No.156 June 2025

Resisting Genocide

Magazine of the Sea of Faith Network
Exploring and Promoting Religion and Worldviews as Human Creations for This Life

Sofia is the magazine of the SOF (Sea of Faith) Network, published quarterly in March, June, September & December.
ISSN: 1749-9062
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CONTRIBUTIONS
The Editors welcome 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 Please submit unpublished articles that have not been submitted elsewhere, or if previously published, please state where and when. Contributions express the individual writer's opinion. They do not necessarily represent the views of the Editors or SOF Network.

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PAST ISSUES
This and all past issues of Sofia are available to download and view on the Network's website at: https://sofn.uk/sofia/

PRODUCTION
Sofia is typeset in-house and printed in England (Devon) by digital.imprint.co.uk

Contents

The copy deadline for Sofia 157, Sept. 2025, is
18th August 2025

Editorial: Resisting Genocide

The bust of Dietrich Bonoeffer on the cover of this issue was carved by the artist and Methodist minister, the Reverend David Moore. A lot of David's art honours Bonhoeffer, and the images[1] on pages four and 24 show further examples. Bonhoeffer was executed 80 years ago, on the 9th April 1945, and in recognition of that anniversary *Sofia* will have two articles on Bonhoeffer by Martin Spence. The first, on Bonhoeffer's life, is in this issue, and the second, on his theology, is planned for the September issue.

Bonhoeffer was executed for resisting the genocidal Nazi regime, and in this issue we meet people resisting the current slaughter of Palestinians in Gaza and the occupied Palestinian territories of the West Bank. The authors of the books discussed in *The Notion that the Polite, Western Liberal Ever Stood for Anything At All* (page 18), Munther Isaac and Omar El Akkad, have no doubt that the actions of Israel in Gaza should be called genocide, and Isaac says: "for those who object to the use of this term [genocide], I must question not only their analysis but also their motives". Both authors not only draw attention to those committing and supporting the atrocities, but are scathing of anyone who watches and does nothing. El Akkad quotes a Palestinian poet Rash Abdulhadi:

> Wherever you are, whatever sand you can throw on the gears of genocide, do it now. If it's a handful, throw it. If its a fingernail, scrape it out and throw. Get in the way however you can.

What about us, in the Sea of Faith Network? Paul Overend's *Don Cupitt on Political Agency and Social Resistance* helps us grapple with a foundation and framework for ethics from a SOF perspective. Alison Webster's examination of *Feminism, Non-realism and Resistance* tackles potential difficulties with non-realism that not only apply to feminism, but for any question of social justice. Is non-realist theology at root a quietist endeavour?

Isaac and El Akkad would have no time for quietism, for they are challenging us immediately: what are you doing about it now? This was discussed at the SOF Steering Group meeting in April, and it was agreed that although the Network is not an appropriate entity to take action, as an organisation, nevertheless many individual members of the network have in the past taken action or spoken out in a personal capacity, and continue to do so. For example, last year Caroline Pickard shared her experience of protective presence in Palestine at an *In Conversation* session[2] and in this issue she has an appreciation of Ilan Pappe's 2024 book *Lobbying for Zionism on both Sides of the Atlantic*. If you have been active in the cause of peace and justice in the Middle East we would love to hear from you: please get in touch via editor@sofn.uk

In the immediate aftermath of the horrific Hamas attacks on 7th October 2023, as the terrible scale of Israel's response became clear, a grass-roots group (which was later to designate itself *Communities for Peace and Justice*) emerged in Milton Keynes to call for peace. It initially met in a Mosque but although the largest number of members were Muslims, it also included representatives from Jewish, Christian, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist and non-faith communities. The group sent an open letter, signed by representatives from all the groups, urging the Milton Keynes MPs to support an immediate ceasefire, as well as calling for the return of all hostages[3]. The group still continues and organises events campaigning for an end to the killings. In this issue we have input from two of the key members of the group: Kurshida Mirza answers the questions for our *Religion in my life* feature, and Arif Master writes about how the example of the Muslim prophet Hussain inspires the annual "Peace and Humanity Procession" in Milton Keynes.

In this issue we also have important articles continuing the more general theme of resisting: David Lambourn continues his analysis of *Mark as a Gospel of Resistance* and Edward Nickell presents a fascinating look at an Irish saint in *Saint, Goddess and Resistor: Will the Real Brigid Please Stand Up?* Sadly we lost a much-loved and long-standing member or the Network, Penny Mawdsley, earlier this year, and John Pearson offers a reflection and appreciation of her life. We also have poetry curated by our poetry editor, letters from readers, Dave Francis's regular *Worldviews Navigator* column and brief biographies from a selection of our members.

Finally, remember that we want to hear from you!

- editor@sofn.uk
- poetry@sofn.uk

1 Photograhs of David Moore's art © David Phillips under CC (BY) license

2 https://sofn.uk/library/my-experience-of-protective-presence-in-palestine

3 https://www.miltonkeynes.co.uk/news/people/milton-keynes-interfaith-group-calls-on-local-mps-to-press-for-israeli-ceasefire-4411181

Bonhoeffer: His Life

Martin Spence

This year marks the eightieth anniversary of the death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, executed by the Nazis in 1945. He is hardly a forgotten figure; on the contrary, he is the subject of continuing study and debate. And yet he remains an enigma. His theology – especially his prison writing – is perplexing. And the activity which led to his death – membership of an opposition network seeking to kill Hitler – is not what we might expect from a Lutheran pastor.

For all these reasons he is a fascinating subject, so perhaps it's no surprise that someone has now made a film about him. Its title - *Bonhoeffer: Pastor; Spy; Assassin* – gives a clue to its content, as does the stated conviction of the filmmaker, Todd Komarnicki, that Bonhoeffer was above all "a hero". Komarnicki's previous films are mostly thrillers and action-movies, genres which celebrate heroism, and heroism is what we get here. The film presents a version of Bonhoeffer's life which plays fast and loose with the facts in order to deliver thrills and pathos. It offers a cartoonish caricature of Nazism, and invents bogus episodes intended to bolster the image of Bonhoeffer-as-hero. For instance, in one scene he is shown personally drafting the manifesto of the anti-Nazi Confessing Church. In another he personally escorts a number of Jews to safety in Switzerland. In a third he personally participates in the detailed planning of an attempt on Hitler's life. All these episodes are entirely fictional, and all misrepresent Bonhoeffer himself, and the anti-Nazi resistance in general.

However, in my own case, the film had the effect of driving me back to the biography of Bonhoeffer written by his friend Eberhard Bethge, to get a more reliable grasp on the actual course of his life. This article provides a brief summary of his biography, and it will be followed by a second, in a future issue of *Sofia*, which will consider his theology. The two cannot be separated. Much of the debate on Bonhoeffer focuses on his writings, but theological ideas do not exist in a vacuum. Theologians like anybody else are formed by their background and experience, by family and friends, home and work, success and disappointment. To grasp Bonhoeffer's ideas we must know about his life.

Bonhoeffer came from a privileged background. His family was upper middle class with connections to the minor aristocracy, and his childhood was spent in affluent suburbs in Breslau and Berlin. His was not a particularly devout family, but from early on Bonhoeffer's ambition lay in theology, where he was a star student. Having obtained academic qualifications, and a licence as a university teacher, he studied briefly in the USA in the early 1930s. But by the time he turned 27 in early 1933, he was back in Germany. Hitler had just come to power.

The Nazis moved quickly to take control of Germany's Protestant churches. By the end of 1933 they had created a single centralised 'Reich Church' and banned anyone of Jewish heritage from serving as a minister. From the start Bonhoeffer was active in opposing this, but he and his colleagues were up against the power of the state, and many ministers and churchgoers were happy to go along with the new arrangements. The Reich Church was established, and in the autumn Bonhoeffer left the country.

He moved to Britain, and for the next eighteen months he worked as pastor to a German émigré church in south London. Here he built a network of contacts and friendships in the Church of England, above all with George Bell, Bishop of Chichester. He also used Britain as a base for travel to other countries to broaden his international church contacts.

Meanwhile in Germany, church opposition was moving towards a new strategy. The Nazis' Reich Church was now an established fact, and in May 1934 the opposition gathered at Barmen to denounce it, arguing that it had forfeited the right to call itself

a Christian church at all. A declaration drafted by the theologian Karl Barth was adopted, and a 'Confessing Church' was established, not as a clandestine movement but as an open alternative to the Reich Church. Bonhoeffer was still in London at the time of the Barmen conference, but he helped from afar by securing international ecumenical support.

In 1935 he returned to Germany, where he taught and lectured in the Confessing Church, developed his international contacts, and continued his writing. But all activity against the regime was becoming increasingly dangerous. Confessing Church seminaries were closed by the police from 1937, and through 1938 the Church faced constant harassment and intimidation.

In the following year Bonhoeffer left Germany again. He passed briefly through Britain on his way to the USA, unclear about his future. There is no doubt that he could have chosen to stay in America, where he had a warm welcome; teaching work was available, with the prospect of an academic career and widespread respect as a professed anti-Nazi. But he chose differently. It only took a few weeks for him to decide that, for better or worse, his place was in Germany. He returned shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War.

From this point his life took an entirely new turn which is difficult for us to grasp. Through his brother-in-law, Hans von Dohnanyi, he made contact with members of the *Abwehr* or German military intelligence. This seems astonishing: why would a professed opponent of the regime be talking to that regime's military spies? And he was not just talking to them; from the autumn of 1940 Bonhoeffer started working as an *Abwehr* agent, based in Munich. Why did he do this? And why did the *Abwehr* employ him? Unless he had abandoned all his principles – which he hadn't – it seems to make no sense.

It does, in fact, make sense, but only if we make an effort to understand German society under the Nazis. The regime was not as ruthlessly unified as it liked to pretend. It was shot through with internal rivalries, personal hatreds and institutional feuds. And in addition, there were deeply rooted traditions in German society whose values were different from those of the Nazis. Some of these the regime destroyed, promptly and brutally, including rival political parties and independent trade unions. Others it tried to co-opt, such as the church and the army.

The traditions of the German army, inherited from nineteenth century unification and from the state of Prussia before that, were steeped in class privilege and militant patriotism. This led to an ambiguous relationship with Hitler. Like him, army officers longed to avenge the humiliation of the First World War; but at the same time many despised the Nazis for their lower-class origins and brutality. These mixed feelings played out differently in different military institutions, and in the *Abwehr* hostility to the Nazis was particularly strong. Some of its members, including Bonhoeffer's brother-in-law, believed that Hitler was leading Germany to ruin. On patriotic grounds therefore, they built a network inside the *Abwehr* with the aim of assassinating him and instigating a coup. However, to succeed they would need support across society. This was where Bonhoeffer came in: the conspirators believed that his connections with members of the Confessing Church in Germany, and with leading church figures in other countries, could help win over public opinion in the aftermath of a successful assassination and coup.

From Bonhoeffer's side, his willingness to join the network was influenced by family and social connections. He came from an upper-class family, giving him a natural affinity with the upper-class officers – including his sister's husband von Dohnanyi - who formed the network inside the *Abwehr*. They were anti-Nazis, and highly courageous, but their outlook was essentially patriotic and conservative. Whether or not Bonhoeffer shared these values, he understood them, because he came from the same class and social background as the officers who espoused them.

For three years as the War raged on, Bonhoeffer maintained contact with friends in the fragmented Confessing Church, and deepened his international connections by travelling to Switzerland, Norway and Sweden. On one of his trips to neutral Sweden he even managed to meet up again with Bishop Bell who had managed to travel there from England. The *Abwehr* network sought to protect him on these travels by providing him with nominal missions to act as cover. Meanwhile, whenever possible, he would find a quiet retreat to continue his writing, producing notes which would be published after his death as a book entitled *Ethics*.

In March 1943 the conspirators made two attempts on Hitler's life while he visited the eastern front, but both miscarried. This led to the arrest of many members of the *Abwehr* network, including Bonhoeffer and his brother-in-law. Any lingering hope of release disappeared in the summer of 1944, after the failure of yet another assassination attempt, and Bonhoeffer was moved to the high-security SS prison in central Berlin. And yet for most of his two-year imprisonment, he was allowed to correspond with friends and family, and to work out his thoughts in writing. These were the works which were later collated by Bethge and published as *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

The end came in April 1945. By this time, as Germany was overrun by Soviet armies in the east and American and British armies in the west, Bonhoeffer and other members of the *Abwehr* network were moved repeatedly from one prison to another, including three months in Buchenwald concentration camp. In the first week of April, it seems that new evidence about the network came to Hitler's attention, and he personally ordered that all prisoners associated with it should be executed. Bonhoeffer and others were quickly tried and condemned by summary court martial. He was hanged on 9th April 1945, just a month before the Nazi collapse and Germany's surrender. He was aged 39.

Feminism, Non-realism and Resistance

A personal reflection
by **Alison Webster** arising from
her talk at a *Sea of Faith Network*
'In Conversation' event
on 19th March 2025

My first encounter with non-realist theology – in my late teens – was a personal liberation. My progressive Methodist upbringing had provided a pretty effective inoculation against theological dogmatism and conservatism, but my fate was sealed when I fell in love with Don Cupitt's big idea, through watching the *Sea of Faith* TV series, and studying under Don himself.

