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Looking Back – Facing Forward

sofia

down to Earth

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CONTRIBUTIONS

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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.

Looking Back – Facing Forward

The recent annual SOF Conference was held in London in July 2024. Its title was *Looking Back – Facing Forward*. This Conference issue of *Sofia* begins with the talks given by the three speakers. First, Anthony Freeman described the life-changing event that happened to him when he was sacked from his job as a priest for publishing his book *God in Us*, which says that God is created by the human imagination.

Next Tony Windross spoke about how he was ordained as a *result* of the *Sea of Faith* but, he said, this made him feel ‘something of an impostor in the Church’. However, it gave him what Don said in his final *Sea of Faith* programme ‘was the purpose of religion: a spiritual path’. Lastly Linda Woodhead, a sociologist of religion, spoke about spirituality, which, she said, was growing in popularity whereas the organised churches were in decline. Many people in Britain now described themselves as ‘spiritual but not religious’. In their discussion at the end Freeman responded that he would describe himself as ‘religious but not spiritual’.

I rather agreed with him. I love these ‘poetic tales’ and what they can say to us and inspire us to do, but I certainly don’t think of myself as spiritual. I remember the song sung by the Greenham Common women’s camp: ‘You can’t kill the Spirit, / she’s like a mountain / old and strong...’. (Incidentally, in support of that ‘she’ for the Spirit, the biblical Hebrew word for spirit, wind and breath is *ruach*, which is feminine.) That’s the Spirit I prefer to a rather fuzzy ‘spirituality’.

There is plenty more in this *Sofia*. In her *Penn’orth*, Penny Mawdsley writes about ‘Fear’. John Pearson goes on ‘Going Green’. (He is also active in Green politics in Newcastle, where he lives.) There is poetry and a review by Kathryn Southworth of *A Century of Poetry: 100 Poems for searching the heart*, edited by Rowan Williams.



Surveying

When I wake up
from my window I see gulls
flapping across the sky.
I call them seagulls
though London is far from the sea.
I wonder what they gather
as they survey the land below.

Coming home by plane and looking down,
when the Channel reaches the coast
I see the white cliffs and green fields.
I survey the landscape from the air –
how I love that green –
and then London, my city
I love even more.

Waking at home in London
I survey the dawning day,
who is coming, what I have to do
and if it is still early,
as well as looking forward I look back
on more than fifty years in this same house
where my three children grew.
And on what happened in the world
during that half century.

Today is Easter. Christ is risen
and the daughters are coming to dinner,
grandsons too. I am eighty-three
and dodderly. Will I cope?
Yes, I think together we will rise
to it and enjoy ourselves.
Time to spring up.

Dinah Livingstone

A Life-Changing Event

Anthony Freeman

Inevitably this will be a personal account, if only because (apart from Don himself) I had my life changed more dramatically than anyone else as a result of the Sea of Faith. Put briefly, I lost my income, my home, my career, and the standing in society that still attaches to a parish priest in the Church of England. What I did *not* lose was my Christian faith: it was transformed, but in a way that has been entirely positive.

I shall first paint a picture of the theological landscape in the 1970s and '80s, and then describe the significance of Don's contribution in that context.

Christian Believing

We start in 1976, when the Church of England's Doctrine Commission published a report on *The Nature of Christian Faith and its Expression in Holy Scripture and Creeds*.

The Commission had been expected to give a summary of the Christian Doctrine held in the Church of England, and to show how this conformed to the God-given teaching already set out in the Bible and the Creeds. What it did instead, was to insist that 'the first and fundamental loyalty of the Christian conscience ... must be to the truth'. And that furthermore, this loyalty to the truth demands a genuinely open quest, a 'voyage of discovery' on which the final destination cannot be known in advance.

By taking this approach to Christian doctrine, the Commission acknowledged that it was putting itself at odds with 'the overwhelming majority of Christians', for whom the Bible and Creeds already contain the only correct answers to questions 'about God and the universe and the relation between them'.

Nonetheless, the Commission took the view that for many Christians (including some of themselves), faith was no longer something fixed, that could be written down in scripture or in creed, or in a doctrine report, but an ongoing

process, engaged in both by individuals and the church as a whole. They signalled this by giving their report the dynamic title *Christian Believing*, rather than the more static 'Christian Doctrine'.

I can remember my pleasure that the Church of England was at last accepting officially the approach to Christian believing to which I myself had become accustomed. Not that it was altogether a surprise, because the chairman of the Commission was professor Maurice Wiles, whose two books, *The Making of Christian Doctrine* and *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine*, had largely guided my own understanding of the matter.

However, there were two problems. First – perhaps predictably – the report was thrown out by General Synod. They were not ready to accept that neither the Bible nor the Creeds could be treated as sources of absolute universal truth revealed by God.

The second problem was – for me – far more significant, and would lead me eventually to Don Cupitt and *The Sea of Faith*. This problem was, that having clearly set out the case against treating 'the Faith' as a set of divinely revealed propositions about God and creation, the 1976 Doctrine Report did nothing to address the religious consequences of such a position.

Weakness of Liberal Theology

There is a persistent underlying weakness of liberal-modernist theology, shown up by the Report: it cannot avoid looking wishy-washy and vague, and ultimately incapable of sustaining the religious practice it is meant to underpin. This is because it still maintains a *theory* of a supernatural world, with a Creator, a Saviour, etc., whose intentions and acts influence our lives, but at the same time admits that in *practice* no particular historical event can be proved to be an act of God. The same contradiction applies to the Bible (I quote the Report):

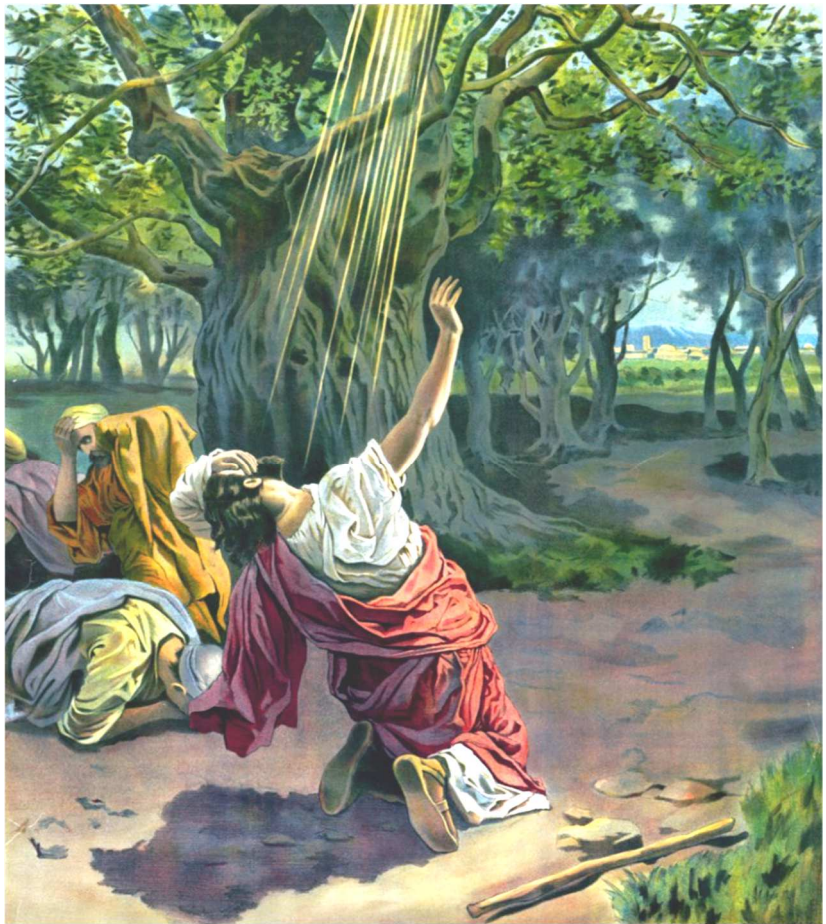
'To speak of the Bible as the 'Word of God', or the 'Word of God in the words of men', is just as much a judgment of faith as to speak of some historical event as an 'act of God'. It is not a proposition that can be proved.'

I can see how these must be judgments of faith. My difficulty is, having ruled out identifiable divine intervention or revelation, what basis does a liberal Christian have for making any such judgment of faith? And once the judgment is made, once we have made the leap of faith, what difference does it make?

To take an example, St John assures us that, although no one has ever seen God, we know what he like because the only Son has made him known. But what good is that to me? Even if I accept (as a judgment of faith) that Jesus is the Son of God who has made God known, I have never met Jesus face to face. My only access to Jesus is through the New Testament, and the critical study of the gospels – which lies at the heart of liberal theology – has shown that there is no single clear picture of the historical Jesus. At best, we have a confusing and often conflicting collage of snapshots, and these may well tell us more about the evangelists than about him.

