.

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David Boulton is a former editor of *Sea of Faith* Magazine, the first convenor of the Nontheist Friends Network, and the author of *The Trouble with God* and *Who on Earth was Jesus?*

# Compliance and Resistance in Latin America

Francis McDonagh

Christianity, mainly in its Roman Catholic form, has been an integral part of Latin American life for five centuries. It was of course imposed as one of many aspects of Spanish or Portuguese colonial rule, which involved the domination of the local inhabitants and the transport of Africans to work as slaves on sugar plantations. These policies were justified at the Spanish court by Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, who claimed that the indigenous peoples 'are inferior to the Spaniards just as children are to adults, women to men, and, indeed, one might even say, as apes are to men.'

Such arguments were countered by Bartolomé de Las Casas, who had been a landowner and slave-owner and seen the effects of the system. He became a Dominican friar and in 1542 wrote *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, in which he argued that '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.'

Las Casas was influenced by an earlier Dominican critic of the colonial project, Antonio de Montesinos, who delivered a scorching condemnation of it in 1511: 'You are all in mortal sin. In it you will live and die because of the cruelty and tyrannical behaviour with which you treat these innocent peoples. Tell me by what right and on the basis of what justice you keep the Indians in such cruel and horrible servitude... Are they not human? Do they not have immortal souls? Are you not obliged to love them as yourselves?'

The abolition of slavery did not immediately transform the lives of the ex-slaves. Most had little alternative than to continue the same work, possibly in less harsh conditions, but with next to no income. The legacy of racism and disadvantage still affects Afro-descendant populations today.

In Brazil, the largest country of the sub-continent, the social outreach of the Catholic Church cannot be separated from the name of Hélder Câmara. This diminutive native of Fortaleza in the north-east of Brazil had been appointed auxiliary bishop of Rio de

Janeiro, when he founded the Brazilian bishops conference in 1952. Essentially a means for the bishops to keep in touch with each other and share their concerns and ideas, it became a sort of civil service for the Church. It eventually had a Pastoral Land Commission that worked to support small farmers against the attacks – sometimes murderous – of rich landowners, and an Indigenous Missionary Council that helped to defend indigenous people against similar attacks directed at them.

The bishops conference organises a yearly educational and fund-raising campaign. Over the years the themes became less churchy and included land, housing, Afro-Brazilians and the Amazon region. The Church also encouraged the formation of small groups to discuss the relevance of faith to local situations. These church base communities, as they became known, were for a while a powerful force at the grassroots, and had national assemblies every five years. The effectiveness of these various campaigns depended largely on the bishop in charge in each locality, and there were wide variations.

In general, in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century the Brazilian Catholic Church could be described as conservative. When a military coup took place in 1964, the bishops gave thanks for Brazil's deliverance from communism. As the violence of the military became more apparent, however, the bishops began to protest. Hélder Câmara, by now archbishop of Recife, stood up publicly to the military, and was subject to attacks and could not be mentioned in the media. In São Paulo the new archbishop, Paulo Evaristo Arns, sheltered people at risk of arrest, and organised a public inter-faith service in his city centre cathedral for the Jewish journalist, Vladimir Herzog, who had died under torture, that became a mass protest against the dictatorship.

If Brazil had a military dictatorship lasting 21 years, Colombia was torn by 60 years of internal armed conflict costing an estimated nine million lives. There were two main guerilla groups, the FARC and the ELN, and paramilitary forces financed by landowners, often in alliance with the state's armed

forces, which perpetrated some of the most brutal killings. A peace agreement was finally agreed with the FARC in 2016, though negotiations with the ELN have still not been concluded. One of the unusual features of the ELN is that it was founded by two priests, the Spanish former worker priest Manuel Pérez, and Camilo Torres, a pioneering Colombian sociologist, who died in combat in 1966.

In 2022 the Colombians elected as President Gustavo Petro, a former guerrilla, the first time the country has had a left-wing president. His main proposal was 'total peace', negotiations with all groups still engaged in conflict, a process that is still in progress. The conflict was made worse by the drug trade, in which the FARC became involved. Throughout the conflict the Colombian Jesuits, through their thinktanks and development programmes, made important contributions to work for peace and development. The Social Ministry department of the bishops conference was also important in bringing into the discussion the experiences of communities remote from the seat of power.

At a global level, in the 1960s the Catholic Church was being pushed to transform itself to meet the needs of the world after the Second World War. In 1962 Pope John XXIII opened the Second Vatican Council, the first ecumenical council since 1870. A sign of the mood among the assembled bishops was that they rejected the drafts prepared by the Vatican bureaucracy and insisted on discussing the challenges they faced in their various countries and possible ways of addressing them. In Latin America the Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez published *A Theology of Liberation* in 1971, launching a movement that was to bring Catholicism out of the churches and into everyday life. Gutiérrez was clearly formulating a mood that was already present in the sub-continent: in 1968 the Latin American bishops, meeting in Medellín, Colombia, adopted the 'option for the poor', the concept that channelled liberation theology into action.

Like other Latin American countries, Peru endured a military dictatorship and a guerrilla war led by the Maoist group Shining Path between 1980 and 2012. Peruvian bishops were heavily influenced by the Second Vatican Council and promoted social and economic reform. The Catholic Church in the Southern Andes created the Andean Pastoral Institute and developed approaches to engage with the local Quechua and Aymara population and work for land reform. In 1999 Pope John Paul II appointed the conservative Juan Luis Cipriani as archbishop of Lima, which led Gustavo Gutiérrez to join the Dominican order, to remove himself from the



jurisdiction of Cipriani. Cipriani tried to impose his control over teaching in the Pontifical University of Lima, until he was removed as chancellor by Pope Francis in 2016.