Cambridge theology faculty in the mid 1980s was, however, a pretty conservative place, so it wasn't until after I graduated that I encountered liberation theologies, including feminist theology. Then the question became: can these two differently-located theological strands cohere?

There were two problems in bringing them together. Firstly, the accusation that non-realist theology is, at root, a quietist endeavour. The creative quest which was the reinvention of myself as a religious person which had seemed such an exciting prospect began to look too much like an individualist undertaking. Talk was of individual autonomy, but not much about institutional and structural power and our enmeshment in it. Don's work in the late 1980s spoke of celebrating self-possession; of a newly born religious subject, blissful and unlimited in its range. His early ethical work valorised the human being as a creator with entrepreneurial drive and flair, someone with the self-confidence and the capacity to conceive and to execute an original work – a bit like art – autonomously.

The creative quest which was the reinvention of myself... began to look too much like an individualist undertaking.

Secondly, as social justice became the focus of my spiritual practice, and of my career, I sensed an implied realism at its foundation in most theological contexts. To give one example from the feminist theological sphere – how and why do we argue for inclusive language? Philosophically, you can advocate for two very different, some would say diametrically opposed, reasons. If you believe that religion is a human construct and that language is all there is, then one has a particularly acute responsibility to create religious language which is inclusive and non-oppressive. On the other hand, if you believe that God is 'out there' – an objective reality – albeit that God is mysterious and bigger and more complex than we can know, then we need inclusive language to ensure that our God-talk represents an 'authentic description' of what God is like. My sense was that Christian feminist gatherings mostly worked from the latter set of assumptions. I was working with the former.

Feminist theology was (and remains) excellent at exploring how boundaries are policed within religious traditions: when is feminist theological work considered to have exceeded the boundaries of what can be called 'Christian'? Who decides, and what is at stake? But this overwhelming concern with the function of various manifestations of Christianity and Christian teaching can leave questions of substance unaddressed. Take the example of God, for instance. Feminist theology has demonstrated how the God of patriarchal theology is very clearly gendered – very clearly male. And it has shown how this functions in a damaging way (as Mary Daly put it, 'If God is male then the male is God'). But to question the substance of the nature of God felt like forbidden territory.

There are very good political reasons for leaving questions of substance unaddressed. For non-realism is potentially dangerous, especially in the ethical sphere. Doesn't justice-making require a foundation of certainty that some things are objectively wrong: not least sexism, but also racism, poverty and all forms of discrimination and economic injustice? If we don't start from there, from where do we start?

Doesn't justice-making require a foundation of certainty that some things are objectively wrong?

From a feminist perspective I believe we have to start with 'reality', by which I mean our lived experience: the ways in which we are restricted by our physical location and our positions within political structures. In the light of this, my question is, how can we overcome our restrictions and expand our possibilities? Non-realist theologies as evidenced by their male theological protagonists are in danger of aiming to speak as non-gendered, non-racialised, that is, disembodied beings who assume unlimited freedom either as a starting point or the ultimate aim. That's a kind of theology that doesn't take account of reality, and therefore doesn't ask or answer my questions as someone limited by society's constructions of power around my gender and my sexuality, if not around my class and my race.

From the mid 1990s onwards I found it more fruitful to engage with largely 'secular' philosophical movements in making sense of all this. Queer theory (as explored, for instance, by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*) helped by disrupting the 'necessary connections' between biological sex, gender constructions, and partner choice, blowing binaries of all kinds out of the proverbial water. This translated, for me, into a way of queering the binaries between 'having faith' and 'losing it' by problematising the content of belief and the action of believing (see my book *Found Out: Transgressive Faith and Sexuality* for more on this). Butler's other key move was to introduce the notion of 'performativity' – something Don himself explored in *Solar Ethics* – the notion of coming out and putting on a good show. Both thinkers asserted, helpfully, that the human subject does not precede agency and identity, but is constituted by it. In religious terms, I become my faith identity through my

spiritual practice. I don't decide who I am and what I assent to intellectually, then live that out.

And feminist epistemologists like Donna Haraway (see *Symians, Cyborgs and Women*) tackled the political problem of subjectivist ethics. Like Don, she asserted that subjectivity is present in all our knowing – like an onion, you keep peeling away layers, but there is no irreducible objective core at the centre. The perceived need for an objective basis for right and wrong is replaced by an arguably more powerful acknowledgement that

[A]n objective basis for right and wrong is replaced by an arguably more powerful acknowledgement that all of our knowledge is situated.

all of our knowledge is situated. The task is to be accountable for what we do with our own situatedness – especially with regards to how we use our power and privilege.

Running in parallel with these philosophical developments has been the emergence of a plethora of creative, imaginative and embodied contextual theologies. All articulating God-talk from experience. These theologies are liberatory, challenging the largely unhelpful, Greek-influenced dualism of disembodied spirit (good) versus its carrying case, the body (bad). These were feminist, womanist, queer, Black, disabled, neurodivergent, and emerged also from experiences of abuse and trauma, economic dispossession, colonialism and slavery. And as the multiplication of specificities threatened fragmentation, identity politics developed slowly into an awareness of the power of intersectionality (nobody is just one thing, and all oppressions are linked) and the need for solidarity across difference. Through this we gain a fuller and deeper understanding of how oppressive forces (in our contemporary world, chief among them is White supremacist Neo-liberal Capitalism) seek to 'divide and rule' in the interests of the global caste of the super-rich.

And what of now? Emerging from our impending global climate catastrophe are post-human and post-activist movements. These challenge Don Cupitt's (now quite old) focus on the Only Human, whilst also giving an enhanced role for his Solar Ethics. In her book, *The Body is a Doorway*[1], eco-writer Sophie Strand says this:

> We have believed, for too long, that our minds belong to us as individuals. But advances in everything from forest ecology to microbiology show us we are not siloed selves, but relational networks, built metabolically by our every biome-laced breath, thinking through filamentous connectivity rather than inside one neatly bounded mind…I am not a noun on an empty page. I do nothing alone. I am a syntactical being, strung together by my metabolism and needs and desires to thousands of other beings. Together we are all a household, and every choice we make, whether mundane or explosive, takes place within the networked household of relationships.
>
> Strand 2025. pp 207 & 210

We are not siloed selves, but relational networks.

This puts Don Cupitt's heroic individualist narrative in its place. However, on the theme of death they share a deep commonality. Strand declares:

> It seemed to me that when someone died, their body became even more alive, an aliveness that was plural, polyphonous — suddenly an ecosystem of bacteria and fungi and beetles and beings all feasting, decaying, making love, making soil, making connections.'
>
> Strand 2025. p. 47

And Don says in his book *Impossible Loves* (p. 5):

> We are always subject to Chance, and Death is ubiquitous in the sense that everything is slipping and passing away all the time. All life is dying life, timebound, ambiguous, chancy, transient – and yet also, as I have always felt, heart-breakingly beautiful'

And (p.6):

> We must cast ourselves into, and identify ourselves with, the continual passing-away that so terrifies. "Green and dying", we must learn to live a dying life, and then we will find that, "the more I give, the more I have'

Cupitt and Strand share in a moving affirmation of human life as dispersed and in flow, intimately connected with all other networked life forms. This

The Enlightenment Human will not survive the climate crisis.

spiritual anthropology is picked up by Bayo Akomolafe whose work challenges human aspirations to supremacy and omniscience:

> The thought that we might one day figure it all out, master the elements, and convene the tides to script the tales of our magnificence shocks the air out of my lungs. I struggle to breathe in the face of such an ideology not merely because it strikes me as troublingly hubristic, but because I am immediately crippled by a claustrophobic sense of capture. By the image of a universe frozen still under the clinical gaze of the human. Nothing hurts me more than the idea that I might inhabit a world so "little", so flat, so unremarkable, so familiar, so known, so habituated, so conservative, and so without surprise or enchantment.
>
> https://www.bayoakomolafe.net/post/everything-is-just-a-small-part-of-what-im-interested-in

So we are being newly called to a vision of being spiritual that is not about singular, autonomous beings, but plural networks connected with an infinite number of other networks. We are more Mycelian than we are monad. Our spiritual growth more fungal than fideistic. The Enlightenment Human will not survive the climate crisis. It has brought us the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene, both of which are doomed to pass away. We are being invited beyond rationalism into intuitive, embodied ways of becoming and resistance.

Alison Webster is General Secretary of *Modern Church*, and Mission Theologian in Residence for Citizens UK.

1 *The Body Is a Doorway: A Memoir* by Sophie Strand. Running Press, 3 April 2025 (Page references are to the Kindle edition)

Mark - a Gospel of Resistance (Part Two)

David Lambourn

In Part 1 (March 2025) I suggested that Mark understood Jesus as living a life characterized by resistance to the Roman occupation in an effort to sustain Jewish culture and identity. This was illustrated by reference to the story of the woman with a haemorrhage told within the story of the healing of Jairus's daughter. This double story revealed a series of ways in which the occupation might be resisted.

For those readers who were were either not persuaded by that double story or, although persuaded, nevertheless took it to be a 'one-off' in Mark, I now add yet another story.

In Mark 5:1-20, Jesus has ventured out of Galilee into non-Jewish territory, Decapolis, a relatively recent Greek development. Having arrived by boat, he is immediately met by a strong, violent, man who dwells in tombs and is so strong that he cannot be restrained. The spirits, which drive the man, call themselves 'Legion, for we are many'. Not so far away (a day's journey?), is Caesarea Philippi. It has been suggested that at this time Caesarea Philippi was a garrison town housing a Roman legion of perhaps some five thousand men[1]. I take this story to be coded, describing the Roman occupation and the relation of Judaism within it.

You will recall that I have suggested that Mark was writing in such a way that it would be well understood by Jews but not available to gentiles - he had, as it were, asked himself what it was that Jews understood but was opaque to the Romans. What follows is my own interpretation of Mark's story.

When challenged by Jesus, the spirits seek permission of Jesus to enter a local herd of two thousand swine, who rush downhill, and perish in the sea. I cannot imagine the possibility of a herd of that size, with the consequent destruction of vegetable life that that would entail. Those numbers cannot be anything other than symbolic; much closer, though not equal, to the number of men in a Roman legion. Imagine the story told alongside a possible coded understanding:

- Jesus comes face-to-face with the strong man that cannot be restrained. *The Jews and the Roman army confront each other.*
- Jesus heeds the spirits who drive the strong man, and what they have to say, and gives them permission to do what they want to do. *The Jews, finding themselves in confrontation with the Roman army, and heeding what the army wants, agree to what the army wants - and it goes ahead.*
- The spirits, going ahead, quickly go downhill and perish. *The Roman army, will go downhill and will perish*[2].
- The swineherds and others from the local community came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind. *When the Roman empire collapses, those who were under their occupation will be restored to their proper, healthy, selves.*

As I understand it, Mark is making an important point here. He is reminding his Jewish readers that empires come and go - the burden of the Book of Daniel - whilst Jews and Judaism survive. They have survived a number of empires in their history: Assyrian, Babylonian and Greek and, given time, the Roman empire, too, will disappear. Meanwhile, it is both possible and necessary to live a quality of life that is drawn from Jewish history and practice, together with one or two developments indicated by Jesus. Such a life would constitute a resistance to the empire. This life is referred to as the Kingdom (realm) of God.

Jewish hearers of this story will be able to decode it. This story, told and understood by the Jews with their history, becomes a cathartic story - a notable form of resistance. Mark gives the story an ending designed to put any Roman readers' fears to rest: the former demoniac has his wish to become one of Jesus' group, denied. Rather, he is encouraged to return to be with his own people - he "went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him" - a further form of resistance.

For the Romans, this is a story about a provincial healer who has no wish to gain followers, *he is simply providing a generous service whenever and wherever he comes across a need - sustaining a local community - even if it is a community which was once its enemy. Romans, you can relax!*

I hope readers will be encouraged to continue to read Mark, bearing in mind the dangerous time in which it was written, and look for the possible understandings which Jewish hearers 'get', but others will not.

For notes and commentary on this story see Joel Marcus *Mark 1-8* , Yale University Press (2010) pp. 341-354

Comments?

Send them to editor@sofn.uk or direct to the author davidlambourn@mac.com

1 I have been unable to check this claim and wonder whether what was intended was the Caesarea on the coast - a similar distance away and where Pilate had his headquarters.

2 The Jews, familiar with their history, by virtue of their readings Sabbath by Sabbath, understand that former empires have expired while they themselves have continued. The Roman empire, it is understood, will also come to an end in time. This same point is the burden of the Book of Daniel, that the Persian Empire passed away and that the Seleucid will also pass away - which it did very shortly. It is this book that Jesus references by his use of Son of Man and from which he draws the notion of empires passing away - hence his policy prioritizing quality of life coupled with teaching/protest in the meantime.

Saint, Goddess and Resistor: Will the Real Brigid Please Stand Up?

Edward Nickell

Brigid the resistor

At the start of February, Ireland celebrated Saint Brigid's day with a bank holiday. Instituted only last year, this is Ireland's first bank holiday for a female and brings Brigid out of the shadow of her fellow patron saint, Patrick. But who is this bank holiday for, is it Brigid the saint, Brigid the ancient goddess, or Brigid the resistor?