My act of faith in Jesus as the Son of God has brought me no closer to a description of the unseen God, because I have no secure information about the Jesus I have never seen either.

Perhaps the answer is to bypass the Bible and go direct to the detailed description of God contained in the Creeds. But this will not do either, because liberal theology quite rightly applies the same critical approach to the Creeds as it does to scripture. The Doctrine Commission Report is remarkably frank in this regard. Having acknowledged the difficulties facing those who hammered out the Creeds in the first place, in their 'attempt to express the inexpressible', the Report then goes on:



St Paul's Encounter on the Road to Damascus

'... we can form some idea of what the creeds intended to affirm when, for example, they asserted the humanity and divinity of Jesus; and we cannot escape the obligation to decide whether we can repeat that assertion in their own language; or whether, while continuing to share their intention, we must express it in different terms; or whether again we have to conclude that what the creeds intended to say is no longer meaningful or in fact not true.'

You can see why General Synod did not like this. But I quote it here simply to underline my point about the weakness of liberal theology. To maintain a theory of a supernatural God, while admitting that our official description of God could be wrong, or at best meaningless, is a very peculiar and weak position.

I hope I have said enough to show why, by the early eighties, the liberal theology of my student days had ceased to be an adequate foundation for my preaching and teaching ministry. This is the point at which Don Cupitt came to my rescue.

Enter Don Cupitt

You must by now be able to picture me, frustrated by my liberal-modernist teachers like Maurice Wiles, who took away my confidence in the Bible and Creeds as reliable windows on to God, but still said I must – by a judgment of faith – accept that he existed. John Macquarrie, another Oxford professor, had gone so far as to write that it is probably more accurate to say that God does *not* exist than that he *does*, but he then went off to quote Psalm 94, to the effect that God might still have his beady eye on us, so best say he exists anyway.

And then comes Don Cupitt, this saviour from Cambridge, saying, ‘*But, Anthony, you don’t have to say that God exists. In fact, from a religious point of view, you ought not to speak of God’s existence at all.*’ The effect was like St Paul, telling his fellow-Jewish Christians, that they no longer needed to struggle to keep the whole Law of Moses. In fact, as Christians, they should not follow the Law at all. I felt free of a great burden.

But if Don was right, why was everyone else still clinging to the language of existence in relation to God? The unwitting villain, it seems, was Plato. He had lived 400 years before Christ; but seven centuries later, at the time Christian doctrine was being formalised, the Graeco-Roman intellectual world was gripped by a revival of Plato’s philosophy, Neo-Platonism. Plato had taught that our earthly physical world was but a pale reflection of the real but unseen world, the world of what he called ‘forms’. Thus every dog that we have ever seen is a more-or-less imperfect version of the archetypal heavenly form of Dog – capital D. And what was true of physical objects was equally true of abstract words like truth, beauty and justice. These words, according to Plato, must also designate forms, real beings existing in a timeless, heavenly world above.

This is what Don calls philosophical realism. But as he explains in *The Sea of Faith*, that is no longer how we understand such things. I quote:

‘We now see that values like this do not have to be independently and objectively existent beings in order to be able to claim our allegiance. [e.g.] We can ... recognize that duty calls ... without supposing that duty ... is a real being.’

This what Don calls philosophical non-realism. And – crucially – it applies to religious words just as much as to ethical or aesthetic terms. Thus, Don goes on to write:

‘As with values, so with God, because God’s status in the language is very close to that of values. God simply is the ideal unity of all value, its claim upon us, and its creative power. ... Just as you should not think of justice and truth as independent beings, so you should not think of God as an objectively existing super-person. That is a mythological and confusing way of thinking.’

The key sentence in this quotation is, *God’s status in the language is very close to that of values.* Don’s revolution is to say that we should not ask what certain words *refer to* in some outside world, but rather we should focus on the *meaning we give* to words and ideas. We should study how we use them, and the role they actually play in our lives. And this is especially the case with religious words and ideas.

And so he continues: ‘*The ... idea of God is imperative, not indicative. To speak of God is to speak about the moral and spiritual goals we ought to be aiming at, and about what we ought to become. The meaning of ‘God’ is religious, not metaphysical ... The true God is not God as a picturesque supernatural fact, but God as our religious ideal.*’

Of course, this change of approach raises all sorts of questions that I don’t have time to deal with here, but which I discuss in simple terms in my book *God in Us*. My aim today has been to give a sense of the freedom that non-realism gave to me.

Talk given to the 2024 SOF Conference by Anthony Freeman.

Ordained as a *Result* of Sea of Faith

Tony Windross

Whilst (like me) there are plenty of people who can't get their heads around religious claims – *unlike* me, pretty well all of *them* are outside the Church (and *remain* outside the Church). As one of the very few clergy to have been ordained *as a result of* Sea of Faith I've long been used to feeling something of an imposter in the *Church*. But given the role Sea of Faith played in my religious gestation, none of this should be in any way unexpected. And in the light of that dubious theological parentage, it's a matter of surprise all round, not just that I was ordained in the first place – but that I've managed to survive in parish ministry for the last 30 years. My priority in the early 1980s (although I don't think I fully realised it at the time) was to find some way of making sense of religion, that would enable me to take part in worship. In other words – *to find a theology that would make religion a possibility*. And the serendipitous timing of the 1984 *Sea of Faith* series and book supplied precisely that – with my whole world changing as a result.

Part of the problem was that *I couldn't say what I believed*. Not in the cautious, self-protecting sense that I daren't let on – but in the more profound sense that I didn't really know myself. And that's still the case – which puts me beyond the pale with most people (both inside and outside the Church) who seem more than capable of doing so. But my inability to list my beliefs doesn't bother me – as I see religion as far more about Faith than Belief – which is just as well, otherwise I'd find it impossible.

That was what Sea of Faith did for me – and it's what I've wanted to try and do for anyone else in a similar position to the one I'd been in. Faith is always something *Active*, involving some sort of choice, some sort of decision; whereas Belief is always something *Passive*, something we either have or we haven't. And of course, the belief (or rather set of beliefs) that pretty well everyone outside Sea of Faith has with regard to religion – involves the *supernatural*.

I've never been able to make any sense of 'the supernatural', so it's not really a case of denying its existence, but simply not understanding what it is that's being claimed. And because the entire basis of Sea of Faith is the refusal to brush aside troubling questions like that, it puts us at odds with everybody else. Which means if we want to be part of church communities, we've always got to be aware of just how odd and threatening our non-supernaturalism must seem – *and mind our theological language*.

That is why, for me, Ethics *always* trumps Theology – and can therefore be seen as a yardstick or measure or test *of* the Theology. All of this flowed from the *Sea of Faith* programmes. They are not intellectually watertight – and as a deeply personal interpretation of a great sweep of religious and philosophical history, made all sorts of claims that could be (and were) challenged.

I was *grateful* for the insight that all religion is a human creation, including the concept of God itself. Whilst this doesn't necessarily lead to a full-blown non-realism, that's where it took me, and where I (probably) still am. I was especially *grateful* for the overall narrative the *Sea of Faith* series provided, because it gave me what (in the final programme) Don said was the purpose of religion: a spiritual path.

The programmes and the book changed *everything* for me, but the hostile reception they received within the Church made it obvious just how threatening they were, especially because of their explicit non-supernaturalism. Which is why that first Sea of Faith Conference (in 1988) had such an exciting, illicit feel – with many people worried that their attendance might somehow get back to either their parishioners or their bishop (or both). What is so scary? What is so unacceptable about serious religious people engaging in serious religious exploration? Why is the Church so afraid of its members actually thinking?

We can, if we wish, continue to use the same forms of church services as those still enthralled by the theistic notion of God, but are under no obligation to adopt their picture or story or intellectual model. It's not a matter of being or becoming an atheist, as that would mean ditching all the stories and rituals. We *can* continue to worship as fully and as enthusiastically and as sincerely and as genuinely as the rest – whilst being especially conscious of the 'beyond-ness' to which the liturgy points us.

It's easy in Sea of Faith to feel second-class, in the sense that because we're unable to see the world in the way most religious people seem to manage, we've had to make do with a religious picture-of-last-resort. *But we've got nothing to apologise for!* Our religious picture, whilst certainly unpopular is far closer to the ancient apophatic idea of God, than the limited and ontologically-circumscribed version so beloved of the theists. But there's got to be some sort of balance between being apologetic – and aggressively defensive. Of either seeing our picture as intrinsically second-best, appropriate just for those who can only afford the cheap version. Or seeing it as intellectually superior, on Occam's Razor-type grounds, because of its metaphysical minimalism.