The tiny Central American country of El Salvador was an improbable powerhouse of radical Catholicism, brought to international attention when Archbishop Oscar Romero was assassinated on 24 March 1980. Romero had called on the army fighting the FSLN guerrillas and the population that largely supported them: 'In the name of God stop the repression!' Nine years later, in November 1989, six Jesuits of the Central American University, their housekeeper and her 16-year-old daughter were murdered by an elite battalion of the Salvadorean army. One of the murdered Jesuits, Ignacio Ellacuría, was a leading liberation theologian.

Things appeared more promising in neighbouring Nicaragua. There the Sandinista revolution triumphed in 1979, and the initial governing junta included four priests, Miguel D'Escoto as foreign minister, Fernando Cardenal as education minister, his brother, the poet Ernesto Cardenal, as minister of culture, and Edgard Parrales as social welfare minister. Their involvement with the Sandinistas resulted in their

suspension from their priestly functions, and Ernesto Cardenal received a public finger-wagging rebuke when he tried to greet Pope John Paul II at the start of his visit to Nicaragua in 1983. The Polish Pope was intensely suspicious of revolutionary movements and liberation theology, which he identified with communism.

In the course of time the Sandinista movement became more authoritarian, and Nicaragua became a dictatorship ruled by the former guerrilla leader Daniel Ortega as president and his wife, Rosario Murillo, as vice-president. The initial revolutionary impulse had attracted broad support, including from intellectuals such as Sergio Ramírez, the novelist. In 1994 Ortega removed Sergio Ramírez from his leadership roles. In the same year Ernesto Cardenal resigned from the Sandinistas, saying: 'My resignation from the FSLN has been caused by the kidnapping of the party carried out by Daniel Ortega and the group he heads.'

In 2018 anti-government protests were put down with extreme violence, particularly against students, many of whom were given refuge in the Jesuit Central American University. The government has since closed the university, setting up its own university in its premises, though it has had difficulty in getting off the ground. Much of the residual opposition to the Ortega regime has come from the Catholic Church, with one bishop forced into exile and another, Rolando Álvarez, and several clergy, imprisoned. On 9 March 2023 the regime deported 222 political prisoners to the United States, and on 15 January 2024, after negotiations with the Vatican, deported 18 clergy, including Álvarez and another bishop, to the Vatican.

Despite the harassment of the Catholic Church, the archbishop of Managua, Cardinal Leopoldo Brenes, has made no criticism of the regime. In fact, in March this year he accepted public congratulations from Rosario Murillo on his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday. The vice-president said: 'Thank God we have been able to leave behind us the days of bell-ringing and broken windows, those terrible days when there were attempts to break down the sense of family and community, and the alliance of reconciliation and union in our Nicaragua.'

In recent years Roman Catholicism has been in decline in Latin America, especially as Catholics have moved to Pentecostal churches. This change began in the 1970s: whereas Catholics were 92% of the population in 1970, in 2020 they were only 57%. The decline seems to be particularly fast in Brazil: one survey in 2020 put Catholics at 54%, whereas the last official census in 2010 had them at 64%.

In Brazil Protestants organise politically more than Catholics, though in earlier times this would have been a defence against an overwhelming Catholic majority. In the federal Congress there has been an Evangelical Parliamentary Front since 1980, and the conservative parliamentary groups defending landowners came to be known as the 'beef, bible and bullets' bloc. The use of religion for political ends was at its most extreme in the career of Jair Bolsonaro, an undistinguished military officer elected to Congress in 1990. He was elected president in 2018. Brought up as a Catholic, Bolsonaro had himself baptised in the river Jordan in 2016, which enabled him to appeal to both Catholic and Protestant voters as co-religionists. In his inaugural address as president, Bolsonaro proclaimed that he would 'respect religions and our Judeo-Christian tradition, preserving our values. Brazil will once more be a country free of ideological shackles.'

As president, Bolsonaro appointed both military officers and Protestant pastors as ministers. He reduced the protection for indigenous peoples and proclaimed that he would 'integrate' the Amazon rainforest into the rest of Brazil. He also relaxed the legislation on carrying arms. Perhaps his most notorious position was to dismiss COVID-19 as 'a touch of flu' and refuse to wear a mask or be vaccinated; this attitude was regarded as contributing to Brazil's total of half a million deaths from the disease.

In the subsequent election in 2022 Bolsonaro was defeated by the Workers Party candidate and previous president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. On 8 January, a week after Lula was sworn in as president, a mob of Bolsonaro supporters invaded the presidential palace, the Congress and the Supreme Court, damaged and destroyed furniture and fittings, even the photos of former presidents. It later became clear that the attack had been organised on social media, buses had been arranged to bring people from all over Brazil, and food had been provided for them.

Bolsonaro himself had left Brazil on 30 December to avoid taking part in the swearing in of Lula, but when he returned he was declared ineligible for public office until 2030 for attempting to undermine the result of the 2022 election. Evidence had come out that he had discussed a coup with the commanders of the armed forces, and only the refusal of the commander in chief of the army had prevented a full-scale military take-over. This it seems is what happens when, as Bolsonaro's wife, Michelle, claimed: 'Jesus governs Brazil.'



# Don Cupitt at 90

Stephen Mitchell

When I was a child I didn't know anyone who was ninety. I couldn't conceive of being ninety. Nonagenarians inhabited the mythical world of Methuselah. In middle age, in my first incumbency, eager to ingratiate myself with the older parishioners, I sent some flowers and a card to an octogenarian: 'To one twice as old and twice as beautiful'. But the mathematician in me realised that as I grew older, that proportion would rapidly diminish.

It's only now, having reached my allotted span that I've begun to appreciate ninety year olds, and I seem to know a great many. Mary rattles off *Countdown* anagrams and conundrums with astonishing speed. Joan plays the piano before the service with an enviable touch and dexterity. You might say they're the lucky ones. No, they all have their troubles but nearly all bear them with fortitude and good humour.