Brigid as Goddess

Brigid first appears as a pre-christian goddess. The earliest written records about her are from a 7th century Christian monk called Cogitosus. Due to the very limited archaeological evidence, it is hard to tell how much of what was written was about the goddess or the saint.

Brigid, or 'Brid', was a wise sage and goddess of poets, dairy farming and the spring. Her festival was on 'Imbolc' (meaning 'in the womb') marking the start of spring around the 1st of February. In some stories there is a trinity of Brigids, sometimes called sisters, who are associated with healing and blacksmithing.

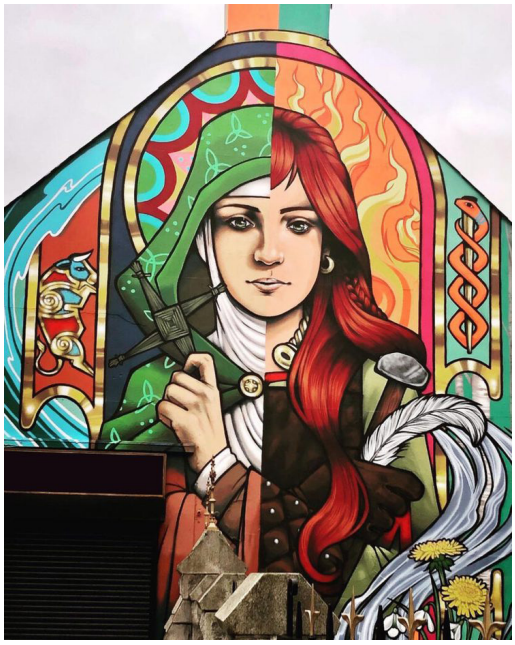
While there is little archaeological evidence for Brigid, we can be confident that the changing of the seasons was ritually marked. There is a passage tomb in Tara that is illuminated by the rising sun on the festival of Imbolc. These passage tombs are over 5,000 years old, overlapping with the Sumerians and earlier Pyramids of Egypt.

Brigid as Saint

Just as there is no purely pagan source about Brigid, there is no purely Christian source either. Many aspects of the saint's hagiography seem like adaptations or appropriations of the pagan goddess. Her saint's day is unchanged and she remains patron of poets, healers, blacksmiths and dairy farming.

Some stories say her mother was a slave baptised by St Patrick and her father a druid, all agree that her early miracles are acts of generosity. She worked on the farm churning butter, which she would give away to the poor, much to the annoyance of her father until the stocks were miraculously replenished.

Brigid valued her freedom and resisted marriage. She resented the attention her physical beauty drew from men. When one man told her that her pretty eyes would be married to him, willing or nilling, she plucked out her eye and gave it to him. (It healed back…) She vowed chastity and for



the rest of her life lived as a lesbian: her closest relationships – and bed – were shared with fellow nuns.

Her most famous miracle was when she asked a miserly pagan king to grant her the land to establish an abbey. He refuses and mocks her, saying she can have as much land as she can throw her cloak over. She threw out her cloak, and it expanded to cover a forest, lake and acres of fertile land. This gave rise to the idiom 'There's room under Brigid's cloak for all of us.' Brigid got her abbey and the king converted.

Being from a protestant background, I hadn't really heard of St Brigid growing up. I remember making a St Brigid's cross at school once and my catholic-schooled friends tell me that it was something they did every year, keeping their reed crosses over the door of the house.

The origin story for the cross is that when St Brigid was visiting her druid father on his death bed, she made this cross out of the straw on the floor to teach him about Christianity. He was so taken by it that he converted then and there. It's amusing that he was so impressed, as he would have seen the symbol many times before, given it was a pre-Christian symbol of protection.

But suspending our disbelief about the whole story, we can imagine that in seeing Brigid make the cross, he realised that his tradition and belief was going to be adapted and maintained by Christianity, not destroyed by it. In this story, who is really being converted?

A miraculous abortion

Returning to Brigid's chastity, the monk Cogitosus records an even more interesting miracle.

> A certain woman who had taken the vow of chastity fell, through the youthful desire of pleasure, and her womb swelled with child.
>
> Brigid, exercising the most potent strength of her ineffable faith, blessed her, causing the child to disappear, without coming to birth, and without pain.
>
> She faithfully returned the woman to health and to penance.

If Brigid had performed this miracle in the 20th century she would have been locked up. Abortion was illegal in Ireland almost all circumstances until 2018, and until 2020 in Northern Ireland (with regular NHS provision not actually being established until 2022).

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And what of the young woman? Given that she's described as showing a swelled womb, she would likely be

beyond the 12-week gestation limit on abortions in Ireland and Northern Ireland. She could have been placed or incarcerated into a mother and baby home, suffering awful abuse at the hands of the church, or she may have suffered worse abuse from her own family. If she'd had a baby, it may have been one of the thousands forcibly taken from the mother and trafficked by the church, or ended up in one of the unmarked mass burial sites.

The contrast between St Brigid's compassionate and caring response to this woman, and the cruelty actually experienced by women at the hands of the church and society since, couldn't be more stark. So it is fitting that the campaign to mark St Brigid's day came out of the campaign for justice for the Mother and Baby Home survivors and victims.

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The campaign for a bank holiday

The proposal for an extra bank holiday was made to the government in the wake of the covid lockdowns. A cost-benefit analysis found an extra bank holiday would earn more than it cost thanks to 'domestic high spending short break' demand, and 'extending the tourism season'. A similar argument was made in the 2019 Labour manifesto for the UK, advocated a St Georges Day bank holiday.

With the economic case made, all that remained was to choose the date. This was not a campaign led by the church, who wouldn't see it as their role anyway. In any case, they couldn't have pontificated on celebrating women without being met with derision, given their own awful legacy.

The Catholic church and women in Ireland

While the rest of Western Europe secularised from the 1960s, Ireland bucked this trend all the way up to the 1990s. Going by the census alone, in the 30 years from 1961 to 1991 self-identification as Catholic fell only from 95% to 92%. In the next 30 years, it fell to 69.1%. Attendance at church and personal prayer have fallen even more starkly.

The outcomes of public referenda reflect this change in attitude to the church, with complete reversals on key issues. Abortion was banned by 67% in a referendum in 1983, but that ban was removed by 66.4% in 2018. On marriage, in 1986 63% voted against allowing divorce, but by 1995 it was allowed and in 2019 a referendum to liberalise divorce passed by 82.1%. Same-sex marriage was legalised in 2015 with 62% support.

It's not the sort of thing you can prove with data, but the most plausible explanation for the changing attitude to the church must be the scandals unearthed since the late 1980s. Clergy abuse of power, the child sex abuse scandals, mother and baby homes and laundries – each shameful scandal compounded by the covers ups of the church and complicit state. It's important to remember the scale and recency of these abuses: an estimated 30,000 women were confined to institutions run by the church, the last of which only closed in 1996. The then Taoiseach Enda Kenny's speech on the Cloyne Report was considered one of the most significant in the history of Ireland, with the closing of the Irish embassy to the Holy See interpreted as further condemnation of the church.

The Herstory campaign

At the early stages the Herstory campaign explicitly linked these abuses to their call for St Brigid's day. Their open letter to the Taoiseach says:

> Mná na hÉireann fought for democracy, they got a theocracy. They fought for equality and got oppression. Religion replaced empire. One form of control, replaced by another.
> …
> Under the constitution, women had little access to the sovereignty they fought for, no autonomy over their own bodies. Marital rape was not a crime, contraception was. Women were prevented from working after marriage, banned from divorce, access to information was censored and there was little support from the State.
> …
> We, as a society, were coercively controlled by Church and State to behave in ways that were contrary to our nature.
> …
> We call on the Government of Ireland to recognise Brigid, our matron saint, in the same way that St. Patrick is honoured. Originally an indigenous Goddess of Ireland, she was appropriated by the Catholic Church who made her a Saint.
>
> In the spirit of unity, let Brigid's Day, February 1st 2022 and all other years thereafter, be a national holiday where we honour Brigid as Goddess, Saint and symbol of feminine power and strength.
>
> Let this gesture symbolise how our society values women and men equally. Ireland, Éire, a wounded land named after the Goddess Ériu. In our healing, we can rediscover our true selves and find that real sov-

> ereignty is possible when men and women can truly empower each other through shared strength and unity.
>
> Let this be our commitment to shaping Ireland's future, a new era guided by Brigid's principles of light, inspiration, imagination, healing, truth, justice and love.

Brigid's day is not a celebration of the church, but a celebration of women's survival despite the church.

The Herstory campaign tells many positive stories of women in Ireland, not just stories critical of the church. In the art, poems and press releases shared by the campaign, we see Brigid as a feminine icon. Stripped of the vestiges of Catholicism, her pagan-ness is emphasised. It was this image of Brigid promoted by the campaign, and this Brigid who won the support of many Irish parliamentarians and the public for St Brigid's day.

The government's own announcements emphasise the pagan aspect and downplay the catholicity. The regulation which legally established the bank holiday states it is 'in celebration of Imbolc/St. Brigid's day' and that it 'marks the half-way point between the winter solstice and the equinox, the beginning of spring and the Celtic New Year.' The accompanying press release notes, 'This will be the first Irish public holiday named after a woman.'

In his statements to the press, then then Minister Charlie Flanagan TD said:

> Raising her day to a national holiday is also a welcome recognition of the equality of the feminine with the masculine in society. Because of her very strong association with fertility and the natural world, Brigid is also the perfect patron of the ecology movement. She can become the Mother Earth figure of the awakening consciousness of the beauty and fragility of this Earth, and our human dependency on this Earth, and our interconnectedness with all the other species sharing the planet with us.

There are also those who oppose this reimagining of Brigid. Senator Ronan Mullen, on the catholic and conversative end of Irish politics, criticised the St Brigid's Day celebrations as ignoring the 'historical Brigid'. Speaking in the senate, he said that 'it is paradoxical that brave new secular and politically correct Ireland should indulge in the hijacking and cultural appropriation of a religious feast day.'

I obviously disagree with Mullen's opposition to a feminist Brigid, but he is right to identify that the Brigid being celebrated is a challenge to the conservative tradition.

Brigid the feminist

The Brigid being celebrated today is knowingly mythic. The 'Who is Brigid' page of the campaign website opens with a quote from a Jungian psychoanalyst that wisdom can be gleaned and reawakened from ancient culture on the journey to equality, and that a goddess isn't any one person but is everyone, the collective unconscious that we all share in common and whence comes myth.

There are so many new and unexpected ways that people are drawing on the tradition and myth of Brigid. It's exciting to watch as, before our eyes, people explore novel aspects of the goddess and saint. From a feminist and queer perspective: her rejection of physical beauty and aversion to marriage and the egalitarian arrangements of her abbey. From a political perspective: her bold generosity in the face of miserly rulers and her exhortations to hospitality, as well as her origins and roots across Europe, in the Danube, Turkey, Spain and Ulster. From an ecological perspective: her affinity to nature.

Brigid is being explored as a human creation, a deliberate reinvention and reimagination of myth, not as real historical person or an 'out there' pagan goddess. Unlike past appropriations of Brigid by Christian monks, no-one feels any need to make an historical or metaphysical claim that she is the 'real Brigid'. And this means that we can create the patron saint or goddess we need for Ireland today: a patron for equality, an icon of Irish women and a defender of the environment.

Brigid is being explored as a human creation, a deliberate reinvention and reimagination of myth, not as real historical person or an 'out there' pagan goddess.

For me, celebrating St Brigid is celebrating the women who are – through their effort and persistence – embodying the spirit of the goddess and the saint and making Ireland and Northern Ireland a better place. This year in particular I was thinking of one of my friends who has become a Senator in the Irish parliament, and another friend who did a huge amount of campaigning for reproductive healthcare on both sides of the border over the past years. I messaged her about St Brigid after she posted an image on St Brigid's day, and I want to finish with her fantastic reply.

> I'm glad she lost the patron saint of Ireland battle to Patrick, so she could become the alternative saint she was meant to be.

With thanks to Rachel Watters.

Images: Page 9. 'Brigid of Faughart' mural in Dundalk by visual artist FRIZ: https://thisisfriz.com/
Page 10: 'Brigid Rising' Embodied by Jessamy O'Connor, photographed by Myriam Riand with concept art by Áine O' Brien. https://www.herstory.ie/photo-essays-2/brigidrising2024
Page 11: Ninja Brigid by Seán Brannigan https://www.herstory.ie/brigid-artwork

Poetic Responses

James Priestman, Poetry Editor

In the last issue I encouraged you to send in your poems to me at poetry@sofn.uk , particularly those that are relevant to this year's theme of "Resisting Faith".