I don't have (and have never had) an argument (in the sense of an intellectual case) to support my non-dogmatic non-realism – it's more like a coping strategy to help me take religion seriously. And because I'm making no claims that might conflict with the claims made by others, I don't *want* an argument about any of it. I've got absolutely no interest in trying to persuade others that the way *I* see things, is in any way 'better' than the way they see things.

In fact, I'm *so* keen *not* to have an argument, that I got into the habit, when asked to give a talk, of saying at the very beginning, that it really didn't matter to me whether people agreed with what I said or not. And that I wasn't putting anything forward as 'truth' – but simply offering a personal perspective. But by the time I'd finished, and it was time for questions, people had (of course) forgotten all that – and there were *always* those keen to point out (sometimes in quite offensive terms) that the way I saw things was wrong, and the way they saw things was right!

Don Cupitt showed me (and presumably many of the people here today) the possibility of exploring these questions from inside the Church – but of course the Church didn't thank him for that, as it enabled what it saw as religious riff-raff to join (or remain in) *their* club.

That meant there were bound to be casualties. Don himself suffered almost unbearable (and horribly personal) vilification for decades. Anthony Freeman lost his job in the most painful circumstances. David Paterson (sadly no longer with us) and Stephen Mitchell (happily very much so!) were publicly called to account by their bishop. And of course, Hugh Dawes (also sadly no longer with us) had to suffer the brutal consequences of speaking truth to ecclesiastical power, with the publication of his brilliant *Freeing the Faith*, marking the end of any career ambitions he might have had.

Any normal person is bound to find it painful to be seen as the devil's spawn, and those who think it reasonable to direct such venom at us, presumably have no inkling of what trying to practise our religion with integrity has cost – and continues to cost. Those of us who are (broadly speaking) non-realists, are as we are, not out of bloody-mindedness, but because we can do (and be) no other.

We see the world (and God) as we do, not to be awkward, but because (following Socrates) that's where the argument has led us. Standing up (and out) against the establishment is always costly; and it's also hard to stand up (and out) against fellow church members, as well as those outside the Church who see the whole thing as barmy – and wonder why we're bothering with *any* of it. Being in the middle of all that can feel a bit lonely at times – which is why the support that this Network provides, is *so* important.

Because the unending negativity and unpleasantness (as well as all the mental gymnastics) are bound to take their toll – and there *are* going to be times when we wonder whether it's all worthwhile. Maybe we really *are* (as everyone else seems to think) religious fraudsters, stuck so far inside our personal echo-chamber that we've forgotten just how weird we sound, with all our in-house talk of non-realism? Maybe we should

take the hint that we're not welcome – and leave the orthodox in peace?

But quite apart from the fact that many of us find worship an essential part of life, and therefore have a personal *need* to remain part of the Church, it's also vital that the non-realist approach to religion is not allowed to disappear. It needs to be available for the benefit of those (and there are always going to be some) who (like us) might find it a lifeline. We cannot therefore, with a clear conscience, simply push the ladder away, once we've safely got to the top.

Despite what many people think, Don never resigned his orders, but *has* distanced himself from the Church – and considering the way it treated him, that's not at all surprising. The Church is no closer *now* to taking on board the ideas of John Robinson, than when he first gave voice to them in *Honest to God* over 60 ago. And if it *still* can't accommodate *him* (given his theological conservatism), there's no way it could cope with Don (or indeed us). Not now – and (almost certainly) not *ever*. That is really *very* depressing, given the potential that Don's example and writings have to keep the rumour of God alive – at least for a handful of people.

My problem, 40 years ago, was that however hard I looked, I couldn't find God. The answer to prayer did eventually come – in the form of the *Sea of Faith* series, book, and network. And made me realise that I'd been looking in the wrong sort of way, in the wrong sort of place, for the wrong sort of God.

It was about being 'held captive by a picture' – and as soon as the picture was changed, the barrier to faith was removed. Which is what I've been trying to do for the last 30 years. Trying to dismantle whatever religious barriers may be in people's way. Not wanting them to think like me (what would be the point of that?) – but setting them free to go in whatever directions might work for them.

Far from trying to convert people to non-realism, it's been about holding open the door that Don provided to all manner of religious possibilities. And inviting people to see whether



Swedish mountaineer Göran Kropp was the first to climb Mount Everest without oxygen alchetron.com

going through it leads them anywhere. But unless there's some sort of religious inkling or yearning there in the first place, with apparently insuperable obstacles in the way, Don's religious ideas (or indeed anyone else's) have got nothing to engage with, nothing to work with, no barriers to overcome. And there are bound to be many people for whom the whole religious quest is (and will remain) entirely meaningless, and who will therefore *never* be able to make any sense of what religion is all about.

Don was writing his career-ending *Taking Leave of God* at precisely the same time as the first climbers reached the summit of Everest without extra oxygen. And in their very different ways they showed that it *was* possible to survive, whilst not carrying stuff that everyone assumed was absolutely essential. The spiritual air that *Sea of Faith* types breathe takes a lot of getting used to, as it's much thinner than most people could ever cope with.

It can *never* be mainstream – so when Don talks in terms of how '*we've all moved beyond the old kinds of belief*', or when he says that '*the supernatural doctrine of Christianity is dead now – and cannot be revived*' – either the 'we' he's referring to is a very narrow constituency (essentially people like us) – or he's gravely misjudged the religious *Zeitgeist*! But whichever it is, our religious minimalism makes us stand out – and seem like an odd lot.

However, we're not a *homogeneous* lot. There *is* no *Sea of Faith* archetype, something to which everyone in it has to conform. We come in a

whole variety of spiritual shapes, sizes – and certainties. Some are *dogmatic non-realists*, the mirror image of the *dogmatic realists* who are the growth merchants of the institutional Church. Both groups have a confidence in their position that puzzles and intrigues both the *non-dogmatic realists* (who comprise the increasingly unfashionable liberal camp within the Church) and the *non-dogmatic non-realists* (who are people like me – and aren't really sure of anything). Far from being bothered by my lack of sureness, I see it as the only way to do justice to the idea of the unknowability of God

Anyone who took seriously the Socratic idea of wisdom only being available to those aware of the sheer scale of their ignorance – would realise that the humbler and more reticent we are in our knowledge-claims (maybe *especially* our religious knowledge-claims), the greater is likely to be our sense of wonder, as well as our sense of the sacred. With the result that we will feel unable to say *anything* about the nature of the divine – the only appropriate response being a profound silence.

But religious integrity is a tricky thing, and we're always in danger of becoming *prisoners of the binary* – in that we feel under some sort of social or intellectual obligation to put ourselves into camps. We're either with Freud or with Jung. We're either liberals or radicals. We're either for Don Cupitt or against him. We're either realists or non-realists. We're either theists or atheists.

Why do we need to do this? Is there something in the brain that urges us to think or to feel like that? Is it something tribal? Why can't we be potential members of several (maybe all?) the camps? Why can't we move from one to another – and back again? Why has our 'take' on reality got to be so *fixed*? So circumscribed? Why can't we (at least sometimes) be deliciously inconsistent? Why can't we be *playful* with all such classifications?

The problem, of course, is that if we dare to allow ourselves to question the basis on which we might have built an entire academic or ecclesiastical career, and which is therefore an essential part of our self-definition – what am I if I abandon all that? What have those years been

for? What does my life amount to? What do *I* amount to? Maybe the risks taken, and extreme physical suffering experienced by those Everest climbers who didn't use extra oxygen, is paralleled by the mental suffering that Don has spoken of – and which several of the theological pioneers in the Sea of Faith series endured? Maybe that's what happens when boundaries are pushed to the absolute limit, and everything is a flux – or a void?

Maybe we all need to feel some sort of firmness in the ground beneath our feet? And maybe it comes down to how unsettling each of us finds it if we sink in a bit – with some needing far more solidity than others? Many (maybe most?) people can only cope by having things fully defined and nailed down. And if that's what they need to get them through their day, then that's what they'll do. Their God is likely to be very definitely anthropomorphic in shape and scale, with any other version perhaps being impossible for them to contemplate.

But if we *can* be more relaxed, more flexible, more fluid, more creative, more imaginative – there may be no limit we can (or would want to) set as to the nature of the divine. In his book *To the Unknown God* the Romanian writer Petru Dumitriu asks (following Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*), *to whom shall I address my silence?* And that really is *the* religious question.

These are the sorts of things that the churches (surely?) should be engaging with. But they don't – and are never likely to. Which is why there will always be a need and a role for Sea of Faith: to provide a forum and support system for the ideas and questions and people that the Church doesn't want to know. It will *never* be a mainstream movement, and its ideas will *never* be popular. And this is at least partly because (despite what Don seems to think) most people in our society have *not* given up belief in the supernatural. Many *Guardian* readers have, of course – but they're hardly representative.