I find it hard to believe Don Cupitt is 90. Born on the 22nd May, he's a true Gemini (not that he'd give a fig for that fact). I consult the astrologer. 'Gemini are very intelligent and pick up knowledge quickly.' Tick. 'They are perceptive, analytical, and great communicators.' Tick. 'A Gemini is constantly juggling a . . . ' well he did teach my daughter to juggle when she was about eight years old. 'They are the social butterflies of the Zodiac.' Ah, not quite. I think you mean he's a lepidopterist.

'Energetic and quick-witted, a Gemini never gets stuck in the past, and doesn't ruminate on what might have been.' And probably a good thing too, given the way he was treated both by the church and academia. After the publication of *Taking Leave of God*, he received the same treatment by the church as John Robinson with *Honest to God*. Following the broadcasting of *The Sea of Faith*, the academic world also turned its nose up at this popularising lecturer. Today, with Brian Cox, Alice Roberts, Lucy Worsley, Hannah Fry, we expect professors to be on our screen, but not then. Exceptionally, Emmanuel College, Cambridge have remained a constant support and are hosting the celebrations of the fortieth anniversary of *The Sea of Faith* at which he hopes to put in an appearance.

Such disappointments have encouraged him to display enormous sympathy with those who have suffered because of the honest expression of their views. One who found Don supportive was the late Hugh Dawes, who died earlier this year, a friend and member of our Network and founder of Progressive

Christianity Network Britain. Hugh had been the Chaplain at Emmanuel College at the time Don was filming *The Sea of Faith* and had his own trial with the publication of his book *Freeing the Faith: A Credible Christianity for Today*. It put paid to any preferment in the church but he was well aware of the dangers.

Published in 1992 a year before Anthony Freeman's *God in Us*, it's still possible to pick up copies of Hugh's book. It pulls no punches and having argued against various aspects of 'traditional' orthodoxy and for an open liberal faith, he ends

'Finding a way forward from here demands that we now recognise that God too has to change, if what God represents is ever going to be available to future generations. Though in one sense, indeed, we can only live in the present moment, we surely owe it to those who follow us to take that future very seriously. That involves acknowledging the full extent of our human responsibility for creating faith, as well as for the world of which faith is a part. (p120)

As his wife Jill wrote in the Guardian:

'He was savagely attacked in the press by traditionalists, who called on him publicly to resign his orders. The *Independent* carried the story of the 'atheist priest'. He braved the storm and proclaimed himself a catholic modernist priest, with no intention of resigning. He was a prophetic voice, often crying in the wilderness.'

One might expect support from the church for serious and enquiring priests, but it hasn't always been given. 'Do you believe in God?' asked my bishop during an interrogation. 'It depends what you mean by God' I replied. 'It doesn't matter what you mean. Can you say it?' One archdeacon, who I went to tell of my forthcoming separation, greeted me on the doorstep, even before inviting me over the threshold, with the words 'Will there be a scandal?' Don, on the other hand, said a simple 'Bad luck!'. He offered the same response to me some time later, when I told him of my new wife's terminal illness. Not very sympathetic some said but it was exactly what I needed to hear. We didn't want prayers for her healing, or an assurance that this was part of God's plan for her, nor an enquiry as to what we might have done to deserve this (all of which were said to us).

And while I continue to take pot shots at my critics, Don remains true to his solar ethics: understanding, gracious, civil and living without resentment.

The Sun lives beyond the distinction between living and dying, because the thermonuclear burning by which it lives is also and identically the process by which it is dying. Its whole being is wholly both at once. Because it is utterly heedless, careless and identified with its own pure transience, it cannot in any way be self-defensive, which makes it a symbol of 'glory', or eternal life – a perfect synthesis of life and death that completely delivers one from self-concern and the fear of death. (*Solar Ethics* p.15)

One can't write that and not try to live up to it.

Thirty years ago, he wrote

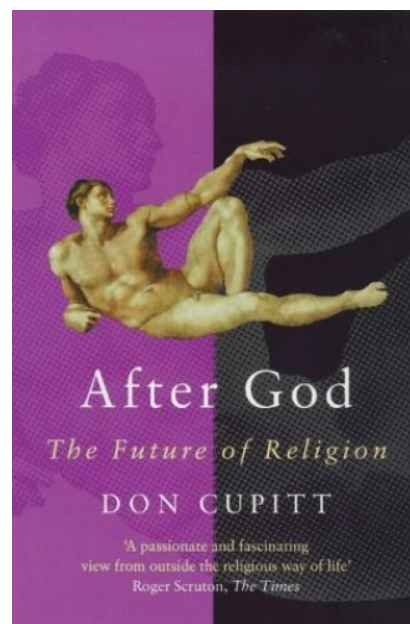
'Me, I am sixty years old as I write, and have less than twenty per cent of me left. I'm a candle already well burnt-down. But the thinner I get, the more objective I become, and the more I love the world.'

His love of the world and of life lights up every page of his writings (and we remember that for five years he did specialise in the study of Natural Science). Nearly all his books this century, after *The New Religion of Life in Everyday Speech* (1999) have been about life.

On Don's seventieth birthday, we contrived to be at Emmanuel College for a Steering Committee meeting and David Boulton presented him with a two volume compendium of British butterflies. Now we shall meet in this, the year of his nineteenth birthday, and the fortieth year of the broadcast from which our network sprang, and he still has something to say to us:

'I am soon to die, and death is final and simple cessation. I may possibly know one day very soon that I am dying, but I'll never know that I am dead. I can be aware that I am getting close to that invisible frontier, but I'll never be aware of actually crossing it. But I am acutely aware, already that I am doing many things for the last time, and that I shall never again walk easily, or be able to think and concentrate intensely and with a clear head. I know all time that I am going downhill towards the invisible cliff-edge. So I know I must love life and savour its poignant transience to the full. (*Ethics in the Last Days of Humanity* p78)

This is from one of his last books written in 2015 and one which, as Hugh Dawes advises us, takes the future very seriously. Despite this extract, it is not only about facing up to one own mortality, but the dark cloud



hovering over the whole of humanity. Of course, as he reminds us climate change is not a straightforward, scientific prediction, for as soon as it is made it affects our thinking and planning. 'We can't go on like this. We need to change ourselves, and the way we act upon our world.' But, he insists, the change need is not just moral. 'It means a *religious conversion*.'