Tom Hall, an SOFN member who lives in Rhode Island, USA, has sent in an impressive poetic summation of the apparent contradictions in the nature of God, Jesus and his disciples. For me, the implied answer to the question at the end of the poem is that we should seek guidance from more than just the Bible if we want "a way of life that gladdens and fulfils"

I have been learning William Blake's poem, *The Tyger*. It is less about a tiger than it is about the contradictory nature of God as revealed in the natural world: "Did he who made the lamb make thee [the Tyger]?". Here is a link to a recital of the poem at Paddington Station, where I recite poems as James Pendle every Friday morning between 10 and 11 am: https://www.youtube.com/shorts/T3AWbbm2IoI

Paul Overend has been thinking about another beast. He writes, "I have been much moved by the theological yearning of war poet Rupert Brookes in *On the death of Smet-Smet, the hippopotamus Goddess*. Remembering particularly the sacrifice of WWII marked the age of the death of God for many." In this time of geo-political change, it is worth reflecting on what Smet-Smet might represent to us today. The poem can easily be found online. Here is one link:

https://www.rupertbrooke.com/poems/1905-1908/on_the_death_of_smet-smet_the_hippopotamus-goddess/

Different Gods

Tom Hall

Surely the Yahweh who ambled in the garden
With our first parents, then drove them out for fear
A second breach might render them his peers
Was not the Elohim who with a word
Called into being heaven and earth and life
Of every kind, and saw that it was good.

Nor was the God who ordered Joshua
To wage a genocidal war on Canaan
That Israel might live secure and free
Cut from the same cloth as Micah's muse,
Whose sole injunction was to lead a life
Of justice, kindness, and humility.

Whatever the creed that drove the heartless Ezra
To cancel priestly marriages and condemn
Mothers and children to shame and desperation,
Its author's deity was not the God
Who inspired the contradicting tale of Ruth,
The alien whose love was holiness.

Could Jonah's mild taskmaster, who exhorted
That prideful prophet to display concern
For all the folk of hated Nineveh
Have led a vengeful post- exilic psalmist
To wish that all the babes of Babylon
Might have their brains bashed out against the rocks?

For Jesus Jews we meet in Didache
And Galilean archivists of Q,
Their Lord was a new David or a sage;
In Mary's Gospel and in that of Thomas
He seems a Spirit with a human form;
Thus early on his nature was in doubt.

And what are we to understand when John's
Report that Jesus (aka "the Word")
Was co-creator of the universe
Beggars belief, only to learn that he
And his father Joseph hail from Nazareth,
A place of generally low repute?

Why is it John has Jesus early on
Declare that to be saved we must ingest
His body and his blood, then near the end,
At that climactic final meal together,
Replaces the salvific loaf and cup
With after-dinner footbaths for The Twelve?

We'll never know why Matthew changed "the poor"
To read "the poor in spirit" and erased
The curses Luke found in their common source,
Nor make good sense of Luke's chronology
That places Jesus in Jerusalem
For six weeks after his ascent to heaven.

When Luke's Paul scolded fellow Jews who failed
To see his Jesus as God's new Messiah,
He prophesied a Gentile supersession:
"They will listen!" But what sort of God
Would on such grounds desert his chosen people
And pave the way that led to Holocaust?

To what broad vision of the great scheme of things
Will you entrust the guidance of the one
And only life you get the chance to live?
From what commitment then derive the strength
To choose and sanctify in word and deed
A way of life that gladdens and fulfils?

Others have been thinking about the problems of human nature. David Lambourn has been affected by Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan's, *This is not a humanizing poem*, which bemoans the requirement to be "relatable" and "recognisable" to others before they will feel compassion for you. The poem highlights how this requirement may be experienced by Muslims living in the United Kingdom. We have printed this poem on the back cover of this issue of *Sofia*[1], but you should also watch and listen to the author's original performance of the piece here:

https://youtu.be/G9Sz2BQdMF8

I have been reading some poems by Arundhathi Subramaniam. In her poem, *To the Welsh Critic Who Doesn't Find Me Identifiably Indian*, she speaks of a requirement to be recognisably foreign. "Arbiter of identity", she says to the critic, ironically, "remake me as you will. Write me a new alphabet of danger, a new patois to match the Chola bronze of my skin". The poem can be found online and more information about Subramaniam can be found at https://www.bloodaxebooks.com/ecs/product/the-gallery-of-upside-down-women-1371

David Chapman has been reading Dylan Thomas's poem, *Do not go gentle into that good night*. The poet is speaking to his dying father and the poem is a reminder that even as we approach our death, our words and behaviour affect others, particularly those who love us: "my

Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan

father […] curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears I pray". According to the first letter of John, it is in love that God is revealed to us (chapter 4: 7-12). Dylan Thomas can be heard reciting the poem at the following link:

https://youtu.be/1mRec3VbH3w

Please keeping sending the poems that are affecting you to me at poetry@sofn.uk. You can send a poem you have written or one by someone else. If you like, include a few words about why the poem is important to you.

In July I will be directing the *Festival of Biblical Literature* - hope to see you there!

1 *This Is Not A Humanising Poem* from Postcolonial Banter, VERVE Poetry Press, 2019. Reprinted by permission of Verve Poetry Press.

Don Cupitt on Political Agency and Social Resistance

Paul Overend

To consider how the human subject is for Don Cupitt an agent of political resistance, we will take an overview of Cupitt's framing of subjectivity as historically situated and contingent, and his ethics as involving both 'solar personal ethics, or "spirituality"… [and] "humanitarian" social ethics. …(*Emptiness and Brightness*, 2001, p.52-53). We will then consider the subject's agency in the struggle for social change, before raising some questions for evaluating Cupitt's thinking.

The self

Cupitt shares Karl Marx's belief that the subject is historically formed and situated, twice citing *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1844) in which the young Marx says,

> But *man is no abstract being encamped outside the world. Man is the world of men, the state, society. This state, this society, produce religion,* … [but religion] is the fantastic realisation of the human essence, because the human essence has no true reality.
>
> *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 3, p 175, Cupitt cites the italicised in *The Revelation of Being*, 1998, p.20 and *Kingdom Come in Everyday Speech*, 2000, p.133

For Cupitt, it is primarily language, the public world of culture and values, that both situates the subject in history and forms the inner sense of self.

> We never actually get right outside language… out of the flux: …I can no more be lifted out of history than a wave can be lifted from the sea.
>
> *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, 1989, p.42

> If all our thinking is transacted in our language, then 'the mind' and all our supposed inner life of thought must be secondary internalization. … All this makes 'the mind' not a metaphysical entity with access to a higher world, but simply a contingent cultural construct. No more than that. Society is logically prior to solitude and not the reverse; and publicity prior to privacy.
>
> *Solar Ethics*, 1995, p.23

This 'language' is comprised not only of words, spoken or written that are internalised, but of cultural sign systems and values that are shared by what Cupitt calls a '"broadcast" self' (*Solar Ethics*, 1995, p.39, p.13). The self is relational and performative, not a 'spiritual-substance… just a collection of roles, faces and functions.' (*Radicals and the Future of the Church*, 1989, p.19); 'we receive and give off a continual stream of stories and messages through our dress, grooming, body-language, gait, manner, signature, speech, self-presentation, visible feeling responses and so on.' (*The Time Being*, 1992, p.70)

Cupitt admits that, 'The route by which we approached marxism (language, the external-relations view of the self, radical historicism) has also shown us that there is a great deal wrong with classical Marxism. … but we acknowledge the continuing influence of the marxist view of the self, society and history.' (*The New Christian Ethic*, 1988, p167-169). Marx 's primary concern is with the material and the conditions that form consciousness, which Marx calls 'the language of real life'. (*A Critique of The German Ideology* [c.1845-1846] 1932 in, *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 5, [Part 1.A, pp.19-26]). For Cupitt, these historical or material conditions that informed Marx's understanding of social class still have an influence, but through language and culture. Cupitt's work aims primarily at liberation from the influence of the ruling ideas of religion and political order (the 'ideological superstructure' as is found in later Marxist thinkers (e.g., Althusser on interpolation, Gramsci on cultural hegemony, and in Foucault's various genealogies of power).

A responsible moral agent

The subject is not merely a product of culture, but is a responsible agent: 'We have to break with the long Western tradition of supposing that only a substantial self is a fully morally-responsible self'. (*The New Christian Ethics*, 1988, p.88) Our moral actions are a part of our value-laden performative communication.

> Someone who asks, 'Why should I be moral?' is naively misunderstanding the human situation. He is like a person who asks, 'Why should I use the common language?" Human beings are social. Rational thought is social, rational communication is social, and rational action is social too. A wholly personal and private morality is as useless a thing as a wholly personal and private communication-code.
>
> [1978] *Explorations in Theology 6*, 1979, p.99

As a moral agent, the individual is not an isolated 'lonely human being as being de trop, adrift in an ice-cold universe, bereft of value, and finding himself [sic] stuck with the sole responsibility for creating and projecting out values to live by' as imagined by certain existentialist philosophy, rather, 'Every human being is always already within a complete,

fully-formed and value-laden human construction of the world.' (*Solar Ethics*, 1995, p.51-52.) A given social order is also a social construct, which means we can be agents of change.

> [A]ll 'realities', political, religious and other, are transient human constructs. When we have reached this point we can consider refusing to accommodate ourselves to presently-established 'reality'. We hope and believe that things could be much better than this.
>
> *Creative Faith*, 2015, p.55

Cupitt's subjectivist solar ethics encourages individuals to take responsibility for their actions as they express themselves in words and deeds, and to become agents of change.

> What does a solar religious life look like? First, it involves an attempt to find your own voice—that is, to find the lifestyle through which you can best and most fully express yourself. Second, you must attempt to appropriate your own life and assume full responsibility for it. Third, your personal living should be as affirmative and extravertive as you can make it: each of us should so act as to enhance and increase the overall value of life.
>
> It is worth commenting here that all the greatest moral advances of the past seventy years have been of this type: feminism strives to raise the general social valuation of females; environmentalism strives to raise our valuation of our physical environment and of all the living things that populate it; anti-racism and the many movements descended from it strive to raise our valuation of racial groups other than our own; and finally, humanitarian ethics responds simply to human need, without regard to any calculation of the relative merits of individuals.
>
> If we are still able to be hopeful about human beings and the human future, it is largely on the basis of what these four great movements have already done to make the human world a better place today than it was in earlier periods.
>
> *Impossible Loves*, 2007, p.86-87

Humanitarian Agents of Resistance

The social ethic that Cupitt commends is humanitarian, understood to be from a secular realising of Jesus' "kingdom" values, in a secularised Christianity (*The Meaning of the West*, 2008). But humanitarianism has become a global moral vocabulary of international agreements, such as the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (*Above Us Only Sky*, 2008, p.vii, p.114), even though these values remain contested and not universally accepted.

Cupitt's subjectivist solar ethics encourages individuals to take responsibility for their actions as they express themselves in words and deeds, and to become agents of change.

This social ethic evolves democratically, in contrast with ideological programmes like Marxist-Leninism. Cupitt's solar ethics is an unsystematic ethics of 'deviants and whistle-blowers', who contribute to liberation from oppressive ideologies in politics and to the development of this evolving humanitarian ethic.

> Systematic schemes for reducing the historically evolved variety and untidiness of our life cannot be implemented without more loss of values than gain, and serious curtailment of freedom. Space needs to be left for untidy people such as deviants and whistle-blowers. Many of us now prefer to be political sceptics, floating voters, people whose commitments are irregular, occasional and piecemeal. We interest ourselves in pressure-groups, minorities and issue-politics. Our politics is consciously unsystematic.
>
> Cupitt, "Unsystematic Ethics and Politics", in *Shadow of Spirit*, ed. Berry & Wernick, [pp.149-55], 1992, p. 154

Cupitt looks to the examples of those who have had a Christian formation and have become humanitarian agents of resistance: those Quakers and Evangelical Christians, who struggled 'for the emancipation of slaves and of many other groups, such as workers, women, prisoners, the insane and children'; as well as Tolstoyans and Nelson Mandela. (*Creative Faith*, 2015, p.2, pp.5-6)

There are of course religious traditions that oppose humanitarian values. Cupitt notes that there is 'an extremely sharp confrontation between a neo-conservative and ultra-puritan Islamism and 'the West', which it perceives as humanistic to the point of idolatry and as being rotten and ripe for destruction.' (*The Meaning of the West*, 2008, p.120). In this case resistance involves non-violently bearing witness to humanitarian values, expressing humanitarian love even to the point of 'martyrdom'.

> [W]e should prefer to die for our humanitarian values, rather than betray them. So martyrdom returns, because we must be as serious about humanitarian values as we used to be about our old supernatural beliefs. ... We should prefer to risk death by arguing non-violently for a full acceptance by Islam of democratic values, critical thinking, and humanitarian ethics.
>
> *Ethics in the Last Days of Humanity*, 2016, pp.85, 86

In this case resistance involves non-violently bearing witness to humanitarian values, expressing humanitarian love even to the point of 'martyrdom'.

Democracy and Politics

At the turn of the century, Cupitt had confidently believed that liberal democratic politics could best advance humanitarian values, holding to an ongoing and progressive vision of development.

> [W]e live in an epoch when historical developments have progressively deconstructed the old disciplinary worldview. These developments include the world-wide triumph of liberal democratic politics and the decline of every sort of ideological politics, together with general acceptance of a strong doctrine of individual human rights. Nobody sees 'beyond' these ideas, and they bring us to the end of history — in the sense that democracy is itself an endless conversation, and a continuous process of adaptation to change that never evolves beyond itself. … Liberal democracy is kingdom-politics; it is end-of-the-world politics, and it is profoundly post-ecclesiastical.
>
> *Kingdom Come in Everyday Speech*, 2000, p.55-56

This presents democracy as consensus building process, and Cupitt even commended the collaborative political philosophy of anarchism, in the

sense of both being 'without foundation' (*an-archē*) and also being politically liberal-communitarian.