The target audience for Sea of Faith is going to be those among the thoughtful and educated with an interest in religion, and who are repelled by what the churches are offering. But we need to think about what we hope to do, if we once manage to engage with them.

Do we want to try and show them that non-realism is the only sensible option? Or simply offer the glimpse of an alternative perspective? Do we want to offer them our 'take' on Faith? Or simply provide a Forum to help them find their own?

Is Sea of Faith an oasis in the desert for thirsty religious seekers? My personal view is that Sea of Faith needs to continue to act as a place of refuge for the theologically dispossessed and disenfranchised members of the religious awkward squad, as well as being a gadfly to the religious establishment.

It's sometimes said that churches are like swimming pools, with all the noise coming from the shallow end, and I have to admit to an almost visceral hatred of the gurning Alpha-beta certainties churned out by places like Holy Trinity Brompton. There's no doubt that the sort of pre-digested and pre-packaged stuff they provide answers a very real need for enormous numbers of people, which is why churches that offer it are often full to overflowing. But just as there will always be a market for fine Bordeaux claret alongside the one for White Lightning cider, there will always be room for an approach to religion that reaches the people more popular brands fail to reach.

In the final Sea of Faith programme there are some words from Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*, that give as good a summary as is possible, of the potential cost of the authentic spiritual quest – and which I find at least as moving now as when I first heard them forty years ago. It's a cost that Don himself bore to the full:

*Did I not seek where the wind bites keenest?
Learn to live where no-one lives.
In the wilderness where only the polar bear
lives.
Unlearn to pray and curse,
Unlearn Man and God
Become a ghost, flitting across the glaciers.*

We've got to decide whether we have the energy to keep on keeping on – and refusing to

let the Richard Dawkins or Nicky Gumbel cheerleaders have things all their own way, by allowing them to dictate the terms of the debate.

And it really *is* our choice. Because as Don, with great prescience, made clear 40 years ago (at the very end of that final *Sea of Faith* programme) – he's done his bit. It's over to *us*.

Talk given by Tony Windross to the SOF Conference in London, July 2024.

Finzi at Malmesbury Abbey

There were those ambiguous faces!
Medieval masons had put them
in the ceiling of that ancient Abbey church.
We were amused, me and the children
that the faces those ancient men had hidden
from their masters were visible
in the big, uncouth modern mirror. And then
the light grew darker
with apparent approach of rain; and music
rose into the ancient height.
English, something I ought to know;
but what piece, what composer?
Just strings rehearsing
with a hint of English weather through the ages.

The rehearsal paused. I summoned
the strength to ask politely just what
were they were playing? 'Finzi,
'The clarinet concerto.' In the absence
of that instrument I raised
a polite eyebrow, and was told
'We are waiting for the soloist.'

Odd, of course it was odd! But
the whole thing went with
the Native light of that day
in that place for peaceable monks,
which the great warrior Athelstan had provided,
the first realm maker of England.

Fred Beake

Spirituality

Linda Woodhead

Thank you very much indeed for inviting me to give this talk. I hadn't realised how many here people I would know, so it's been lovely to see people I know from many different parts of my life here today. Don Cupitt was my director of studies and my supervisor when I was an undergraduate at Cambridge and I went to study theology and religious studies in 1982. *The Sea of Faith* series came out in my second year as a student, and I was a student of Don's. He taught me anthropology of religion, amongst other things. He taught lots of different courses. And it's to his credit, I think that in my second year, I was barely aware that this *Sea of Faith* programme was coming out. He never neglected his students for one moment. He was very self-effacing and life continued very much as normal in Emmanuel.

That period, the 1980s was a real hinge, a time of change in lots of ways. We might think politically it was the Berlin Wall coming down. The Cold War was coming to an end. But I'm interested in the religious and cultural change at that time. Anthony Freeman has reminded us of just the same point, that this period, the late 1970s and the early 80s, was a time of great theological ferment as well.

We were very excited when we were students. There was feminist theology. There was liberation theology. There was a questioning of many things. The churches were still very powerful in society and in culture then. Actually, they were in decline and they were challenged, but it didn't quite feel like it then and there was a sense that they could still be carriers of significant values and of change. I think that Don thought that by speaking into them, he would be an agent of that change. And that's the focus of my talk today. I want to think about that how far it has or has not happened.

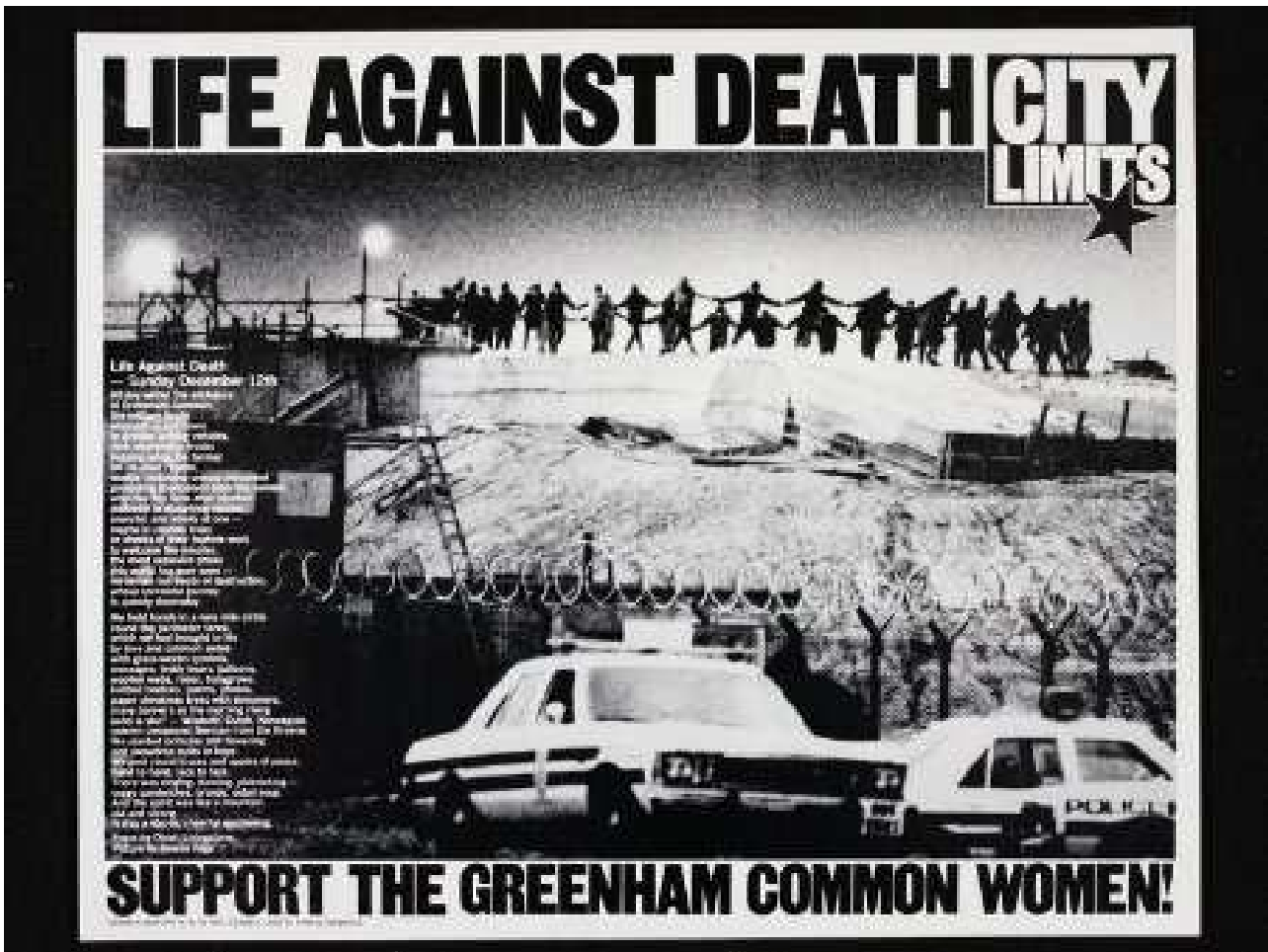
I'm going to argue it hasn't happened for the churches and religious culture in the way Don hoped. I am a sociologist of religion. Even though I was trained in theology, I became really

interested in social change. I have spent most of my life talking to religious people, visiting religious institutions and trying to make sense of how sociologists look at how society and religion have changed. How they are fitting together, how is social change impacting religion and how is religious change impacting society? Anthony also finished by saying he wasn't going to talk about that, so my brief is to talk a bit more about putting the *Sea of Faith* and the *Sea of Faith* movement into context.