I don't think Don is optimistic about the future.

'In us the human being reaches the summit of self-knowledge and solitary dignity, in a moment, which is also to be our utter ruin. . . It is a cosmic tragedy.'

Typically though, this is not quite the last word and only the reader of the Notes and Further Reading will find a slight note of optimism.

'I have ended with the worst case scenario . . . there remains also the other main possibility, that by a continuing process of piecemeal adaptation we will successfully defer catastrophe and survive long enough to attain full sustainability.' (p112)

And what of our response as we raise a glass? Thanks for all those you teach, inspire and support and may we too pledge to free our own worlds of dogmatic religion, liberate Jesus from the supernatural dress in which the church has clothed him and attempt to practise a solar humanitarian ethic of unconditional love. Maybe in our final days we'll say

In spite of humanity's wickedness, folly, and undeserved sufferings there has been enough in our world of beauty, goodness, and joy to make it all just about worthwhile. (p112)

# Going Green

John Pearson writes about wine.

I am not by nature what I would call a great wine drinker, though I do have a slight fondness for claret, to which I was first introduced by a friend at SOF Conferences back in the late 1990s when these were invariably 'live' residential events. Each night at dinner we would share a bottle between ourselves or with others. So it was, during the Covid lockdown, living largely alone, that I resorted to an occasional bottle of the same, once or twice a week.

An inveterate hoarder, I still have the bottles to prove it, all 20 of them on a shelf in the utility room – every one held a mere 250 ml. A former neighbour across the way, whom I could see through his dining room window, once used to knock back a real bottle every night with his dinner. Some of you will remember TV Chef Keith Floyd perhaps, who would work wineglass in hand (a red wine fan too, as I recall) endearing himself to many of his viewers. Similarly, a colleague of mine once told me that she would regularly make the dinner for the accompaniment of a glass or two. And so it goes on.

Some statistics: Here in the UK, in 2021 49% of adults (aged 16+) drank alcohol on at least one day each week. 57% of men drank at least once a week compared to 43% of women. 8% of men reported drinking almost daily compared to 5% of women. Adults aged between 55 and 74 were the most likely to drink alcohol on at least one day each week whereas adults aged between 16 and 24 were the least likely (59% vs 31%).

In 2021, only 21% of adults (aged 16+) did not drink alcohol at all. 18% of men did not drink alcohol compared to 24% of women. Adults aged between 16 and 24 were the most likely not to drink alcohol, whereas adults aged between 55 and 74 were the least likely.

The proportion of non-drinkers increased from 16% to 20% between 2011 and 2021. 233 ml of wine was consumed per person each week – 492 ml really since 21% of us were drinking none.

I myself am just at the end of a few days of celebration as a member of the team which on May 2<sup>nd</sup> produced the first two Green Party councillors in Newcastle upon Tyne. What did we do? We had a glass of Prosecco – but was that Green?

A bit like Greta Thunberg, who in her massive tome tackled the negative environmental impact of almost everything (*Sofia* 149), and writing as I do under the banner 'Going Green', I feel obliged to put a bit of a damper on things again this month.

The occasional glass of wine may do your soul a lot of good, but what about the environment? Is the industry contributing to its own existential crisis? It might not be on your mind as you pull the corkscrew out or hear the glug glug of red or white liquid fill your glass, but the wine industry does itself contribute to the warming of the planet. The two largest global emissions sources in the trade are the glass bottles and packaging that are both difficult to recycle, and the weight of transportation resulting in higher carbon emissions.

Overall, the biggest problem with the wine industry in terms of a large carbon footprint remains the weight of the glass bottles – accounting for nearly a third of the wine industry's carbon emissions. Over 30 billion bottles of wine are manufactured and sent off for purchase annually, and those billions of glass bottles being sent around the world don't just eat up carbon emissions on their global adventure; it requires an extensive amount of fossil fuels to make those wine bottles in the first place.

Maybe you think that the answer to this problem is simply to recycle the bottles. It is one answer, but think again – let's take the United States as an example, the country that consumes the most wine globally, where only 25% of glass gets recycled. This means 75% of those heavy glass bottles end up in landfill. That contributes to even more waste and emissions in addition to the carbon footprint left behind from transporting wine.

In addition to this, wine bottles need to be properly padded and packaged to ensure their brittle glass doesn't break during transportation –

this often creates even more excessive waste, plus sometimes that packaging isn't recyclable, and it too ends up in landfill.

I might have taken some comfort from the fact that my own little bottles, which I have yet to recycle of course, were, in the main, plastic ones. But now I read that per litre of content, every plastic bottle produces 11 times more Greenhouse Gas emission, uses 27 times more water, and produces 440 times more plastic pollution than a reusable stainless steel water bottle with a plastic cap.

The way the vineyard land is worked, together with the land-use change brought on by vineyard implementation, can cause disturbances to soil health and biodiversity. The emergence of new pests and diseases and the increasing occurrence of extreme weather events, such as heatwaves, heavy rainfall and possibly hail, also challenge wine production in some regions. In contrast, other areas might benefit from reduced pest and disease pressure. At the more extreme end excessive droughts, wildfires, dry soil, and low reservoir levels reduce yields for wine producers and it isn't unheard of for entire vintages to be lost in entire regions due to adverse weather events.

So, go red; It is suggested that we might switch the type of wine we drink in order to reduce our carbon footprint. Due to production factors white wine apparently emits more than rosé or red. White wine emits on average 0.92 kg of carbon dioxide emissions per 0.75-litre bottle, whereas both red wine and rosé emit around 0.89 kilograms of carbon dioxide per 0.75-litre bottle. A reduction of 0.03 per bottle doesn't look much at first sight, but if just half of the 30 billion bottles a year saw a change from white to red wine that would produce a saving of 450 million



Organic vineyard. Image: [earth.com](https://www.earth.com)

kg. per annum.