> Because we are emotionally still monarchists in politics, realistic theists in religion, and foundationalists (Cartesians, usually) in philosophy, anarchy has a dirty name. It is a Yeatsian nightmare: "Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world." But in fact anarchy can turn out to be far more powerful and efficacious than absolute monarchy. …
>
> The purely immanent interest each organism has in surviving, and that each human being or group has in communicating effectively, is now well known to be a highly effective discipline. …. When we grasp this we see that there is no reason to fear anarchy and radical immanence. Far from it, because the surviving absolute monarchies, theocratic societies, and other sorts of dictatorship are without exception in our experience backward, cruel, and corrupt. When did people's desire for a "strong leader" ever do them any good? Doesn't it now look as if a fully horizontalized world might be much more rational and peaceful, and much less self-destructive? Instead of trusting Authority, why not try trusting conversation, democracy, and bargaining?
>
> *Mysticism after Modernity*, 1998, p.90-91

Instead of trusting Authority, why not try trusting conversation, democracy, and bargaining?

This confidence in a collaborative democratic process might have found expression in Cupitt's method of drawing on popular idioms of everyday language for a democratic *Lebensphilosophie* (*Meaning of it All in Everyday Speech*, 1999; *The New Religion of Life in Everyday Speech*, 1999; *Kingdom Come in Everyday Speech,* 2000). While everyday speech is neither uncritical nor univocal, this methodology only identifies current assumptions, rather than engages critically with the material conditions and capitalist worldview that give rise to such ideas, or the worries and fears and frustrations leave people alienated from the political process.

Later in life, Cupitt became more disillusioned. The 'general acceptance' of individual human rights remains elusive and there is a lack of 'agreed rational criteria for a good society':

> One person's progress may be another's decline… [furthermore] we do not have and never will have moral and political standards that are fully independent of history and our own criticism. In which case the whole idea of progress breaks down'.
>
> *Theology's Strange Return*, 2010, p.43

Democracy is far from a polite 'endless conversation' in which people are 'communicating effectively' worldwide: it remains a battleground of competing material and economic interests, as well as religious and ideological politics. People are drawn to the popular 'strong leader' hoping for material improvement. Liberal democratic politics has also failed to stem environmental destruction, global inequality or resulting population movements in immigration. In spite of these, Cupitt still saw a need for humanitarian ethics and institutions.

> [B]y far the best thing we have left to cling to as we face a very dark future is our tradition of humanitarian ethics originally associated in the Bible with the last and blessed Age to Come at the end of time, and now diffused very widely through the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, through the United Nations and its various agencies concerned with refugees, health, food and the like; through the modern state's active concern to promote the education, the health and the welfare of its subjects; and through the great international voluntary aid organizations. …Today, we are almost all of us humanitarians—because we darkly suspect that the human race has not got much time left.
>
> *Ethics in the Last Days of Humanity*, 2016, p.18; p.20

Questions for Evaluation

Cupitt's historically situated and culturally-formed ethical subject has moral agency, and an ability for social resistance as well as cooperation and consensus building. This a modification of the autonomous subject of liberal philosophy, who values liberty from social constraint, freedom for self expression. But liberal philosophy has gone hand in hand with capitalism, as liberalism was shaped by and has supported capitalism, perhaps more than capitalism as been held to account by the liberal critical tradition, or humanitarian ethics and institutions.

Cupitt is himself situated in a critical western intellectual tradition and his ethical subject prioritises reason over those emotions such as fear and vulnerability, desire and greed, which are exploited by capitalism and motivate people and politics. Recent Marxist writers have returned to Spinoza's study of the affects motivating human striving (Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part III, including Deleuze, Guattari, and Negri) to analyse the influence of capitalism on our material conditions and consider how these construct our inner life and political behaviour.

One might wonder if Cupitt's own material 'situatedness', living with university tenure among largely economically privileged students, shaped his thinking.

One might wonder if Cupitt's own material 'situatedness', living with university tenure among largely economically privileged students, shaped his thinking. We cannot avoid being culturally situated, but this means that we need to attend to the experiences of marginalised people — those with long term sickness and disability, or who are displaced or have become refugees, people whose working life is spent in severely restricted and demanding conditions under surveillance. This points to the need for solidarity in his humanitarian ethic, requiring our attention to the accounts of those with different cultural, material and economic experiences. Cupitt became more aware himself of feminism, for example, learning from those around him.

What we do find from Cupitt is a valuable engagement with the post-modern self, presenting us with a model of ethical subjectivity that, if formed by secular humanitarian values, can bear witness to those values in the hope of achieving social change.

An Untouchable State

Lobbying for Zionism on both Sides of the Atlantic
Ilan Pappe Oneworld Publications 11th Jun. 2024 608 pp

> Over 150 years, Zionist lobbying groups transformed Israel into an untouchable state. This is a magisterial history of the most successful advertising campaign the world has ever seen.
>
> Quote from the book cover

Caroline Pickard offers an appreciation of Ilan Pappe's 2024 book

I thoroughly enjoyed this book. Ilan Pappe has been a hero of mine ever since I read his *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, one of his early acts of resistance against the Israeli government. Its publication in 2006 cost him his job teaching history at the university in Haifa; although he remains an Israeli citizen he is not allowed to speak in Israeli schools or colleges. Meanwhile he is based at the University of Exeter and continues researching, writing and resisting.

He wanted to explore a conundrum: How is it that a wealthy, powerful and educated country like Israel, unlike any other country in the world, still needs to argue for its validation while, at the same time, the Palestinian cause, simple and just though it is, has been denied by so many of the powerful?

His most recent book *Lobbying for Zionism on both Sides of the Atlantic* explores the problem and his answer lies in very effective lobbying, initially for Zionism and, since 1948, for the State of Israel.

Consider the following familiar statements:-

- Jews have a right to their ancestral homelands promised in the Hebrew Bible
- Jews are not just a people with a religion, but a nation.
- After the Holocaust the world owes something to the Jewish people
- Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East.
- Criticism of Israel is anti-Semitic.

There is no mention anywhere here of the Palestinian people.

It comes as a surprise to many that the early Zionists were Christian, Lord Shaftesbury for example in Britain, and across the Atlantic a whole theology was developed about the Jews returning to their promised land and converting to Christianity when Jesus would return to earth and save the righteous (Restorationism). Religion has always played a more important part in Zionist lobbying in the USA where the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), founded in the fifties, has become one of the most powerful lobbying groups in the world. Pappe describes Senator Fulbright, (he of the scholarships) as its first political victim. After the first world war however lobbying became more political there as Zionism was portrayed as a defence against communism.

In Britain, the political and colonialist ambitions of the Zionists like Herbert Samuel felt it was essential for Britain to gain advantage of the collapsing Ottoman Empire and this led eventually to the Balfour Declaration, the British Mandate and finally the recognition of the State of Israel in 1948. The expulsion of some 700,000 Palestinians from their homes and villages was allowed to happen with very little protest from Britain or the USA.

The mixture of Zionism with socialism spread among Zionists world wide and Pappe traces its influence among the British Labour Party. Aneurin Bevan, Jennie Lee and Anthony Greenwood founded the Labour Friends of Israel (LFI) in 1957 and it has remained a powerful influence in the Labour Party ever since, Harold Wilson being an avid supporter. Meanwhile Israel funded visits to Israel for both Labour and Conservative politicians and does so to this day. Pappe records that such visits outnumber politician visits to anywhere else in the world.

Since 1967, when Israel took over East Jerusalem and placed the West Bank under military occupation and hundreds of thousand refugees were left in refugee camps, the lobby continued with the familiar lines that Israel must defend itself. Since the turn of the century there has been more emphasis on antisemitism. The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) was formally adopted 2016 as a part of this process. Criticism of the State of Israel is now posited as being anti-semitic. I was surprised reading this section that Pappe makes no mention of the Jerusalem Declaration which came out in response to the IHRA and gives a much better definition of antisemitism.

Recent events in Gaza still show Israel controlling the narrative: no journalists in Gaza and it is 'hostages' in Gaza but 'administrative detainees' in Israel. Pappe devotes a few pages to the BBC under attack by pro-Israel groups earlier and now claiming to be unbiased. However it was Channel 4 which showed films like Kosminsky's *The Promise* and Pilger's *Palestine is still the Issue*, and in March of this year ITV screened *Our Land, Israel's Other War*. (still available on ITVX at the time of writing).

Of course the lobby has not had it all its own way: Pappe charts the many people who resisted it as well as the proponents, varied and fascinating as they all are. We see the undersides of much of our history and of today's world.

In the *Afterword*, written after the start of the Gaza war, Pappe fiercely deplores any conflation of what happened on 7th October 2023 with the Holocaust as it "minimises the unparalleled horror of the Holocaust".

Perhaps the power of this book is reflected in the fact that, so far, I haven't seen it reviewed, apart from in Jewish Voice for Labour, in any of today's press.

Long may Ilan Pappe continue with his policy of resistance.

Comments?
Send them to editor@sofn.uk

The Notion that the Polite, Western Liberal Ever Stood for Anything At All.

One day, everyone will have always been against this
Omar El Akkad. Canongate 25th Feb. 2025 187pp
Christ in the Rubble: Faith, the Bible, and the Genocide in Gaza
Munther Isaac. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 27th Mar. 2025 279pp

David Chapman

Omar El Akkad is a journalist and Munther Isaac is a Church minister. They are both very angry. The proximate target of El Akkad's anger is Western journalism, and of Isaac's is Western Christianity, but the source of their anger is one and the same: Western complicity in genocide. Brutal, barbaric, slaughter of Palestinian people, with the aim of eliminating Palestinians from Gaza.

El Akkad traces the journey from his birth in Egypt to his life as a respected journalist with a good house and family in North America (via 16 or 17 different homes on the way). He recounts lessons learnt on the journey, such as an experience from his childhood in Qatar of people who can be ignored, or worse. People who are "nonhuman, non-anything": simply don't exist. In Qatar it was a Southeast Asian man involved in a road accident with a local man. El Akkad notes that the Southeast Asian man had done something far worse than dent a fancy car's bumper: "he had violated the bounds of his assumed nonexistence". For El Akkad, it shaped the way he thinks about every country, every community: "whose nonexistence is necessary to the self-conception of this place, and how uncontrollable is the rage whenever that nonexistence is violated?". It is not difficult to see where he's going with this. There was his own experience of racism in America, but beyond that it is the reaction of Israel to the Hamas attack of 7/10/23, with the support of Western powers, which treated all Palestinians, men, women and children, as 'human animals' (in the words of the Israeli Defence Minister) to be slaughtered without mercy.

El Akkad describes his book as an account of a fracture "a breaking away from the notion that the polite, Western liberal ever stood for anything at all". When growing up in Qatar he longed for "a fundamental kind of freedom" which he expected to find in the USA. He knew that "there were deep ugly cracks in the bedrock of this thing called 'the free world'", but he believed "the cracks could be fixed, that the thing at the core, whatever it was, was salvageable". He believed that until the aftermath of 7/10/23.

While Pastor Isaac is equally horrified by the events in Gaza, it is not so much of a fracture for him. He is a Palestinian Christian in charge of a Church in Bethlehem and has never had any illusion about 'the West'. Chapter two of his book is entitled "This was did not start on October 7" and he knew that Palestinians were second class citizens long before Israel's uncontrolled rage in revenge for 7/10/23. Isaac attracted international attention around Christmas 2023, both through his uncompromising sermons and the extraordinary symbolism of the Christ in the Rubble nativity scene which was set up in his Church. Pastor Isaac's Christmas message was shocking. "I did not call out for peace and reconciliation" he says, "Instead I called out the Church for its complicity".

> "Daddy, what's that pile of rags in the corner?"
> "That, dear, is the cloak of liberalism."
> "But it's all tattered and torn. No one would wear it, surely?"
> "On the contrary, dear. They will put it on again and again and pretend that it's beautiful and true."
>
> 'Tweet' (X) from Michael Rosen 8th April 2025

> This war has confirmed to us that the world does not see us as equal. Maybe it is the color of our skin. Maybe it is because we are on the wrong side of the political equation. Even our kinship in Christ did not shield us. As they said, if it takes killing 100 Palestinians to get a single "Hamas militant" then so be it! We are not humans in their eyes. (But in God's eyes… no one can tell us we are not!) The hypocrisy and racism of the Western world is transparent and appalling! [...]
>
> To our European friends. I never ever want to hear you lecture us on Human rights or international law again.

And listen to this:

> Your charity, your words of shock AFTER the genocide, won't make a difference. Words of regret will not suffice for you. We will not accept your apology after the genocide. What has been done, has been done. I want you to look at the mirror… and ask: where was I?

This is essentially the same message as encapsulated by the title of El Akkad's book, but all the more shocking to hear a Christian minister apparently refusing to forgive.