I've been studying two things, particularly in my career. One is the growth of some forms of spirituality, another is the decline of many forms of church. Let's start with the first. In the year 2000 I was part of a group who went to study the town of Kendal in Cumbria because we were at Lancaster University and it was the right kind of size to really study in depth over a couple of years and our intention was to use it as a sort of spiritual laboratory.

The main thing that we found, to our surprise, was how much of this thing called spirituality there was. We called it mind body, spirit spirituality or holistic spirituality, because those were the words that the people we met were using. And there were people who were doing things like running yoga groups or doing Reiki healing, or faith healings or interfaith groups. In Kendal, we found 123 different groups and one of our findings was that 80% of those both offering the practices and participating were women.

The other thing I studied is what happened to the churches in the same period. I wrote a book with Andrew Brown, who was the *Guardian's* religion correspondent. We called it *That Was the Church that Was*. We thought we would have a journalist and an academic talking about the church. It answers the question why did the Church of England collapse so dramatically after the 1980s, not just numerically but also in its social and cultural influence and standing.



'You can't kill the Spirit,
she's like a mountain, old and strong...'
Greenham Common song

Poster supporting the Greenham Common women's anti-nuclear weapons peace camp 1981

The Church of England, which is an historic national church, faced unprecedented changes after the 1980s, partly because of its party structure and partly and partly because there was a drive by the more evangelical and conservative and fundamentalist wing to take over the church, which has been successful. The liberal wings have collapsed. So the Church of England ended up at odds with the English people who drifted in a more liberal way in terms of morality. The Church of England went the exact opposite way, became much more conservative, holding on to a very conservative sexual and gender morality.

So where does Don fit into this landscape? He saw exactly what was happening He saw that in many ways it was going in a fundamentalist direction. He deplored it but he saw it was a real possibility. I think he really hoped to change church decline but that has not happened.

And where does he fit in with the growth of Alternative and post-Christian spirituality? He

didn't ever really like that. When I published my book *The Spiritual Revolution*, he talked to me about it, for any of that kind of spirituality really wasn't his thing. It was not the kind of spirituality he could affirm or that he wanted to encourage. In the early 1980s when the *Sea of Faith* series aired, there was still enough Christian dominance in the culture so I think he was still speaking to the mainstream.

But that was very quickly going to change, because every generation since then has been less Christian and the number of those who affirm they are non-religious has been growing. So fewer and fewer young people know anything about Christianity and have not been to a church. But I think one reason why Don was and remains influential to a small group is what I'm going to call his heroic asceticism. The *Sea of Faith* is a story about the destruction of myth, magic, supernaturalism and religion by science, technology and the modern world. And it's not a lament it's a celebration. Don is extraordinarily

uncritically positive about science and modern society. Perhaps that was a feature of the 1980s too.

The Sea of Faith takes us from the modern world, where the series opens with Dover and car ferries and jumbo jets and speed, and takes us through how the medieval universe collapsed and how the idea of God doesn't make sense to us now. Don is going to help us come to terms with this. He takes us on a journey via heroic minds – all intellectuals – not monks. But people like Freud and Schweitzer and Schopenhauer and Nietzsche and Wittgenstein. Schweitzer, I think, is a great emblem of his and probably the most important figure for Don in that series. He is seen as facing the truth unflinchingly – going into complete disillusion through historical studies and yet nevertheless throwing himself selflessly into religion, a Christianity focused on life and helping others.

The message of the *Sea of Faith* is that we can do the same. And I think that part of the success of that series is that Don himself embodies this heroic ascetic figure like the ones he talks about. At the recent Cambridge conference it really came through to me that many people's lives had been very much changed by Don and often they went into a quest, a truth quest. Don actually did have a much bigger influence on academia than people realised because he inspired people to go into academic life and pursue the truth in different fields. He certainly inspired me in that way, even though I didn't agree with all his thinking.

There is no mysticism in Don Cupitt. He has no spiritual mystical sense and he dismisses it as supernaturalism. Mysticism is about merging with the higher good. Asceticism is about renouncing self for a higher good; that plays out in Don's works as different forms of self-outpouring – the solar ethic. That ethic is really the opposite of what has happened in the ethical landscape of our society, which I think has moved from a give-your-life self-sacrificial ethic to a live-your-life, have pride, celebrate life, be who you really are.

That's a new ethical turn since the 1980s, which is really at variance with a give-your-life Christian ethic of the sort that Don embodies and espouses. So there too society has gone in a different direction. Except we do still have respect for duty. You could see it when the

Queen died in all those tributes thanking her for doing her duty. You could see it in the respect for carers in the COVID pandemic. And the memorialisation of nurses and doctors who gave their lives in caring for others.

We are dimly aware that we need people who do put themselves to one side and pursue a higher truth or fight for a higher good or consider that there are some things that are worth dying for. I think that's the *recessive* ethic of our day. It's still there in the foundations and we still have some respect for it. It is not the dominant ethic anymore and I think we should be profoundly grateful that there are people like Don who keep it alive and gave it such a lasting contemporary expression without the need for a certain metaphysical background. That particular legacy of his will be an enduring one.

To sum up. I have been looking at the wide influence of Don Cupitt and the *Sea of Faith*. I've argued that in terms of the big trends in this country, such as the growth of post-Christian spirituality but decline of institutional religions, particularly the churches, Don Cupitt did not speak to either of these trends. He didn't embrace new spiritualities, he didn't succeed in changing the decline of the mainstream churches or the growth of fundamentalism. But I learned from him that it is important to be true to things more important than yourself. That part of his legacy has influenced many individuals besides myself and it remains extremely pertinent and valuable to us. The *Sea of Faith* movement helps keep that alive.

My final wish is that we could move in the future to a different sort of society which has respect for a variety of ways to explore and articulate spiritual and moral experience, both supernaturalist and non-supernaturalist, with none being trivialised or marginalised. At the moment I think we are still in the phase of rejection and reaction against institutional religion in which religion is widely looked down on, not taken seriously, given low status. I look forward to a time when that is not going to be the case. And I hope the *Sea of Faith* movement is a little harbinger of that sort of openness.

Talk given by Lind Woodhead to the SOF Conference in London, July 2024. Linda Woodhead is F.D. Maurice Professor in Moral and Social Theology and Head of Department, Theology and Religious Studies at King's

A Penn'orth

Penny Mawdsley writes about Fear.

Idly reminiscing recently, I remembered how my sister and I dared Granny to climb a tree in her garden. She had already won our bet to skip 100 times over my skipping rope without stopping (she was then 76) but, very sensibly, she drew a line at tree-climbing. She had used a quaint phrase from her girlhood in the 1890s to turn us down, namely 'No fear!', it by then being an expression which had lost any connection with staving off the evil eye.

Fear is a basic emotion which takes many forms, often overlapping with more precisely described mental states. What they mostly share is the ability to impinge on the smooth running of our lives – from distorting our reasoning and causing us to hold back on action we should take, to causing us to take action that we should not.

Simple situations can be blown out of all proportion. Fear can spread rapidly through a crowd, causing hysteria and panic. A recent article in *The Inquirer* (Unitarian publication) mentioned 'Chicken Licken', the classic children's story in which an acorn falling on the chicken's head convinces him that the sky is falling in. He panics and tells others about it and they all get caught up in the fear, which leads to disaster as they are all lured into the foxes' lair and eaten up. The lesson of the story is how easy it is to get caught up in irrational fear, especially someone else's.

The trouble is that there are numerous 'fear' stories swirling about us nowadays, especially via social media. Some can justify our concern, like a fear of the many real and likely irreversible consequences of climate change, which should stir us to action, or a fear of what might transpire and affect us all as a result of the forthcoming US election, but there are many others that we should be more discerning about, particularly if we are not party to all the facts.

The fears of the economically better off in the West are different from those of their compatriots who are struggling to find a decent living

wage and safe accommodation. For those relying on state



Image: www.vemdalen.se

benefits, food banks

and help with fuel costs, there are permanent anxieties about day-to-day living for themselves and their children. For them, especially those with young families, there is real dread – the worst kind of fear – of developing long-term illness, disability or death, of losing the support of a partner or their home.

It's all very well when our spiritual leaders cite 1 John 4:18 about perfect love driving out fear etc, and encourage us to develop a deeply engaged love of life to counter dread. The two forces of love and fear push and pull us constantly, and whichever one we feed is the one that consumes us. Fear can stop us functioning and can lead us into making the wrong life choices, but when we are beaten down and mentally exhausted by worry and fear, I would argue that it is nigh on impossible to 'tune in to love' and be of service to ourselves and others.