Alternatively, seek out organic wines on the menu, or wines produced by smaller producers – hand-crafted, quality wines made with regenerative viticulture. This ensures that you are purchasing wine from a company that is committed to sustainability and the fight against climate change. Wines made by hand mean less machinery used in production of the wine. Overall, organic wines can lead to a 23% decrease in carbon footprint as opposed to a bottle produced by conventional methods. Independent wine merchants often provide customers with extensive information on the wine growing practices of the products they sell, so when you purchase them, you can be sure it is making a difference. A UK produced wine also cuts down on the costs to the environment of international transport. However, the responsibility of contributing to a more sustainable future for the wine industry isn't just choosing the appropriate wine. It doesn't just end when you open the bottle – don't forget to recycle it!

If the above has all seemed a bit too much to take in, and a bit gloomy and censorious, can I suggest you sit down with a large glass of organically produced red wine to calm the nerves – or better still, a large glass of nice fresh drinking water.

# OBITUARY

## The Reverend Hugh Dawes

Jill Sandham

Hugh Dawes, who has died aged 75, was a longstanding member of the Sea of Faith Network, and at one time a regular attendee at conferences. He initiated and was one of the founders of Progressive Christianity Network Britain, which he chaired until 2010. He was a radical priest and gentle pastor. From Brighton and Hove Grammar School, Hugh went to University College, Oxford to study history, where he developed his vocation to the priesthood. He had a particular interest in social history, which informed his social conscience. He was a life-long member of the Labour Party and latterly proud to be one of the relatively few *Guardian* readers in Haslemere.

Hugh prepared for the priesthood at Cuddesdon College, influenced by Leslie Houlden, Dennis Nineham, Michael Goulder and John Barton. Following his curacy, he was appointed Chaplain of Gonville and Caius, and then Emmanuel College, Cambridge, where he served under the Deanship of Don Cupitt whilst Don was filming the *Sea of Faith* TV series. Don became a major influence and a lifetime friend.

Hugh's increasing embrace of radical faith drew him to enabling a new generation of free-thinking believers. In 1987 he was appointed as vicar to the parish of St James's, Cambridge and Director of the Focus Christian Institute. Expanding the work of Focus, he believed strongly in giving opportunities for a wider theological education among the laity. He abhorred the tendency of clergy to talk down to their congregations.

In 1992 Hugh published *Freeing the Faith: A Credible Christianity for Today*, an essay in liberal understanding, advocating change to set faith free from tyrannical tradition and be relevant to today's world. He was savagely attacked in the Press by traditionalists, who called on him publicly to resign his orders. *The Independent* and other newspapers carried the story of the 'atheist priest'.

Hugh braved the storm and proclaimed himself a catholic modernist priest in the C of E with no intention of resigning. He was a prophetic voice, often crying in the wilderness. The book was a suicide note for career preferment.



In 2000 Hugh was appointed vicar at St Faith's, North Dulwich, a diverse community in the Diocese of Southwark; I was already a member of the congregation. The eucharist was fundamental to Hugh's worship. He had a gift for adapting the words, hymnody, actions and movement of the liturgy to make worship contextual, inspiring and integral to the world outside church. He was a gentle pastor, meeting people where they were, never giving people easy answers, instead allowing them to discover faith for themselves. He encouraged children and young people to talk theology and take their full part in the worshipping community.

From 2000 Hugh and I established a close working relationship and friendship, both in the parish and in the development of PCN Britain, and we were married in 2004. We were a team, and it was the most special of marriages.

In 2009 Hugh developed early signs of a Parkinsonism, diagnosed 12 years later as Dementia with Lewy Bodies. He continued liturgical ministry in Guildford Diocese until 2018, and until his death he continued to join in the words of the Mass at St Nicolas, Guildford, when he could find almost no words in any other context. Such is the power of liturgy.

Hugh embraced with joy and enthusiasm the grandparent role, developing special relationships with each of them, including some age-appropriate theological conversations. His two-year-old granddaughter was able to break through the barriers of dementia in the last years of his life, by which time he had minimal awareness of time, place and people.

He is much missed by me, my children, our grandchildren, and the many whose lives he touched in his quietly brave, 'faithful to truth' life.

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Hugh William Dawes died on 7<sup>th</sup> February 2024, aged 75. Jill Sandham is his widow. She is the Safeguarding Consultant, Jericho Road Consultancy .

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Letter published in the *Church Times*  
from Canon Stephen Mitchell

*Image of God 'out there' which still hasn't gone*

How disappointing to read that the late Hugh Dawes's attempt, in his 1992 book *Freeing the Faith*, to find a new story of God which did not rely on supernatural assumptions, found little support from his bishop (*Gazette*, 3 May). But has anything changed?

It is now more than 60 years since Bishop John Robinson came clean and declared that he no longer found it possible to believe in an almighty God 'out there' who intervened in human affairs, and exactly 40 years since Don Cupitt charted the gradual erosion of this belief in *The Sea of Faith*, broadcast on the BBC.

While both of them met with the same unsupportive attitude at the time, the evidence now is that all bishops and archbishops in the Church of England agree with John Robinson.

Prayers in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer (still authorised for use) ask God to 'send us rain and showers', 'confound [our enemies'] devices', and 'withdraw from us this plague and grievous sickness'. Yet during the recent droughts, no bishop or archbishop beseeched God to send rain; nor has one asked God to confound Russian tanks or withdraw the Covid-19 plague from us. While they called for a ceasefire in the Middle East, they did not ask God to bring it.

Until our bishops acknowledge that they do not believe in a God who will send rain, confound war-makers, and take away plagues, the Church will never be the open, liberal, and inclusive community that Hugh so desired.

