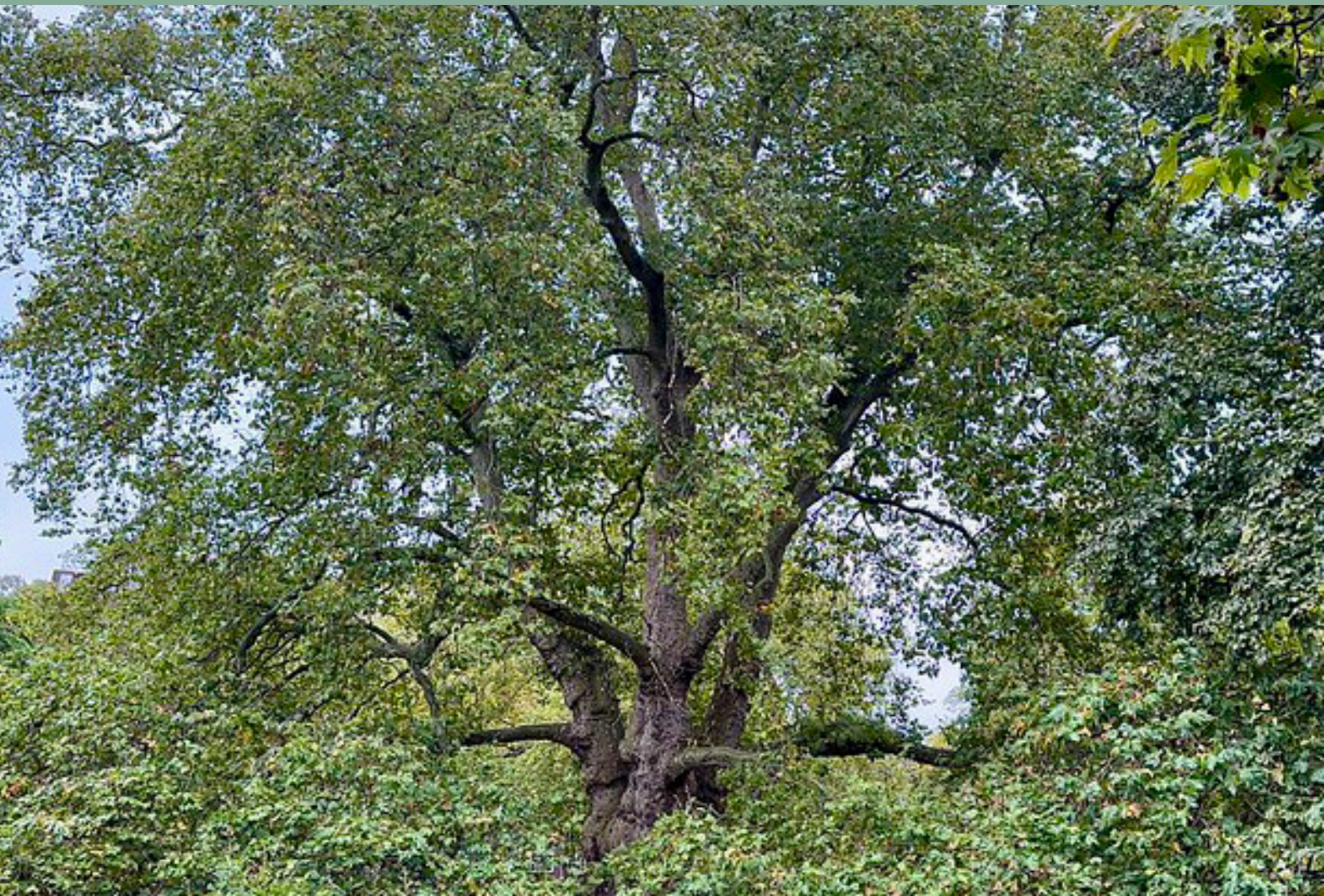


sfia

No.157 September 2025

Education for this Life



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

Editor: David Chapman editor@sofn.uk

Poetry editor: James Priestman poetry@sofn.uk

Website: <https://sofn.uk/>

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 Please submit unpublished articles that have not been submitted elsewhere, or if previously published, please state where and when.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

SUBSCRIBE TO SOFIA

Subscription to Sofia costs £24 per year (4 issues). Single copies £6 post free. See below for how to pay.

JOIN SOF NETWORK

Sofia comes free to SOF Network members, who can also access full contents of all back issues online. Membership rates: Sponsor: £60; single member: £36; single member in receipt of income-related benefit: £26.

HOW TO PAY

Please pay by bank transfer if possible (Sort code 30-94-74; account 15599260). Or send a cheque made out to 'Sea of Faith' to Stephen Williams, 157 Russell Road, Moseley, Birmingham B13 8RR. treasurer@sofn.uk
Please also email or post your name and full postal address to SOF Secretary: Edward Nickell, Flat 51 Park Central, Bow Quarter, London E3 2US. secretary@sofn.uk Also contact him if you change your address or with other admin queries.