I haven't yet touched on existential fear, which is very real for many people. The idea of personal extinction is for many an abhorrent concept, which seems to invalidate everything about how they've lived *this* life. It is presumably existential fear that has led to so many cultures developing forms of belief in an 'after-life'. These emphasise everything from a Last Judgment, reunion with loved ones, reconciliation with those with whom they never 'got on', to experiencing bliss in a new physical body (along with harmonious musical ability) in aesthetically beautiful surroundings - for eternity. For others a real fear of divine judgment for wrongs and shortcomings in this life is enough to keep them 'on the straight and narrow'.

Finally, the 'awe and wonder' type of fear that we get in the Bible is not often explored these days. Is this because scientific knowledge has progressively underplayed the dramatic sights, sounds and mental revelations that folk have experienced as mere heightened emotion?

Going Green

John Pearson writes about this *Sofia's* theme: Looking Back – Facing Forward

'Its not that easy bein' Green?... so sang Kermit the Frog in one episode of *The Muppet Show*. This, a joke song written over 50 years ago, could just as well have been, more significantly, the anthem of the Green Party and others sharing their objectives. Indeed, I asked that the song be played at the funeral of my long-term friend Roy Hilton. It was Roy, supreme environmentalist, who first introduced me to the Green Party, into all this stuff back in the days of the Ecology Party. You may think my choice inappropriate and flippant, but read the lyrics. Roy *was* Green and would have smiled and taken it as a tribute I feel.

So what is it that is so hard? We all know the dire warnings about the future of the planet. We all know, surely, that if we believe these to be based on truth, then we should all be acting accordingly. It's the 'acting accordingly' part that can be hard.

Any satisfaction to be gained from pursuing ecologically sound practices whenever practical comes at the cost of doing things in ways we are familiar with, in ways we like and, in many cases in ways that are much easier. Let us look at our own past practices as a Network. For years, until Covid struck, we made a point of holding an extended residential conference. These were familiar and cherished gatherings, the next one always something to look forward to in between times. We liked the face-to-face element – took it for granted, and did not give much thought to the cost to the planet. And it was easiest for many to travel to the said Annual Conferences, in Leicester or wherever, in their own cars, not necessarily shared, rather than on the train.

Back in 1996 there were 211 attendees at a residential event spread over three days. Back then, a 'carbon footprint' was unheard of – a term which has only been in circulation since 2003. Imagine 211 persons travelling up to 300 miles each; then, once at conference, each being cooked for six times and accommodated in 211

rooms which needed maintenance. Add to that the cost of providing 48 hours-worth of light and heat (or cool in the hottest summers). Contrast this with the Zoom conference of recent times, spread over more days (as was the case in 2022), available to all 250 or 300 members should they wish. Total cost to the environment of a 16 hour gathering, 23kw computer hours in all – negligible?

Talking of sometimes difficult choices for the Network's future, abandoning familiar ways, most of you will read this on the paper ('hard copy') version of our flagship magazine, *Sofia*. How much cheaper and better for the world would be an online publication. But I for one would not treasure it so much, might not read it even – the case I made here in the past (*Sofia* 135).

As to travels by air, I cannot deny my own past sins, not least because I have trumpeted many of these in the pages of *Sofia* over the years. Readers have been treated to accounts of the USA, Berlin, India, Finland, France, mainland Italy and, separately, Sicily. For only one destination, the USA, was a flight essential, it could be argued. But I confess that I flew to and from all of the above, except France and Italy. A total of 22,130 air miles.. Though not previously on record in *Sofia*, I made eight further trips to Finland over the years, two further trips to Berlin and one to Hong Kong, all for work, as well as a family trip to St Petersburg, A further 52,900 miles. All of the above is looking back, not without some shame on my part, presented as I am now with the evidence of the harm it has contributed to. How to face forward?

In the past I have touched on the everyday steps we might all take: re-cycle ; insulate your homes; conserve energy over the summer; walk or use public transport and, if you must travel by car then try and car-share. Fit solar panels. Fit a heat exchanger. Grow your own vegetables, and so the list goes on.

Few people are in the position single-handedly to change the habits of the world, of their own nation even, although senior politicians do have power over economies and the directions which they take. It is to them that we must appeal, seeking concrete change to policies, and the

enactment of those they may already have promised.

When campaigning for the Green Party I often face the dismissive ‘what’s the point of voting for you, you won’t get in?’ A self-fulfilling prophesy. It is true of course that the effect of just one voter boldly doing something new, in this case voting Green, will be negligible.. But if 1000 were to do this next year, 2000 the next, and so on, then it would take effect. Much the same principle applies to other personal choices. Again, it is true that if one or two of us travel overland to parts of Europe and farther afield, rather than flying, we are making a stand but the effect will, again, be negligible. We *all* need to take a stand on this.

Friends and relatives have tried to persuade me that anything other than flying to far flung places, albeit reachable by land (India, Russia and so on) is just not sensible, not practicable As I see it, once one has crossed the Channel, via boat or tunnel, then anywhere can be reached by train or car. Yes, it may be far more time-consuming than a three-hour flight, and the financial cost may be greater. If overseas travel by other means than flying is too expensive, in terms of time or money, simply do not do it.

It has been suggested, and I fully support this as a half-way house, that if nothing better can be achieved as yet, international business trips should be cut to an absolute minimum (so much can be said and demonstrated via Zoom or the like). Individuals and families should be limited to just one holiday by air per year, maximum. All this could be seen as a severe intrusion on their personal freedoms, but so is telling them not to smoke. All of it could be achieved via legislation – national and international...

We all have comfort zones, whether born of upbringing, education or peer group influence. These form habits like plane instead of train (even within the UK), car instead of bus, bus instead of walk or cycle. Many of us still shop at a large supermarket, sometimes a car-ride from home, instead of on the local high street. Those of us fortunate to live a twenty – thirty minutes walk from the city centre should walk there if we are physically able. And of course, the less we walk there the less we will be able to.



Kermit the Frog

I am not advocating absolute martyrdom, but if the future is going to look and feel right and be as sustainable as possible, there are things we can and should be doing. Neither would I wish to seem to be proclaiming my personal sainthood. If I have a chest of drawers to take round to my daughter’s I do not carry it on my back; out comes the electric car.

I was chastised during my recent political campaigning, incidentally, told off even for owning an electric car. ‘You know how they produce the electricity for this I suppose?’. And I have drawn the line at certain other things in the past, as when my friend Roy, above, declared his firm intention to install a compost toilet in his house, just round the corner from my own. ‘Would I use it?’ he asked... ‘Well no’ I replied, ‘I think I’d rather just pop back to my place!’

As we as a Network look back on what might be seen as an enjoyable, comfortable but environmentally extravagant past, are we *all* doing *all* we can for a sustainable future?

Local Groups: a Retrospective

John Pearson and
Penny Mawdsley

John Pearson: At Conference we heard that there were once 27 active Local Groups, spread around the country; a valued link for us all, for the Network and for one another. We made new friends and shared new insights. I myself belonged to the North East Group, led then by Richard Place. We once stayed at his Guest House in Hexham. Our meetings still felt a bit like ‘Church Away Days’, but with occasional excitement. I remember our particular thrill at a Bishop, incognito, who had lost his faith. Penny Mawdsley, who did much to nourish Local Groups, remembers much more. She writes as follows:

Penny Mawdsley: As John has intimated, local groups have been an important arm of our Network from the beginning, and have enabled various initiatives to develop, particularly those we called ‘Roadshows’. These introduced different parts of the country to Sea of Faith discussion, as well as to its ‘personalities’ and its growing number of SOF magazines and other related publications.

Stronger groups in prime locations often organised these day events for themselves, inviting key speakers from the wider membership to address those curious enough to come for the day, and providing opportunities for break-out into smaller discussion groups.

The first of these roadshows was held in Norwich, and the one the furthest away was held in Belfast. The latter was one of those I was most closely involved in organising, with an advance recce, and with a number of us flying over for the event itself. We produced customised literature for the events, from advance posters to go out in the various localities to simple leaflets about the Network.

As Convenor and Co-ordinator for a number of years, I had a great time travelling around the country for initial meetings with those ‘on the ground’ as well as at the events themselves – being closely involved with the planning for these day conferences in South Devon and Southampton, in

Preston and Sheffield, in Liverpool and in rural Gloucestershire.

It was also part of my brief to visit our groups at their regular meetings, a task which I greatly enjoyed. It entailed meeting many interesting folk in a wide range of places, joining in their discussion, finding out how the Steering Committee could serve them, inviting suggestions for our conferences, and providing encouragement to groups whose energy was flagging. The subjects that individual groups have chosen to focus on have been very wide-ranging and meetings themselves have varied in how much they have included in the way of refreshments. Reports in *Portholes* from groups have provided useful ideas for topics to consider in other groups, as well as suggested reading.

I sadly did not make it to every group during my stint as Convenor, but I managed to visit Suffolk, Surrey and Sussex groups, Bath (Wessex), Birmingham, Cardiff and Dorset, Yorkshire, Hemel Hempstead, North London, and Edinburgh – a couple of them more than once.