Such an admission by the Bishops would help liberate faith and free us from an image of God which many find oppressive and abusive. It would help us to take responsibility for our talk of God, and encourage us to make our theology true to experience and explore the rich diversity of ways in which God has been spoken about in the Bible and in history.

*Stephen Mitchell*  
Trustee, *Sea of Faith Network*  
Great Waldingfield

## Climate Change

I enjoyed the recent issue of *Sofia*. The theme, of course,

resonates particularly with anyone African-born; my sister-in-law the Vicar would love Tony Windross's article on baptisms; Dominic Kirkham was as ever excellent.

I hope someone can be found to carry on the editorship, though they will be all too aware they have a hard act to follow.

Before you go, I hope you will revisit climate change. The next generation will judge us, above all else, by our response to global warming (nuclear wipeout aside). One thing dismays me: no matter where or how I raise the main question, it is deflected. As I've said before, I could be back bleating about the denial of the obvious in Ian Smith's Rhodesia. For most, perhaps, the truth is reluctantly absorbed but it is taboo to mention it because no one likes to think of bad endings.

But how *should* we react? Approaching 83 years of age I'm as congenitally cheerful as ever – but at the same time helpless and defeated.

Now, I do know my appreciation of poetry is stuck in the early post Second World War era and this appreciation is the opposite of multi-layered (a popular phrase now). But, anyway, I'll send you this partial distillation of a lifetime's thought.

*Digby Hartridge*  
Bristol

### Saving a Tree

'Leave room for hope', they whine.  
But what is hope where thought is wishful?  
I cannot know but my best surmise  
Must be that we're lemmings  
Or swine over a cliff,  
That cruelty and greed  
Will finish the job  
Of destroying our world  
For many a millennium.  
True courage would be to spell it out  
Unrelentingly.  
We can show love,  
Show kindness  
And joke.  
Laugh..  
And I can make plans of mitigation,  
Proudly preserve an ailing apple tree.



letters

# The Traveller

St Pancras Station then was not a pleasurable place  
of grand departures, a destination in itself,  
just somewhere that East Midlanders  
must go to catch a packed train home.

She was already at the table, facing the engine,  
folder of papers at the ready for the journey  
as he sat down opposite.  
The seats filled up and they set off.

And at that prompt the tears began to flow.  
She didn't try to wipe them,  
he didn't say a word.  
Nobody offered a handkerchief.

But still the silent tears rolled down without a stop  
collecting on her collar  
for the full ninety minutes of the journey,  
as if she wept the memory of all griefs:

the tide held back at the hospital  
held back at the funeral,  
held back as the small white coffin hit the earth  
but loosened now before the eyes of strangers.

Until there came the merciful last station  
and she gathered up the unopened folder.

When her husband met her at the barrier,  
K's eyes were dry

then and forever after.

Kathryn Southworth

---

This poem is reprinted with the poet's permission from her collection *Slantwise History* (Vole Books, Guildford 2024).

Vole books are an imprint of Dempsey and Windle, 15 Rosetrees, Guildford, Surrey GU1 2HS (Telephone 01483 571164).

# A Penn'orth

Penny Mawdsley writes about forgiveness.

Forgiveness is such a key Christian concept that it is unsurprising that scripture is full of it. Looking afresh at familiar quotations I find myself wondering whether we have accepted them too uncritically. Well-known public figures and 'influencers' over the last century have given their take on the subject. For example, Einstein is alleged to have said 'Weak people revenge. Strong people forgive. Intelligent people ignore.' Mahatma Gandhi said 'The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.' Mother Teresa said 'If we really want to love we must learn how to forgive' and Oprah Winfrey wrote 'It's not an easy journey, to get to a place where you forgive people, but it is such a powerful place because it frees you.'

None of these quotations appear to question whether the one to be forgiven is genuinely sorry for their offence, nor whether it is reasonable or fair always to expect the one doing the forgiving to take this step without knowing the answer.

The New Testament abounds in passages stressing the need to imitate God as a loving and merciful father. There's the Parable of the Prodigal Son and the words of the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6 v.9, if more nuanced in verse 14, which states that if you do *not* forgive others, then the wrongs you have done will not be forgiven by God. In the account of the dying Christ, we of course have a more compassionate insight displayed towards 'those who know not what they do'. Genuine ignorance of – or failure to – understand the significance of – a wrong action should be forgiven.

I've always had a niggling problem with forgiving a wrong without being fully convinced of the genuine regret of the perpetrator. When I was teaching, and a pupil had committed a misdemeanour against another I instructed the child in the customary way to apologise to the one he or she had upset. I was loath to accept a sullen 'sor-Ree!' from the perpetrator and to let the matter rest without querying the response. And it

was often obvious with our own children that an apology was not heart-felt but given in order that equilibrium could be restored and there was no danger of missing out on a treat!

Now fear of a wrathful God's displeasure has abated, the contemporary Christian is more likely to be influenced by modern psychological thinking around the importance of forgiveness for both parties to be able to 'move on'. I see this a bit like a Non-Realist view of prayer, where the value is as much, if not more, to the one praying than on expectation of a good outcome directly from the prayer itself.

Another angle on forgiveness we might consider is the current trend for political and church leaders to make speeches apologising for wrongs committed by the ancestors of those they represent to the ancestors of the people they are addressing – designed of course to be covered favourably by the media. Apologies have been made variously for a range of things ranging from sexual abuse, drowning villages to supply water to cities, to the Crusades and slavery. Do they expect that their fine words constitute more than a diplomatic if positive gesture towards making recompense? They certainly have no right to expect forgiveness from their audience. And what about restorative justice or the original perpetrators being let entirely off the hook?

The same perhaps goes for individuals publicly forgiving on behalf of others who for one reason or another are unable to do this themselves and have not given their permission for this to happen. The shocking 1986 Ealing Vicarage Rape comes to mind when the Rev. Saward initially forgave the gang in front of the TV cameras apparently on behalf of his deeply traumatised daughter. Later, admirably, Gill Saward herself was ready and able to forgive those who had hurt her and 'move on' by founding a rape charity for which she worked until her death in 2017.