Neither author supports what Hamas did on 7/10/23 and both oppose violence as a matter of principle. For Pastor Isaac: "my Christian faith requires unwavering commitment to nonviolence, peace, and reconciliation rooted in truth and justice". But, another aspect of his presentation which some might find shocking from a Christian minister, is his rejection of neutrality: "[B]eing a peacemaker unavoidably entails willingness to sacrifice, take sides, and speak truth to power".

Although El Akkad opposes violence, he notes that "one of the most damaging, longest-lasting consequences of the War on Terror years is an utter obliteration of the obvious moral case for nonviolence".

> The argument that violence in any form debases us and marks the instant failure of all involved is much

more difficult to make when the state regularly engages in or approves of wholesale violence against civilians and combatants alike. Instead, the case for nonviolence becomes, in the ugliest way, pragmatic: the state wants violence, because in that playing field it maintains every advantage, from bigger guns to the privilege of perpetual victimhood.

The numbers are mind-blowing (see the box) but, humanly, we struggle to know what to do with bare numbers, and stories of individual people engage with us better on an emotional level. Both El Akkad and Pastor Isaac recount the story of Hind Rajab. Pastor Isaac starts with it at the beginning of his book:

> "Come take me. Will you come and take me? I'm so scared, please come!"
>
> These were the last words heard from six-year-old Hind Rajab in Gaza. She was trapped in a car with five of her relatives, all of them dead. Israeli shelling had forced them to flee their homes. Due to poor weather, the mother had made the difficult decision to send her daughter in the vehicle along with her aunt, uncle, and three cousins while the rest of the family fled on foot. But the Israeli military ambushed the car, and Hind was the only survivor. She managed to call an emergency line in Gaza and pleaded for more than three hours on the phone for help.
>
> "The tank is next to me. It's moving."
>
> "I'm scared of the dark, come get me."
>
> Twelve days later, Hind was found dead in the car with her relatives. A few meters away were the remains of another vehicle—completely burned, its engine spilling onto the ground. It was the ambulance of the Red Crescent, sent to rescue Hind. Tragically, the two crew members—Yusuf al-Zeino and Ahmed al-Madhoun—were killed when the ambulance was hit by Israeli forces. Yusuf and Ahmed sacrificed their lives trying to rescue Hind.

This is an effective story to recount because we know the details, and there exist beautiful photographs of a happy smiling Hind Rajab before the war (a web search will turn them up instantly). But we have no reason to doubt that it is representative of how the other 15,612 Palestinian children died as well.

Confirmed Casualty figures for Gaza as of 30th April 2025

Palestinians

Killed: at least 52,400, of which (identified):
15,613 children, 8,304 women, 3,839 elderly, 22,265 men

Injured: more than 118,014

Israelis in Israel

Killed: at least 1,200 people, including 36 children

Injured: more than 5,400

Israelis in Gaza (soldiers)

Killed: 410

Injured: at least 2,636

Source: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs https://www.ochaopt.org/content/reported-impact-snapshot-gaza-strip-30-april-2025

And the numbers do matter: of course they do. Apart from the scale of the suffering they represent, they are part of the evidence that this is genocide, and neither El Akkad nor Pastor Isaac have any doubt that this is genocide. Pastor Isaac discusses it at length, and concludes:

> Genocide is not a matter of opinion. My opinion should not count. I am not an expert. However, given all the facts, studies, and expert testimony, we can say that the burden of the proof now lies with those who deny that it is a genocide. For those who object to the use of this term, I must question not only their analysis but also their motives.

As Pastor Isaac is particularly angry with, particularly let down by, Western churches, so too El Akkad, the journalist, is scathing about Western media, drawing especially contrast between the cowardice of Western journalists and the heroism of Palestinian journalists. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ): "as of April 29, 2025, … at least 176 journalists and media workers were among the more than tens of thousands killed in Gaza, the West Bank, Israel, and Lebanon since the war began, making it the deadliest period for journalists since CPJ began gathering data in 1992".

In the midst of all the darkness in both of these books, after all the condemnation and despair, both authors find points of light: people to admire and reasons to hope. El Akkad draws attention to extent of Jewish opposition to the actions of Israel and America's support of Israel:

> In New York City, Joe Biden is met by Jewish protestors. It has become an almost everyday occurrence now, this resistance...
>
> It's not suprising, I don't think, that in the midst of this indiscriminate killing, many of the Westerners doing the most active work in opposing genocide are Jews. Here is love born of pain, of the past century's most horrific crime, love of one's own spread out into love of another.

Pastor Isaac has an epilogue to his book: *Hope, Survival, and Sumud*. He holds on to hope from his deep Christian faith.

> [O]ver the past year I began to doubt myself and the validity of preaching hope

he says, but:

> When we stop hoping, we declare that we give in to tyranny and oppression, allowing the oppressors of the empire to shape our reality. When we stop hoping, we accept that injustice is the norm. Hope in this sense is a struggle. It is painful. It is illogical. It even feels wrong, at times. But we cannot surrender to the alternative.

The hope of *Christ in the Rubble*.

Religion in my Life

For this *Sofia* regular feature, new for 2025, we again have a personal contact of the editor.

Kurshida Mirza is a highly respected long-standing resident of Milton Keynes who became active in the community in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in New York. She found that, simply because she was a Muslim, she faced Islamophobia and suspicion in her place of work, but, instead of becoming bitter, she channelled her faith into building bridges through an organisation which she called 'Trubys Garden Tea Room', named after a street in Milton Keynes (Trubys Garden) on which the Milton Keynes Islamic Centre is located. Kurshida at that time was very actively involved in the development and fundraising efforts for the Centre which aspired to be a community space for all members of the community. In 2015 Trubys moved to the Church of Christ the Cornerstone, which they are proud to call their home.

Kurshida was awarded the British Empire Medal in 2020 and, in an extraordinary recognition of her status in the community, was selected to be the High Sheriff of Buckingham for the year 2024 – 2025 (the first Muslim Woman of Asian Heritage to ever hold this honour in Buckinghamshire).

Trubys Garden Tea Room

Trubys is a charity run by British Muslim Women who live in Milton Keynes to create opportunities for positive dialogue between Muslims and the wider community – faith and no faith. Their activities include, amongst many:

- An occasional Interfaith café held at the Church of Christ the Cornerstone
- *The Great Get Together Iftaar*, also at the Church of Christ the Cornerstone, which seeks to celebrate the beauty of Ramadan with the wider community
- Trubys Abrahamic Women's Choir, to bring Muslim, Jewish and Christian women together, but includes women of all faiths and none united in their bond as women working to create peace throughout the world, singing in Arabic, Hebrew and English
- A hardship fund, which has, over the last 10 years, provided support with cost of living to help people live with dignity.

Trubys was awarded the Kings Award for Voluntary Services in 2023, the highest accolade for a voluntary led organisations.

Interview with Kurshida Mirza

What is your personal experience of religion?

I grew up in a Muslim household where Islam was a natural part of daily life. It was not imposed, but was gently lived and introduced by example. A vivid early memory is listening to my mother recite the Qur'an and copying the beautiful melodic recitation of the Qur'an myself. I remember taking out the wooden Qur'an stand, placing a book and reciting like my Mum, long before I could read and understanding the words.

As I grew, religion remained a deep and personal journey. More than just rituals, it became a framework for self-improvement, ethical conduct, and navigating life's challenges. Practicing Islam has involved real struggles—especially in staying kind and grounded when facing prejudice—but these struggles are spiritually meaningful.

My experience of learning about my faith was very positive, my parents never imposed the faith on me, they were always open to questions and in fact encouraged me to research and come to my own conclusions. A clear message that my belief was personal and to be accepted because I wanted to not because my parents wanted to.

Does the idea of 'God' mean anything to you?

Yes, very much so.

God (Allah) is at the heart of everything for me. In Islam, God has 99 names and each one of the names is one of His attributes. I say 'His' attributes as in Islam we use the masculine pronoun to refer to God, but that is purely linguistic. For Muslims, God is not gendered or human-like. God is far beyond human attributes.

The names for God that I most deeply connect with are Ar-Rahman (Most Merciful) and Ar-Rahim (Most Forgiving), reflecting God's boundless compassion and accessibility. And if God is so merciful and so forgiving, and if God can forgive us, whatever we have done, then we can forgive each other. This is what drives me. If we focus on goodness, then we find that only good can come out of goodness. In Surah Ar-Rahman, verse 60 Allah says 'Shall the reward of good be anything but good: so if you do good, only good can come out of you'. This has been my moral compass.

How do you respond to the SOF assertion that religion is a human creation (rather than a revelation from God)?

I don't agree with that. I believe that there is only one God, and God is the creator of everything that we have. I believe that over time God has sent different messengers to give guidance on how we should conduct ourselves. Shared stories from Prophet Abraham to Moses, Jesus and Muhammad (Peace be Upon Them All). Across Abrahamic religions are signs, not of human invention, but of a shared source and message from God, guidance for living our lives in goodly way.

I believe that Islam—and specifically the Qur'an—is not man-made but a direct revelation from God, unchanged since its revelation. While texts like the Torah and Bible have seen modifications, the Qur'an has been preserved word-for-word in the original language, and this is why we as Muslims spend years and years learn-

Resisting Oppression: The Arba'een Walk

Arif Master
Chair, *Voice of Al Hussain*

The Arba'een Walk is a significant pilgrimage undertaken by millions worldwide, marking the 40th day (Arba'een) after the martyrdom of Imam Hussain. Pilgrims walk from Najaf to Karbala, covering approximately 80 kilometers, to pay homage to Imam Hussain and his enduring message of resistance against oppression. This journey stands as a testament to devotion, solidarity, and the unyielding spirit of justice.

The Inspiration of Imam Hussain

The procession commemorates the martyrdom of Imam Hussain (AS), the grandson of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), who was martyred on the 10th of Muharram in 680 CE during the Battle of Karbala. Facing the forces of Caliph Yazid—whose claim to leadership was widely contested—Hussain and his loyal companions, including family members, endured immense suffering. Denied water for days, they ultimately sacrificed their lives rather than submit to injustice.

Through this tragic yet heroic act of sacrifice, Imam Hussain achieved a moral victory. His death catalysed revolutionary change and contributed to the eventual downfall of Yazid's tyrannical rule. Hussain's unwavering commitment to his principles has left a profound legacy, inspiring millions around the world. His stand symbolises the eternal struggle for justice, truth, and human dignity. The Battle of Karbala continues to impact Islamic consciousness and has inspired generations to uphold the principles of courage, faith, and resistance against tyranny.

Why Imam Hussain Was Persecuted

Imam Hussain's persecution stemmed from his refusal to legitimise the rule of Yazid ibn Muawiya, whose leadership represented a departure from the core Islamic values of justice, equality, and morality. Yazid's governance was marked by tyranny, corruption, and oppression. By demanding public allegiance (bay'ah) from Hussain, Yazid sought to gain religious credibility for his illegitimate rule.

Hussain refused to give allegiance to Yazid, stating that a corrupt and unjust ruler could not be recognised by true followers of Islam. His defiance was not driven by a thirst for power, but by a profound sense of duty to preserve the moral and spiritual in-

ing the old Quranic Arabic and the rules in order to recite it. Allah tells us to beautify our recitation of the Qur'an and many Muslims like myself will spend all their life dedicated to the learning to beautify their recitation.

There isn't anything in the Qur'an that's not about living your life in a good way and being kind to each other, but many non-Muslims who haven't studied the Qur'an misinterpret the Qur'anic message. For example, the word jihad is used as though it is about going around killing and converting non-Muslims into Muslims, but the word means 'striving'. For example, I spoke earlier about the struggle in my personal life in which I am striving staying kind and grounded when facing prejudice. This is my journey, my Jihad..

Do you think or believe that life has meaning?

Absolutely. Life is full of meaning—both universal and deeply personal.

Every soul comes from a divine presence and longs to return to that source. The discontent people often feel is a spiritual homesickness. Life's struggles and challenges are part of a divine test. God doesn't expect perfection, but sincere effort and growth. In Islam, intention is everything. If you start with a good intention, then good will come out of it.

Each person has a unique purpose, and part of life's meaning lies in striving to discover and fulfil that purpose. Islam encourages reflection, humility, forgiveness, and continuous striving (jihad) to be a better person, all of which give structure and purpose to life. Failure is part of learning which increases our insight and helps to build to perfect our behaviour and conduct.

What role do you think religion can and/or should play in society?

Religion should play a constructive, unifying role—not a divisive or oppressive one. Ideally, religion should help people live with compassion, justice, and tolerance. Its purpose should be to elevate humanity, not divide it. Unfortunately, religion has often been misused, for political power, colonization, division, and violence. For example, the partition of India created tensions between Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus, we saw it in Ireland between Protestant and Catholic Christians and it is being played out now in Palestine. This misuse is a human failure, not a flaw of religion itself. Sadly, our faith is being used for political power when all faiths advocate Peace, Justice and Love for Humanity.

Islam teaches that differences (race, gender, nationality) are deliberate tests from God—not reasons to hate, but opportunities to learn peaceful coexistence.

In my year as High Sheriff I appointed 7 chaplains to support me, we visited each others places of worship and we bonded through the understanding and learning that we have so much in common than that which divides us.

And finally, anything else at all that you would like to say to us!