Kind members in various parts of the country put me up when some of my trips involved more than a day away. David Boulton organised one or two enjoyable residential weekends at Glenthorne, the Quaker retreat and conference centre, which a number of us attended, together with family members. These were great for group bonding, as were a number of planning weekends which the Steering Committee, later the SOF Trust, held for its early autumn meetings at the Gladstone’s Library in Flintshire.

One of my happiest SOF memories was a meeting we held at the latter in the depths of winter, when we had all somehow managed to get there despite deep snow. We made it out of the lane slipping and sliding for a jolly drink or two in the evening at the pub in the village.

I had joined the North West England group after its first meeting in 1991. The group initially

met on the Fylde near Lytham St Anne's before moving to venues in Preston and later Penwortham, where it thrived for many years. In 2001 I founded the Merseyside group, as we had accrued more members from further south and east. We have somehow kept going ever since, sustained by a faithful membership enhanced by additional new blood from North Wales. Since the Pandemic we have been mostly meeting by Zoom, which not everyone likes, but which solves the problem of our membership spanning a large area. A bright room in Liverpool's Quaker Meeting House, which is reasonably accessible by public transport from all over our region, makes a pleasant venue for the occasional face-to-face meeting. For us in Merseyside food and drink have been important components to enhance our face-to-face discussion, as is the case with the North London group.

It saddens me greatly to see the collapse of many of our local groups over the last fifteen years or so, due to ageing and the loss of their early cohorts. These included the once popular SoFiC (Sea of Faith in the Churches) group, initiated by the redoubtable Ronald Pearse. The collapse is inevitable in many ways, but something we have been aware of for at least half the time of our existence. The concerns that brought the original cohorts in are rarely those of the seekers and enquirers nowadays, and anyway society today has changed so much.

When it comes to joining societies and clubs that are not about singing in choirs or taking part in sport, the market for such membership has dwindled drastically. Today many adults across the age groups appear to be satisfied with social media alone, and cannot be bothered to put time aside to engage with others face-to-face, especially if it means travelling for any distance to do so.

Let us hope that our remaining active groups long continue to inspire others with fresh ideas for discussion, and even prompt a renaissance of new groups.

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Friday 20th September -
Saturday 21st September

*'Listen!' – a discussion of the
Sea of Faith*

To celebrate forty years since Sea of Faith was broadcast, Gladstone's Library is partnering with others to bring about a gathering of those who have been involved in this significant movement. Held on Friday 20th and Saturday 21st September 2024, the gathering intends to ASK, REMEMBER, and THINK about the Sea of Faith legacy and what the future may hold.

Join us for a chance to listen to those whose faith journeys have been and still are shaped by Sea of Faith; hear about the Sea of Faith archive held here at Gladstone's Library and have the chance to ask questions and share your own thoughts.

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Please include your name, telephone number and preferred room type.

Please send your letters to:
Sofia Editor: Dinah Livingstone,
10 St Martin's Close,
London NW1 0HR
editor@sofn.org.uk



letters

I'm sure you have many thanks as you retire from the task of Editor. This is my ha'penn'orth. *Sofia* has always been interesting, intelligent and well-balanced, and looked good. I invariably find connections – here voice, body, greenery, forgiveness all have resonances. Hope that you go along well.

Edwin Salter
East Preston

It was good to see and hear you at St John's Waterloo [summer conference]. I was expecting your fellow trustees to wheel you on to the stage, so that we could all applaud and thank you for your years as editor of *Sofia*. I remember that when I joined in 1998 David Boulton was the editor, so I must have read, but no longer have, your first issue, but I know they have all been very readable and enlightening.

With thanks and admiration.

Martin Bienvenu
York

William Blake

The Marriage of Heaven and Hell

Plate 11

The ancient Poets animated all sensible objects with Gods or Geniuses, calling them by the names and adorning them with the properties of woods, rivers, mountains, lakes, cities, nations, and whatever their enlarged & numerous senses could perceive.

And particularly they studied the genius of each city and country. placing it under its mental deity.

Till a system was formed, which some took advantage of and enslaved the vulgar by attempting to realize or abstract the mental deities from their objects: thus began Priesthood.

Choosing forms of worship from poetic tales.

And at length they pronounced that the Gods had ordered such things.

Thus men forgot that All deities reside in the human breast.

Edward Nickell reviews

Passions of the Soul

by Rowan Williams

Bloomsbury (London 2024) Pbk.121 pages.

Passions of the Soul is a collection of addresses and essays from Rowan Williams describing early Eastern Christian mystic thinking about the human ‘passions’ – the origin of what are commonly called the seven deadly sins. Williams proposes that the Beatitudes of Jesus offer a ‘counter-proposal’ mode of living to respond to the passions.

Williams introduces the book as ‘non-scholarly’, though the introduction was dated ‘Michaelmas 2022’, using the esoteric Oxford calendar. I’m not a scholar and I had to read this book without distraction and often multiple times. I suppose I was forced into a monastic experience of reading.

While books on spirituality proliferate today, early Christians would not recognise the modern ‘self-indulgent quest for gratifying experiences’, notes the opening. And vice-versa, the book must explain to modern readers what the early Christians meant by words like Passion and Apathy.

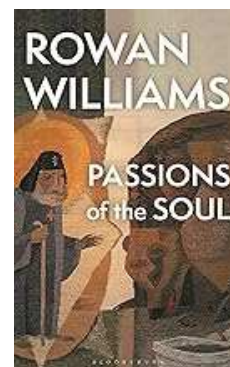
‘Passions’ are the whole realm of instincts, reactions and desires, including survival mechanisms like thirst and hunger. ‘Apathy’ meant freedom from excessive control of the passions to grow in ‘wakefulness’. ‘You can’t abolish these passions, but come to terms with them, so as to not live at the level of reaction all the time.’

This reminded me of the popular airport book, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* by Daniel Kahneman, which divides human thinking into fast, instinctive and emotional decisions in our primitive lizard brain, and slower, deliberative and logical thinking in our more recently evolved brain.

Pre-Christian thought described two ‘bundles’ of instincts: aggression to defend against the world and desire to consume the world for our own agenda. The first keeps reality out, the second draws it in and controls it. True freedom for the mystics was to reach a balance where you see reality without either defensive panic or greed. Early Christians grouped these instincts into the three demons of ascetic life and the eight habits of the soul, which became the seven deadly sins.

Williams has a great passage describing the operation of the passions. Starting with the ‘first

flicker’ of awareness interrupting our thoughts, this is ‘given house room’ and explored in growing detail until we are finally seized by it and driven to enact it, losing our freedom like an addict.



reviews

The advice from the ‘desert writers’ is to acknowledge the impulse, without obsessing, and then ‘give it to God’ and move on; go and do the washing up and take out the rubbish. Modern Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) gives the same advice, though rather than pray you might write in your journal.

At our July conference, I was struck by a conversation between John Holroyd and Linda Woodhead about the mental health crisis facing young people today. Linda talked about how many young people seemed caught in these spirals of paralysing thought, unable to step outside it.

The mystics offer advice on ‘corrupt chains of thought’, what we would call intrusive thoughts or spiralling anxiety. This advice includes talking, not as in therapy, but to see ourselves with some detachment and perspective. This takes us out of the private world in which we are the star of a heroic drama, or just as dangerously, where we pick over our failures with disgust.

Science tells us that evolution made our passions the way they are. The Christian mystics map the passions back onto the creation, ‘We are because God is. And we are *what we* are because God is *what* God is.’ Williams emphasises, ‘This is not a blind New-Age-ish message of self-acceptance ... God embraces and loves us as we are, but the presence of God in the neighbourhood of ourselves cannot but affect what we are.’

The New Age could respond similarly: Genuine self-acceptance requires introspection that inevitably leads to moral improvement. A secular perspective could be that as intelligent animals, it’s up to us to decide when to embrace our nature and when to escape it.

Whatever approach we take, we are pre-supposing some ethic by which we judge what is godly, healthy or good. That ethic may well be another part of our nature, but is at the least more than merely our base unexamined instincts.

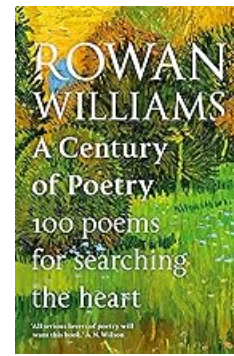
Kathryn Southworth reviews

A Century of Poetry:

100 poems for searching the heart

edited by Rowan Williams

SPCK (London 2022) Hbk . 375 pages



reviews

Rowan Williams, for ten years Archbishop of Canterbury, is learned and remarkable; academic theologian, literary critic, linguist and poet. He is also genuinely insightful and original in his approach to this anthology, a substantial book, in every respect, and a fascinating one.