Further, is it realistic always to expect someone 'to forgive and forget'? Traumatic experience can't easily be expunged from memory. In short, forgiveness is a thorny business.



Edward Nickell reviews  
*Vile Bodies. The Body in  
Christian Teaching, Faith and  
Practice*

by Adrian Thatcher

SCM Press (London 2023) Pbk. 278 pages.

Before reading *Vile Bodies*, I had no idea how alien the ancient understanding of bodies and sex were to ours. These ancient understandings seem risible to us now – and I did laugh many times reading this book – but the consequences of them are no laughing matter. The vilification of bodies by Christians have led to an awful litany of abuses, all examined in this book: ‘violence against women; spiritual abuse; racism; homophobia and sexual abuse.’

*Vile Bodies* offers incisive insights from the Hebrew Bible, New Testament and other Christian writing into how human bodies are and were perceived in Christian faith and thought. This book reminded me of *God: An Anatomy* by Francesca Stavrakapoulou, which was reviewed in *Sofia* issue 143 (March 2022) and well received by readers. The authors of both books are professors in the Department of Religion and Theology at the University of Exeter and Stavrakapoulou is thanked for her suggestions to the book.

Adrian Thatcher, unlike his colleague, writes from the perspective of being an Anglican theologian from the modern, liberal tradition. He is also managing editor of *Modern Believing* and a trustee of Modern Church. For this reason he goes beyond historical context, and also seeks to offer a more positive theology, This is a ‘post-abusive theology’, drawing on Linda Woodhead and Nicholas Peter Harvey’s book, *Unknowing God*, reviewed in *Sofia* 151 (March 2024).

Thatcher introduces the reader to the ancient views of bodies using the example of the Levitical law on female ‘pollution.’ According to Leviticus, women are unclean when they have their periods and after they give birth. If they give birth to a boy, they are unclean for 33 days, if a girl, for 66 days. Apart from the obvious sexism of the whole thing, the specific time difference is odd.

When these laws were codified, there was a ubiquitous belief that male foetuses were two-times ‘more perfect’ than female. By a strange leap of reason, the male foetus would therefore develop in half the time. Despite the fact it is demonstrably

nonsense, the belief that a boy ‘moved first’ in the womb remained common in Europe well into the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

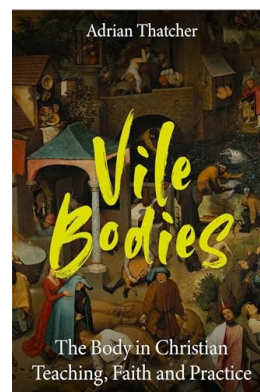
In ancient times, there was only thought to be one sex: man. Man referred to all humankind, but there were two forms of man, a stronger and more perfect male form, and the weaker female form. Both forms had the same genitals but the female form was ‘inverted’. Males had more blood and converted some of this into sperm, carrying life. Females couldn’t produce sperm, instead losing their excess blood in menstruation or, during pregnancy, to nourish the foetus.

This book is even-handed in its contextualising of scripture. For example, Paul’s statement that ‘there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus’ is a favourite of progressive Christians for its advocacy of equality. However, this interpretation ‘unfortunately overlooks that unity and equality are very different concepts. Unity is more consistent with hierarchy.’ Paul meant that, ‘the cessation of sexual difference happens by the elimination, not the transformation of the female.’

Whatever Paul meant does not need to stop us from making our own interpretation today. ‘To revision is to see afresh, with different eyes, and to promote interpretation that engage with such texts with the sexed and gendered understandings of our own time, and with conscious liberatory intent.’

By the 17<sup>th</sup> century advances in anatomy had led to a view of ‘two opposite sexes’, with arguments about whether the sexes are ‘equal, equal but different, or unequal and different.’ These have been read back into the historical texts. Only in the last half-century have we realised how overstated sex differences have been, and how much more complex the distinction and relationship between the biological and social are than previously thought.

In some ways, we are swinging away from the oppositional binary and back towards a new continuum. I hope this new continuum is the one Adrian Thatcher advocates, in which no bodies are considered vile and all embodiments can be a source of joy and celebration.



reviews

## Dominic Kirkham reviews *The Glass Wall: Lives on the Baltic Frontier*

by Max Egremont

Picador (London 2021) Pbk. 320 pages

The Baltic states are once more a focus of global concern, a flashpoint of military conflict, even nuclear Armageddon. What may have once been regarded as remote, far-away places of marginal concern are now very much instrumental in the decision making of the EU and NATO alliance. It is these states, particularly Latvia and Estonia, that are the focus of this book which is part travelogue, memoir, and rumination based on numerous interviews and character studies. Though I have travelled in Eastern Europe and Russia, and studied their history, I bought the book because I had no clear mental picture of these two states. I was amply rewarded.

These always were, and still are, very much 'frontier' states shaped by both the Teutonic West and Russian East, a place where the clash of civilisations – European Christendom and Slavonic Orthodoxy – continues today in Putin's 'Holy War' with its blend of militant Orthodoxy and nationalism. The result is a history of mind-boggling complexity - with its 'glass wall' of ever shifting alliances, and loyalties, and incomprehensible savagery: there is hardly a family that does not have a tragic memory of a relative who was arrested, exiled, 'disappeared', or murdered, particularly in the Soviet era.

No easy lessons can be drawn from this conflicted history nor moral judgements made, other than perhaps the frightening speed with which societies can slide into savagery once social structures crumble. In Latvia and Estonia such structures had traditionally been provided by a Germanic baronial elite that had settled the area during the great Northern Crusade that began in the thirteenth century.