OVERSEAS

Overseas readers can subscribe to Sofia online at: <https://sofn.uk/members/>.
US readers may pay membership or magazine subscriptions by check in dollars, marked 'for Sofia', payable to: John J. Klopacz, 50 Samoset Street, San Francisco, CA 94110-5346. Tel. 415-647-3258. jklopacz@well.com (ask him for prices).

ADVERTISING

To advertise in Sofia contact the editor. Rates are: £132 full page. £72 half page. £42 quarter page.

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

Editorial

- 3 Education for this Life
- 3 In Conversation. Marianne Mead

Education for this Life

- 4 Big Ideas for Religion and Science in Education. Denise Cush, Dave Francis, Philippa Hulme and Michael J. Reiss
- 8 Fostering curiosity. Louisa Smith
- 11 Identities, AI, Religion and Hope. Beth Singler
- 14 From Cave Paintings to Chatbots. Rupert Wegerif

Resisting

- 16 Bonhoeffer: His theology. Martin Spence
- 18 What might Amos say to us now? James Priestman
- 19 Mark: A Gospel of Resistance (Part 3). David Lambourn

Poetry

- 21 Poetic Responses. James Priestman
- 28 'City Walls' and 'Magenta'. Lynda Gilbert

Books

- 22 *What in Me is Dark, The Revolutionary Life of Paradise Lost*. Reviewed by David Rhodes

Regulars

- 23 Worldviews Navigator. "What's Your Worldview" asks Dave Francis
- 24 Religion in my Life. Lynda Gilbert

Inside the Network

- 25 Meet the Members
- 26 Letters to the Editor

Copy deadline for Sofia 158, December 2025
1st November 2025

The **cover image** is the 'Brunswick Plane', a London Plane thought to be over 200 years old, growing in the Brunswick Square Gardens in front of the Coram Conference Centre, which hosted the 2025 Sea of Faith Conference

Picture © Matt Brown flickr.com CC BY 2.0

Editorial: Education for This Life

The theme of this year's Sea of Faith annual conference, *Education for this Life*, celebrated the growing educational work of the SOF network through the Solarity online materials for Religion and Philosophy Clubs and through being a key partner of the Big Ideas for Religious Education project. For this issue of Sofia the conference speakers have provided us with a fantastic set of associated papers. Denise Cush, Dave Francis, Philippa Hulme and Micheal Reiss get us started, showing how the Big Ideas approach to curriculum planning works to support progressive learning in Science and Religion & Worldviews education. As an example, they describe how the centenary of the Scopes Monkey Trial in 2025 was used to motivate discussion of Big Ideas in both science and religion. Louisa Smith then explores *curiosity*: what it is, what it looks like and why it is so important, particularly in the current climate and preparing our children for life in the 21st century.

The next two papers address AI (artificial intelligence) in religion, worldviews and education. Beth Singler explores Identities, AI, Religion and Hope, and introduces us to such as 'Father Justin' the Catholic chatbot (a creation of Large Language Model AI) who recommended baptising babies in Gatorade before he was 'defrocked'. Rupert Wegerif asks whether AI can help us to restore the power of meaning in education, through a return to a dialogic pedagogy. In Beth's binary of AI 'Boomers' and 'Doomers', we heard more of the boom (optimism) from Rupert and some of the doom (pessimism) from Beth.

Continuing the theme for the year of *Resisting*, Martin Spence gives us his second paper on Dietrich Bonhoeffer

in which he explores Bonhoeffer's theology. James Priestman asks what we can learn from the stories of Amos for today, and David Lambourn gives us the third part of his exploration of Mark as Gospel of Resistance - and warns us that in contrast to Mark, Matthew might have misunderstood his sources and led the historic church in entirely the wrong direction.

For the Religion in my Life interview, we have another campaigner known to me personally: Lynda Gilbert, a member of the Milton Keynes Reform Synagogue. I hope by now you will be starting to share my admiration for the people of the new city of Milton Keynes!

Dave reports on a survey of members in his Worldviews Navigator, and we meet some of you in our regular Meet the Members feature. In both the letters and James's poetic responses, there are members questioning the anger that has appeared in Sofia since I became editor. This has given me pause for thought and it would be good to hear what you think. For example, do anger and resistance go together? Or maybe anger is itself to be resisted.

The December issue will continue the theme of resisting - and may be angry. Whether you are OK with that and want to contribute to it, or disagree and want to offer something different, please send your contributions to:

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

Copy deadline for Sofia 158, December 2025

1st November 2025

In Conversation

It seems a long time ago now, but when Covid-19 struck and no face-to-face meetings or conferences could be organised, it was suggested that Zoom meetings could take place to enable members - and non-members - to meet virtually about once a month around a topic. *In Conversation* was born (<https://sofn.uk/in-conversation/>) in April 2023. It has been successful in enabling people to meet regularly on Zoom and exchange points of view on a variety of topics ranging from 'Religion under the rails - HS2 in Buckinghamshire', 'Gospel of St Mark', 'Future of the SoFN', 'Visiting the occupied West Bank', 'Ethical approach to pressure tactics', 'Assisting dying', 'Viable approach to punishment', among others.