The initial response to most anthologies is to question the principles of selection, as unrepresentative, too narrow, pedestrian, exclusive, eccentric or self-serving. So it is useful to say first of all what the book is not. It is not 'best religious poems of the century', not devotional, nor celebratory. In so far as the chosen poets have a religious background, the selection covers most conceivable varieties of Christianity and other world faiths, with considerable cultural breadth, many poems translations, including from Welsh, Hebrew and Yiddish.

It would be invidious to list names: some are obvious and often anthologised, but many are much less familiar. Themes cover obvious topics from fundamentalism to environmental disaster, but the editor's chief aim is to find poems which simply 'open the door' to challenging insights about the nature of humanity, whilst assuming that 'the world of faith is at the very least a serious dimension of the human imagination'. The word 'imagination' is key here, since Williams sees poetry as an important tool for thinking about the world, for seeing patterns and teasing out the language of the holy, a means of knowing which is more than two-dimensional.

The justification for the particular choices lies in one of the most striking aspects of the book: the two or three page critical analysis which accompanies each poem. Take, for example, the first of the hundred poems, Gillian Allnut's spare, enigmatic 'Verger, Winter Afternoon, Galilee Chapel, Durham Cathedral March 2004'. Williams paints the context of the chapel, a smallish space where the local saints Bede and Cuthbert are buried. He then points to the diverse images of the poem's first word 'careful', explores the often-reported sense people get in holy places of a presence just missed, the intangible becoming, as Williams puts it, 'the indwelling of light in the heart'. He relates this to Eliot's more famous extended

meditation on 'presence' in 'Four Quartets' and concludes that the poem is 'an appropriate grammar' for opening ourselves to grace. So Williams moves from exegesis through literary critical analysis to pastoral messages and finally to a transcendental insight.

In other chapters the theologian is more prominent. Williams finds in W H Auden's less known poem 'Friday's Child', one of 'the most nuanced and insightful responses to Bonhoeffer' and argues it is 'one of the most profound poems about faith written in the last century', a study of what freedom means and the importance of seeing beyond our own deceptions and confusions. Especially helpful are the explanations of non-Christian cultures, for instance the esoteric aspects of Jewish thought and the significance of imagery like the almond in poems about the Shoah and survivors' guilt. Yet Williams is never far from a poetic, rather than a teacherly, sensibility evident, for instance, in his choice and analysis of the poem 'Noli me tangere' by Yves Bonnefoy, where the delicacy and tentativeness of a snowflake, which transforms but cannot be grasped, becomes not only a metaphor for the divine but a message for humanity to free itself from the craving to grasp and possess.

Poems are often about the art of poetry but in this anthology God, too, is presented as a poet. So in Larissa Miller's poem 'It was on the Very Last Day of Creation' God rises to 'the height of the Divine game' when he sees everything come together like a rhyme. Writing itself is a resistance to a mechanical or untruthful world. As Len Murray puts it in 'Poetry and Religion':

'You can't pray a lie, said Huckleberry Finn;
you can't poe [sic] one either'.

The right use of language is a moral enterprise and challenges the constraint to find total explanations and final meanings.

This book is for explorers, whether individual or in groups, and is profound material for mindful human journeys. This reviewer will certainly keep it by her as a much-valued resource.

George Herbert

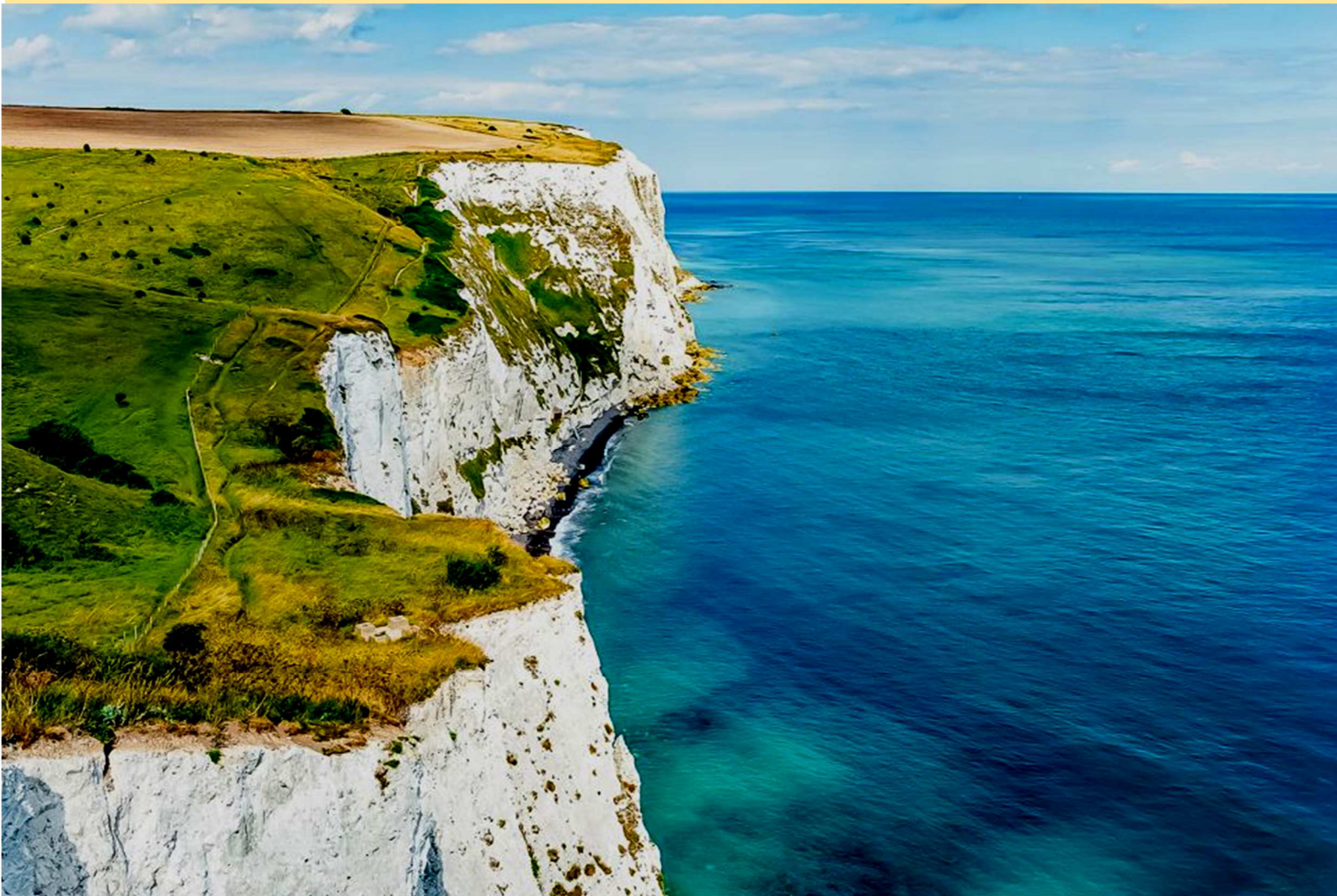
Avarice

Money, thou bane of bliss and source of woe,
whence com'st thou, that thou art so fresh and fine?
I know thy parentage is base and low;
man found thee poor and dirty in a mine.
Surely thou did'st so little contribute
to this great kingdom, which thou now hast got,
that he was fain, when thou wert destitute
to dig thee out of thy dark cave and grot;
then forcing thee by fire he made thee bright:
Nay, thou hast got the face of man; for we
have with our stamp and seal transferred our right:
thou art the man, and man but dross to thee.
Man called thee wealth, who made thee rich;
and while he digs out thee, falls in the ditch.

Prayer (1)

Prayer the Church's banquet, angels' age,
God's breath in man returning to his birth,
the soul in paradise, heart in pilgrimage,
the Christian plummet sounding heaven and earth,
engine against the Almighty, sinners' tower,
reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,
the six-days' world transposing in an hour;
a kind of tune, which all things hear and fear;
softness and peace and joy and love and bliss,
exalted manna, gladness of the best,
heaven in ordinary, man well-dressed,
The Milky Way, the bird of paradise,
church bells beyond the stars heard, the soul's blood,
the land of spices, something understood.

George Herbert (3 April 1593 – 1 March 1633) was an English poet, orator, and priest of the Church of England – rector of the rural parish of Fugglestone St Peter, just outside Salisbury. He was noted for unfailing care for his parishioners, bringing the sacraments to them when they were ill and providing food and clothing for those in need. He was never a healthy man and died of consumption at the age 39.



Surveying: The White Cliffs of Dover

‘How Beautiful the Earth is seen from the air,
especially where it meets water.’

Ernesto Cardenal