Faith is a journey, not a fixed state. It's about effort, sincerity, and continual growth.

My message is one of hope and inclusion: religion—when lived with sincerity—has the power to heal, connect, and uplift. The world would be a better place if people could see religion not as a threat, but as a source of meaning, kindness, and shared humanity.

tegrity of the faith. In standing against Yazid's tyranny, Hussain upheld the principles of justice, truth, and human dignity—even at the cost of his own life and the lives of his family and companions.

Through this tragic yet heroic act of sacrifice, Imam Hussain achieved a moral victory. His death catalysed revolutionary change and contributed to the eventual downfall of Yazid's tyrannical rule. Hussain's unwavering commitment to his principles has left a profound legacy, inspiring millions around the world. His stand symbolises the eternal struggle for justice, truth, and human dignity. The Battle of Karbala continues to impact Islamic consciousness and has inspired generations to uphold the principles of courage, faith, and resistance against tyranny.

A Legacy That Inspired Global Leaders

Throughout history, Imam Hussain's story has inspired many great figures. Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of the Indian Nation, famously remarked, "I learnt from Hussain how to achieve victory while being oppressed." Gandhi's "Salt March" in 1930 was a monumental act of non-violent resistance, and he drew inspiration from Hussain's example of steadfastness.

Similarly, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a key leader in the American civil rights movement, found inspiration in Hussain's principles of sacrifice and justice. Hussain's timeless message has transcended cultures, religions, and borders, igniting movements for freedom and justice around the world.

A Universal Symbol of Resistance

Imam Hussain is regarded as a universal, borderless, and meta-religious symbol. While rooted in Shia Islam, the Arba'een pilgrimage has evolved into a symbol of interfaith engagement. It increasingly draws participants from diverse religious backgrounds, including Sunnis, Christians, Hindus, Yazidis, Zoroastrians, and others, who gather to commemorate and mourn Hussain's sacrifice.

Each year, millions, including Sunni Muslims and people of other faiths, join the pilgrimage to Karbala—not just to walk, but to serve. It is a profound act of protest against all forms of terrorism, fascism, imperialism, despotism, and oppression perpetrated by both state and non-state actors.

The Arba'een Walk seeks to keep alive the spirit of Karbala, conveying the message of freedom to future generations. It promotes human values of love, compassion, and justice, while denouncing bigotry, tyranny, and exploitation. Its appeal cuts across barriers of religion, caste, colour, and creed, making it truly a march for humanity.

The Peace and Humanity Procession in Milton Keynes

For over 30 years, the Peace and Humanity Procession, organised by Voice of Al Hussain, has been an annual tradition in Milton Keynes. The procession begins at the Church of Christ the Cornerstone, where a large gathering of participants hold banners and placards promoting peace, love, and brotherhood.

Religious and community leaders—including Muslims, Christians, Jews, Hindus, Buddhist, Sikhs, and others—walk side by side, symbolising unity, mutual respect, and a spirit of togetherness. Participants chant slogans advocating for non-violence and humanitarian values as they proceed through Central Milton Keynes, drawing attention to the importance of interfaith dialogue and coexistence.

The event aims to foster unity among people from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds and is attended by religious scholars, social activists, and members of various communities.

Following the peaceful march, an interfaith programme is held at various venues in Milton Keynes. The session begins with a recitation from the Holy Qur'an, followed by addresses from distinguished speakers representing Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Sikhism, and other faiths.

Esteemed guests, including the Mayor of Milton Keynes, the High Sheriff of Buckinghamshire, the Police Superintendent, and numerous faith leaders, have participated, adding value and highlighting the event's inclusive spirit.

Each speaker emphasises the universal values shared by all religions—compassion, justice, and love for humanity. Discussions centre around promoting global peace, combating religious intolerance, and fostering inter-community dialogue. Special emphasis is placed on the teachings of Imam Hussain (AS) as a symbol of sacrifice, justice, and standing against oppression—values that continue to resonate across all faiths.

Volunteers from interfaith communities, including the Sathya Sai Baba Community, Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, St. Barnabas Cluster of Catholic Churches, contribute significantly to the event's success.

The Peace and Humanity Procession, followed by the Interfaith Programme, continues to be a resounding success in fostering unity and understanding among diverse communities. Voice of Al Hussain once again demonstrated its dedication to spreading messages of peace, love, and humanity.

The event concludes with a collective prayer for global harmony and a renewed commitment to interfaith collaboration. This programme serves as a beacon of hope, reminding everyone that despite our religious and cultural differences, we are bound by our shared humanity. Its success sets a powerful precedent for future initiatives aimed at strengthening peace and brotherhood across the world.

Letters to the editor

Email your letter to: editor@sofn.uk, or put in the post to: 2 Holywell Place, Springfield, Milton Keynes, MK6 3LP

Don't say it's ligitimate resistance

Any statement that may appear to justify brutalities by anyone in Israel/Palestine is likely to increase mistrust and anger. The attacks by Hamas on October 2023 were terrifying crimes of murder, rape and kidnaping. In *Resisting the Hegemonic Narrative* (*Sofia* 155, March 2025), it was suggested that the Hamas attacks could be seen as a legitimate act of resistance against the Israeli occupation. I can't see how any good could come from expressing such a view. I found the rest of the article very interesting.

James Priestman.

We will be exploring issues around resisting with violence in the December issue. **Editor**

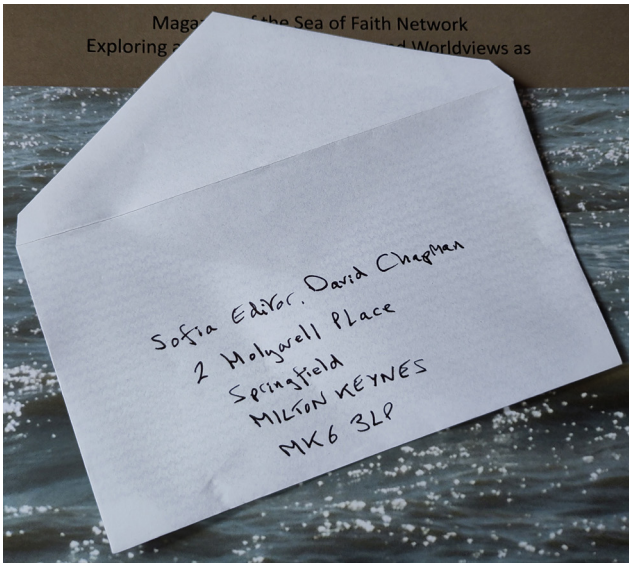
The new statement is better

In response to "debate" between Dave Francis & David Boulton [*Reviewing the purpose of the Sea of Faith Network*, *Sofia* 155, March 2025], the old strapline was indeed satisfyingly succinct, but I've always had to explain it to friends, saying I wasn't either a multi-faither like King Charles or an atheist with vaguely "spiritual" tendencies. And sometimes I think we also need to remind ourselves that, though it's important from an historical viewpoint – and great fun – to explore the scriptures and toss around abstract ideas about religion, it's overwhelmingly important to ask ourselves how we should conduct ourselves day to day. Cupitt wouldn't disagree? And I'm acutely aware that future generations will judge us by one thing above all others: what we did about climate change and biodiversity. Anyway, if we hope to have any influence beyond our declining membership I think we're right to emphasise "For This Life" and to include the wider expression Worldviews. It's good to see Dave Francis concentrating on a practical proposal for rescuing the RE curriculum.

Digby Hartridge

Having read both points of view I think we should stick with the new Statement. It is inclusive of people who are focused on religion as a human creation concentrating on this life but are not sure that belief in God is wrong. I agree that religion in its many different forms is a product of the human imagination, but at the same time it is human thinking about the nature of reality, and we cannot rule out the possibility that there is something real about the universe that it reflects and responds to. Modern developments in physics are showing us how little we know about the nature of the universe, and who knows what surprises are still to come?

Looking at the profiles of the Steering Group, it seems that at least 5 of them, including yourself, are active in a church. I myself am a regular church attender and occasional preacher, and more appreciative than ever of the value of corporate worship. I think of myself as a Christian agnostic. Being in my late 80s, I do not expect to live much



longer, and I cannot imagine a life after my death, but in this mysterious universe nothing can be ruled out.

Raymond Vincent

Against changing the statement of purpose

I am against changing the statement of purpose. The present one is so direct and meaningful. In the new version it seems to me that 'worldviews' have got to be human so the word is unnecessary, and also that 'for this life' implies that we are not much different from other religions. (Just saying as before that 'we promote religion as a human creation' doesn't rule out the idea of another life). I like to think that we offer a way of thinking which makes us stand out.

Yvonne Burman

The debate is a distraction

I thought I would respond to your invitation to "join the debate". In my opinion debates of this kind are a distraction best avoided. I think the problem might be obviated by adopting as the aim of the Network: "promoting discussion instigated by the original 'Sea of Faith' broadcasts". I guess that such discussion might include the merits or otherwise of distinguishing worldviews from religions.

Stephen Parsons

I loved your piece about Tom Bulman much more than the two articles about a strap line which you confessed "I find that as I read each of these papers I agree with whichever one is in front of me at the time!" Intellectually you enjoy watching angels dancing on the pin head, but honestly is it worth your time and energy? It certainly doesn't seem to add to resistance in any of the senses you describe in your introduction?

Maggie Greaves

There is a further article, *Resisting Sofiac Religion*, with 'passing thoughts' on the new statement of purpose, by **Jasbir Bhoda** on the *Sofia* website. Jasbir asks: " Did anyone ever suggest that [philosophy and worldviews] were *not* 'man-made'? Visit: https://sofn.uk/sofia/

Worldviews Navigator

Easy, Tiger, says **Dave Francis**

How many of you have kept up a foreign language that you learnt at school? Perhaps you have since learned a language that you didn't begin at school? Or perhaps you can at least order two drinks and a salad, and say please, thank you and good morning in the variety of countries to which you have travelled?

Those of us 'fortunate' enough to have grown up with English as our native language do not, of course, need to learn any other languages, as everyone has had to learn 'our' language as the lingua franca of the world. And if foreigners do not understand us, we can always shout more loudly.

My father did his national service in Germany after the war, and had nothing good to say about the Germans whatsoever. The only snippet of the German language he learned while he was there, was "Wie geht's meine kleine Kartoffelblume?" ["How are you my little potato-flower?"] I prefer not to think about what his motivation was for learning that particular phrase.

My dad's stories of post-war Germany, however, must have had some sort of impact on me, because since then I've had a fascination with Germany, its people and its literature. I studied German at school, though started with it too late really. I went on to do the A level (just scraping through), but I can't claim that I was ever anything near fluent in the language.

Since then I have occasionally dipped into the deep wells of German history and culture, reading Thomas Mann and Hermann Hesse, and having brief visits to different parts of the country. But during the pandemic I discovered the 'Easy German' podcast, which had just started, and have been an avid listener ever since. I feel that Cari, Manuel and Janusz, who present the podcast, are my dear friends, even if I know a lot about them and they know nothing of me.

One of the key features of the podcast is that the presenters share, not just personal aspects of their lives and relationships (Cari and Janusz are married, and Janusz is Manuel's father), but also their take on German politics, culture and religion. Cari and Manuel, in particular, have taken part in demonstrations opposing Germany's far-right party the *Alternativ für Deutschland* (AfD). Their education has been at a time where Germany's responsibility for the horrors of the Holocaust has been an established part of the curriculum, and 'Nie wieder' [Never again'] part of the zeitgeist. So it is a shock to many to see a deeply unpleasant nationalist party attracting so much support in certain parts (mainly the East) of the country. How can the rise of far-right rhetoric, apparent in the UK as well as the rest of the world, best be resisted in this new world of social media influence? When might going on a demonstration, or writing to an MP be insufficient?

Before 1933 there was plenty of opposition from within Germany to Hitler, but resistance faltered and, in the end, you don't need me to tell you, was violently swept away until none could speak out without high levels of personal risk. Authoritarian government, history shows, and is sadly to be seen throughout the world today, usually ends very badly, not to mention the terrible damage to individual lives it does along the way.

How can the rise of far-right rhetoric, apparent in the UK as well as the rest of the world, best be resisted in this new world of social media influence?

In my favourite Hermann Hesse book, *Das Glasperlenspiel* [*The Glass Bead Game*], written during the Second World War, the central character, Josef Knecht, after a high-flying career in academia, resigns from his post as master of the Glass Bead Game in order to re-enter the 'real world' of ordinary life outside the ivory towers. His defection from an authoritarian, sterile and self-satisfied regime signifies the need to engage in thoughtful commitment with wider society, even, as it turns out – spoiler alert – at personal cost to himself. As Knecht says. "Wir sind selbst Geschichte und sind an der Weltgeschichte und unserer Stellung in ihr mitverantwortlich" ["We ourselves are history, and we share responsibility for world history and our own place within it."]

There is always something to be learned from the immersive study of another people's culture, history and language.

So, by the way, in case you fancy learning or topping up your language skills, as well as 'Easy German' there are podcasts and videos (all with English translations and vocabulary support) for Easy French, Turkish, Greek, Polish, Spanish, Italian, Dutch, Russian and Mandarin… You never know when or where you might like to ask about the well-being of a little potato-flower.