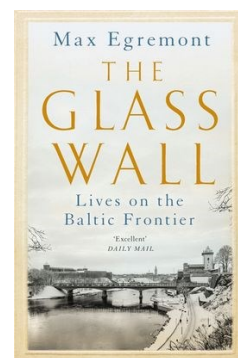
Though we tend to focus on the Crusades as a phenomenon related to the Middle East this is quite misleading. Even over a period of three centuries, their effect here was ephemeral and ultimately a failure – thought their memory remains toxic. Far more enduring and significant were their effects in the Baltic. It is here, particularly in Latvia, that we see the how the drama of one iteration of an imperial Christianity (Christendom) unfolded. Its dual strategy of conversion and colonisation would later become the template for Europe's global expansion.

At the time this civilising mission was seen to be necessitated by the heathenism of the indigenous people. In fact it was little more than a land grab: the Livonian Knighthood, or Ritterschaft, which controlled Latvia and southern Estonia was drawn from a hundred and sixty eight landowning families who imposed a ruthless order from their castles and manors with the additional agency of the church, originally Catholic then Lutheran. 'The enemy', according to one contemporary (1225) witness, would be "forced to give up their wicked habits ... They deserved to be killed."

This domination was resisted at the time, and is now widely regarded as having led to "a thousand years of enslavement," that ended only with the defeat of Germany in 1918, the rise of Bolshevism and the clamour for independence. It was the restoration of this Germanic world – again with the excuse of bringing a superior culture - that provided the key context to Hitler's campaign, Operation Barbarossa, an undertaking he also saw as a crusade to defend and expand civilisation.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990's and the re-emergence of independent Baltic states there has been a further transformation accompanied by an awakened interest in ancient traditions and beliefs that were very much related to the natural world, to the 'spirits' of the forests, sky and rivers. In this world the feminine deities were often more powerful than their male equivalents, with the masculine winds controlled by a mother goddess: the emblematic 'Stone-Age Madonna' dates back to the sixth millennium BCE.

Though Latvia and Estonia are now wholly secularised states the search for a modern identity paradoxically seeks out such places as the settlements on the Estonian island of Saaremaa that date back to the fourth millennium BCE and reveal a wealth of carved tools and amber jewellery of the original Finno-Ugrians. Was this, asks Egremont, something of a 'golden age' before eastern Slavs came from Russia and the Vikings from the west? Rather, almost from the outset, this is the story of a frontier land crushed between greater powers, It is a story by no means concluded nor its outcome assured.



reviews

Edward Nickell reviews  
*On Voice. Speech, Song,  
Silence: Human and Divine*

by Victoria Johnson

Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd (Croydon 2024) Pbk.  
189 pages.

*On Voice* explores and promotes Christian worship, theology and culture by looking at voices in the church today and throughout history. The author, Reverend Canon Victoria Johnson, previously responsible for worship at York Minister and now Dean at the Chapel of St John's College Cambridge, can also draw on her own experience. Her voice, as an ordained woman, remains controversial or even unacceptable in some places.

The voice of this book is one full of lyrical praise and worship. It gets as close to being a song as printed text can get. At times, I felt it was gushing. For example, the author doesn't just wonder how the historical Jesus might have sounded, but exclaims 'Oh to have heard that voice!'

While praise dominates the tone, there is an undercurrent of simmering anger. This bubbles up when the book addresses the unfairness of a government which banned singing and worship while it partied in Downing Street. It was probably meant as an aside, but the litany of the 'meaner and harsher reality' in recent years is one of the most powerful pages I've read recently. The author describes how the bells of a Church should be 'a sign and symbol of the church's vocation to name those things which comfortable society may wish to ignore, to sound out against injustice and warn against complacency.'

Diversity runs through the book as a theme. The author reads the story of the Tower of Babel as God acting against a desire for uniformity and conformity by creating new diversity of languages. The author's own voice brings diversity to worship. When she delivers the liturgy it may be the first time some are hearing the words of Christ or God from a female rather than male voice. This diversity reminds people that God is not necessarily an old man, and that 'we cannot control God or indeed dictate how or when God speaks nor to whom God speaks.'

*On Voice* tells the stories of women from past centuries: the noisy and course but authoritative Margery Kempe; the withdrawn but visionary voice of Julian of Norwich. These voices were, of course,

not always welcome: 'For now, as then, the church still looks with suspicion and caution upon those who profess their own reality of a God who is able to speak directly to them.'

The array of topics covered range from the sad tale of eunuchs to the mysterious voices of bird and whale song, and a fascinating reflection on how the timeless synthesised voice of Stephen Hawking defied his debilitated body and captured his youthfulness.

One chapter breathlessly conveys the excitement of a multi-million-pound organ restoration at York Minster. A loud new voice for the church after the silence of lockdown. *On Voice* argues that worship serves a purpose 'perhaps beyond utility, beyond strategy, beyond economics and ultimately beyond price'. An agreeable ideal, but a world away from my experience of the Church of England. My local parish can't even afford a regular organist, and the Diocese has set a price on our continued existence of £90,000 per year, unrealistic in one of the poorest areas of the country.

The author says that she struggles to sing what she doesn't believe, 'how can you sing something that you don't quite believe or know to be true?' and observes, with sadness, the decline of congregational singing in many places. 'If singing is an expression or sign of belief, if it is a sign and symbol of the church itself, which I want to say it is, Christianity in this country, both the knowledge of it and adherence to it, is no longer something that the general population are willing or often able, to sing in support of.'

In contrast to Johnson, as a Christian Atheist, I'm more comfortable singing a hymn than saying the creed. When I sang in chapel choir, half the words were in Latin anyway, and the rest could be understood as poetic. The book notes that singing at Christmas or sports events endures. Last Christmas, the street carolling at Columbia Road became so popular that the police had to shut it down due to overcrowding.

How would we describe the voice of the Network? Certainly quieter than the clanging bells or booming organ of the church. Perhaps ours is a diverse, at times discordant, but certainly unique, chorus.



reviews



Dad's Army: Resistance, 'Who Do you think you're kidding, Mr Hitler?'