SEA OF FAITH NETWORK ANNUAL CONFERENCE

EDUCATION FOR THIS LIFE

A special conference building on the Sea of Faith's work to develop 'Solarity', 'Big Ideas', and children's education in Religion and Worldviews.

Thursday 24th and Friday 25th July 2025

Coram Conference Centre: Brunswick Square, London WC1N 1AZ

Thursday 24th July 4pm to 8 pm

'Big Ideas for Religion and Science in Education' with

Professor Michael Reiss, **Dave Francis**, **Professor Denise Cush** & **Philippa Hulme**

'Cultivating Curiosity: the value of Religious Education' with **Louisa Jane Smith**

Friday 25th July 10am to 5pm

'Identities, Artificial Intelligence, Religion and Hope' with **Professor Beth Singler**

'Artificial Intelligence, Worldviews and Dialogue:
What is the future role of AI in (Religious) Education?' with Professor **Rupert Wegerif**

Cost for both days, including supper on Thursday and buffet lunch on Friday: **£50**.
Thursday only: **£30**. Friday only: **£40**.
Thursday night accommodation at own expense, please contact us: secretary@sofn.uk
Preferred payment method: transfer 'Sea of Faith', sort code 30-94-74; a/c 15599260.
Reference: Your name + 'Conference'.

Conference Information: https://sofn.uk/library/conference2025/

Religion and Marxism. An Introduction

Paul-Francois Tremlett. Sheffield: Equinox, 2023 81pp

Paul Overend

Paul-Francois Tremlett is a senior lecturer in religious studies at the Open University. This short introductory book, written primarily for A-Level sociology students, helpfully introduces anthropological perspectives of Marx's and Engles' time, Althusser on ideology, Gramsci's hegemony and The Frankfurt School of critical theory. It has accessibility in mind, referencing key sociological concepts and figures, with a helpful short glossary of terms from Marxist writers and cultural theory, and open questions at the end of chapters for group discussion.

The concise and introductory nature of the material necessitates difficult decisions, but from a Sea of Faith perspective when explaining Marx's understanding alienation, drawn from Ludwig Feuerbach, it might have been noted that for Feuerbach theology was a form of anthropology, in which God is an objectification of human consciousness[1]. This is echoed by the young Marx, who opens *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1844), by stating 'Man, … has found only the reflection of himself in the fantastic reality of heaven, where he sought a superman'. Hence, the humanist Marx believed religion was 'inverted consciousness': 'Religion is, indeed, the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet won through to himself'.

Apart from passing reference to the diversity of religions in the preface, the book is introducing western Marxism and refers only to Christianity, primarily Catholicism. But it indicates that Christianity has been a force for social change - with Friedrich Engels reference to the radical Catholic Thomas Müntzer, a chapter on political Liberation Theology, and Louis Althusser, also a Catholic who recognised that in religious institutions, such as schools, religion could be a medium through which people find meaning in everyday life. Althusser was actually associated with the Catholic left wing worker-priest movement for a time and in an interview in 1980 stated that "I became a communist because I was a Catholic."

Nevertheless, the book gives an accessible overview of vast and complex subject matter, and as a good introduction should, leaves a reader interested for more.

Note that Paul has a longer review of this book on the *Sofia* website:

https://sofn.uk/sofia/

1 Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 2nd ed 1843 https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/feuerbach/works/essence/ (Trans George Eliot, https://georgeeliotarchive.org/items/show/250)

Penny Mawdsley

Penny Mawdsley, whose *A Penn'orth* column was a valued regular in *Sofia*, sadly died on Sunday 9th of March. **John Pearson** offers a brief reflection on her life.

Penny was a friend and sometimes co-conspirator for over 30 years, born out of our work together for and within the Network which I think we both loved equally … particularly whilst, Pre-Covid, Penny was still well and the organisation was still in its prime.

Penny first bounced irrepressibly into my life at a Leicester Conference in 1992, taking me, shy newcomer, under her wing, as she must have done for others in her time. We participated in many more until an unforgiving end was put to such gatherings by Covid. As it happens, 2019 was also the last year that Penny was instrumental in designing and managing the event.

So, for over 27 years we plotted and planned with others, putting the show on the road. Penny would excitedly create special events each year – rushing "from pillar to post" like a 40, 50 or 60-something teenager executing them – such as the tenth year conference, at which she created a "formal dinner". I remember her filling the 7.30 early morning "Worthship" slots with, for example, guided tours of the Botanical Gardens, to the accompaniment of poetry or music which she had chosen. So, some great memories and one of my greatest friendships were born..

Penny was an immensely creative force in the Network across the years, doing much in her various official capacities over time, including her stint as Chair of the Trustees. But she will be remembered principally, I feel, for her contribution "on the ground" at Conference and through Portholes and her Merseyside Local Group. As Editor of "Portholes" and Local Group Co-ordinator she took on the additional mantle of Pastoral Officer .. relating to members around the country as nobody had before, visiting each group and corresponding with members across the year.

Penny was certainly no fool, and seemed disinclined to suffer fools gladly (though was always kind to them in person). So, we huffed and puffed together about some decision by the Trustees or of an individual (in the Pub' after a tiresome Trustees meeting or over our nightly shared bottle of Claret at Leicester). However, though a very clever, very wise and serious force to be reckoned with Penny could always see the funny side, and could laugh at herself. As we all might, she could get the "wrong end of the stick" occasionally, but having dug a hole sometimes dug it deeper. On hearing that a certain bank had collapsed she urgently emailed the rest of us…"our bank has gone bust" - in fact another bank with a very similar name. Much trepidation ensued, until a correction was made! On a personal note I remember her response on my telling her that her favourite Leicester tree (under which she had always vowed to have her her heart buried one day) had been chopped down. "Ooops" she said… "have to re-think that?" We also corresponded outside the immediate realms of Sea of Faith. Our regular exchange of Christmas Letters fostered and cemented further friendship and understanding of one another's worlds… though the understanding was not quite 100%. On one family visit to Liverpool Penny kindly treated us to a magnificent roast dinner.. Only later did it emerge that we seldom had such a feast, and neither did she. We had each gone along with what we supposed was the norm for the other.. We had a good laugh at that.

I vividly remember Penny's initial stoical telephone call informing me of her diagnosis. In admirably calm and measured tones she told me the worst. Subsequently she kept myself and others informed along the way. Penny did well to stay, superficially at least, as fit as she was for so long. I'm sure all were pleased to see her on-line at the SoF 'Conversation" sessions until quite recently, and it was particularly good that she was able to join us all last year in London, to mark the 40th year of the Network. She was a driving force in it for all 40.

Penny, through her life and work gained a great many friends, and it was good to see that over 120 of them attend events held in her memory.

Meet the Members

In the March issue of *Sofia* we introduced the members of the Sea of Faith network Steering Group. In this issue we introduce some more of our valuable network members. But all our members are valuable! So please send your own brief biography to editor@sofn.uk and this will be a regular feature, as long we continue to receive bios.

Marianne Mead was born and raised in Brussels, but did nursing and midwifery training in London. She worked as a midwife in the UK and Belgium, in clinical, teaching and finally research practice. Speaking French gave her opportunities to work for some organisations where French and English were the official languages, which was very interesting to open one's eyes to different practices. Brought up as a Catholic, she found Catholicism in the UK very different from what she had experienced in Brussels. She looked at Anglicanism for a long time, but never joined another denomination. When the BBC programme Sea of Faith was transmitted, she thought "I'll have a bit of that"… and joined about 25-30 years ago, attending conferences when she could. It made her realise her major shortcomings, particularly in philosophy and theology, so she listens and reads but do not always understand all the subtleties of some arguments. Work in progress...

John Pearson, a retired University (Poly') lecturer, has belonged the Network for over thirty years – serving for most of them on the Board of Trustees or previous Steering Committee, acting variously as Secretary, Treasurer and Chair. In 2024 he resigned from the Board in protest at its direction of travel. Brought up in the mainstream Anglican tradition, he gave up belief in a Supernatural god (or gods) or any of the "baggage" in his early 20's. Most recently he has described himself as "at best a Christian Atheist, at worst a militant Atheist". Though a disciple of Richard Dawkins he still attends an Anglican church and is a PCC member, but sees himself as a follower of Christ rather than the Established Church. He sees all traditional doctrine as merely metaphor, born of the different times, places and situations of its creators. He is chiefly occupied by his medal collection, allotment and grandchildren.

David Lambourn: approximately 55 years ago was priest-in-charge of a daughter church in the diocese of Southwark - with John Robinson as his suffragan bishop. With only a few very minor lapses he has not been a church attender since. He has been a youth worker and trainer of part-time youth workers in London, a researcher in adult and higher education in Manchester, an in-service trainer of secondary school teachers in Birmingham, and latterly an OU tutor. He wrote a PhD thesis on social thought when working at Warwick University. He was SoF membership secretary for 5 years, and founder member of the Birmingham SoF group and he has found a home as a Quaker in East Anglia.

Paul Overend spent most of his thirty years as an Anglican priest working in theological education. While a university chaplain at Cardiff, he was editor of Sea of Faith magazine (issues 52-67). After gaining a doctorate in philosophy (on Levinas' ethics), he taught philosophy and ethics at Liverpool Hope University before working in the Diocese of Salisbury as Principal of its Local Ordained Ministry scheme, at the ecumenical Southern Theological Education and Training Scheme, and later in the Norwich Diocese as director of lay ministry education, before finally spending a few years as Canon Chancellor of Lincoln with oversight of learning. He left ministry and the church in 2023, and is not currently employed.

David Boulton: Humanist and Quaker, journalist, author and broadcaster. Former editor of SoF Magazine, co-founder of the Nontheist Friends Network. Former head of news, current affairs, arts and religion at Granada TV and editor of World in Action. Former member of the Broadcasting Standards Commission. Books include *Jazz in Britain* (1958), *The Trouble with God* (2005) and *Who on Earth was Jesus?* 2008. Currently writing a history of Dentdale in the Yorkshire Dales where he lives in quiet recollection of all those 'former' lives and unfulfilled dreams.

Bobbie Stephens Wright, officially Roberta but known as Bobbie all her life, worked for 20 years with the Post Office (later British Telecom) where she was involved with accounting. Due to ongoing problems with chronic arthritis she was advised by her consultant to seek early retirement on medical grounds. This opened up the opportunity to undertake a degree course and her first choice was religion – after years of confusion, as her father was an atheist and her mother a spiritualist. She also took politics as a subsidiary subject and realised that her real interest was philosophy. She left with a Masters degree in philosophy. She also trained as a public speaker through LAMDA up to gold medal level, and gained a teaching qualification. In religious terms she seemed to fit nowhere until after a chance meeting at Durham university, with a chaplain from Leicester university, she was introduced to the Sea of Faith in 1997. On hearing Don for the first time she knew that she had found her community and a place to belong. With her husband she enjoys football and they are season ticket holders at Newcastle United.

THIS IS NOT A HUMANISING POEM

Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan

Some poems force you to write them
the way sirens force their way through window panes in the night
and you can't shut out the news even when you try

write a humanising poem
my pen and paper goad me
show them how wrong their preconceptions are

be relatable

Write something upbeat for a change crack a smile
tell them how you also cry at the end of Toy Story 3
and you're just as capable of bantering about the weather in the post office queue
like everyone you have no idea how to make the perfect amount of pasta, still

feed them stories of stoic humour
make a reference to childhood
tell an anecdote about being frugal
mention the X factor

be domestic
successful
add layers

tell them you know brown boys who cry
about the sides of Asads, Amirs and Hassans they don't know
the complex inner worlds of Sumaiyyahs and Ayeshas
tell them comedies as well as tragedies
how full of life we are
how full of love

but no

I put my pen down
I will not let that poem force me to write it
because it is not the poem I want to write
it is the poem I have been reduced to

reduced to proving my life is human because it is relatable
valuable because it is recognisable
but good GCSEs family and childhood memories are not the only
things that count as a life
living is

So this will not be a 'Muslims are like us' poem
I refuse to be respectable.

Instead
love us when we're lazy
love us when we're poor
love us in our back-to-backs council estates depressed unwashed and weeping
love us high as kites unemployed joy-riding, time-wasting, failing at school
love us filthy without the right colour passports without the right sounding English
love us silent unapologizing shopping in Poundland
skiving off school homeless unsure, sometimes violent
Love us when we aren't athletes when we don't bake cakes
when we don't offer our homes or free taxi rides after the event
when we're wretched suicidal naked and contributing nothing

love us then

Because if you need me to prove my humanity
I'm not the one that's not human

my mother texts me too after BBC news alerts
'are you safe? Let me know you're home okay?'
and she means safe from the incident yes
but also safe from the after-affects

so sometimes I wonder
which days of the week might I count as liberal?
and which moments of forehead to the ground am I conservative?

I wonder
when you buy bombs is there a clear difference between the deadly ones that kill
and the heroic ones that scatter democracy?

Isn't it really 'guilty until proven innocent'
How can we kill in the name of saving lives?
How can we illegally detain in the name of maintaining the law?

I can't write it.

I put my pen away

I can't
I won't write it

Is this radical?
Am I radical?

Because there is nowhere else left to exist now.