The model we have adopted for these sessions is the introduction of the topic for about 25-30 minutes, followed by about an hour of 'conversation'.

All SoFN members and non-members are welcome to attend. If you know someone who might be interested in these sessions, just send Marianne their name and email address so that they can be invited to future sessions.

The series will continue with various topics to be finalised at the end of 2025 and the whole of 2026. It might be useful to book the dates in your diary:

2025: 17th September, 15th October, 19th November and 17th December

2026: 21st January, 18th February, 18th March, 15th April, 20th May, 17th June, 15th July, 16th September, 21st October, 18th November and 16th December.

Zoom link for 2025:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/89675043969>

Zoom link for 2026:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/85779579009>

If you have a topic that is potentially of interest (we all do ...), don't keep it to yourself, but suggest it for a forthcoming session. It is quite rewarding to see it picked up by the participants as the conversation develops.

With thanks to all who have taken part in any way in *In Conversation* sessions since its onset and encouragement to all who have a topic hibernating somewhere in the corner of their mind to retrieve it and share it with all of us.

Marianne Mead

mmead@btinternet.com

Big Ideas for Religion and Science in Education: The Scopes Monkey Trial 100 years on

Since its inception, in 1989, the *Sea of Faith Network* has been proactive in launching several educational projects and programmes. Notably, in 2013, *Solarity*¹ provided online resources and detailed plans for religion and philosophy clubs. Eighty-two complete sessions are included, providing a good model for those who wish to set up such a club, often taking children deeper than the regular curriculum.

SOF then linked with the 'Big Ideas for Religious Education' project. Led by former HMI, Barbara Wintersgill, and involving RE specialists from across England as well as three of the authors of this piece, the project has evolved into a more-or-less complete programme for an education in religion and worldviews for 4-18 year-olds. We believe it makes a considerable contribution to the subject of RE in schools. It has already been influential in several Local Authority Agreed Syllabuses and the national online Oak Academy.

Here, we examine one of the units developed for the Big ideas for RE website². It was suggested by Mark Chater, who noticed that 2025 was 100 years after a teacher, John Scopes, had been put on trial for teaching about evolution, thereby contravening the Butler Act of Tennessee that made it "unlawful for any teacher ... to teach any theory that denies the Story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible, and to teach instead that man has descended from a lower order of animals".

The law was repealed 60 years later, but in some states of the USA today there remain permissions and protections for biblical creationist ideas to be taught in the state-funded schools. In the original case, Scopes volunteered to provide a test case for the law. The local civic leaders wanted more publicity for their town. They

**Denise Cush, Dave Francis,
Philippa Hulme & Michael J. Reiss**

encouraged two famous lawyers to fight out the case; William J Bryan, a former presidential candidate, who wanted to defend the literal biblical account of the world's creation, and Clarence Darrow, who thought it time to challenge the idea that believing in the Bible meant not believing in the evolution of human beings as presented in Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*.

American media sensed a story: science versus religion! It became the very first trial to be broadcast live on the radio. Several plays and films of the trial have since been made, notably the excellent 'Inherit the Wind' starring Spencer Tracy.

At the end of the trial, which put



John T. Scopes.

literal interpretations of the biblical creation story on the stand, Scopes was found guilty. The judge fined him the maximum \$100 (later overturned on a technicality) and the journalists lampooned the locals as having been left behind by the 20th century. Perhaps this was where today's so-called culture wars began; people were presented with a choice: creation as described in the Bible, or Darwin's the-

ory of evolution by natural selection.

Our unit introduces students aged 11-14 to the main issues so that they can understand the original debate and be brought up to date with both scientific findings and developments in thinking about the interpretation of religious texts. And this is where Big Ideas comes in.

Big Ideas

Anyone putting together a curriculum has to have some way of starting. They might simply amend a previous curriculum or begin afresh but they need to have some idea, whether implicit or explicit, of why certain things should be in the curriculum while others need not be. Back in 2005, two USA academics, Jay McTighe and Grant Wiggins, argued that there was a lot to be said for using the concept of 'big ideas' to help determine curriculum content³. A big idea is a concept that is core to a subject – something one wants students really to have understood, not merely to have covered. McTighe and Wiggins give the example of the physics concept: 'Energy cannot be created or destroyed, although in many processes energy is transferred to the environment as heat' (McTighe & Wiggins, 2005, p.10).

Big ideas apply to any subject but one of the first people to run with the notion was the indefatigable science educator Wynne Harlen. Using the money she had won when awarded an international prize, Harlen gathered together an international group of scientists and science educators, and the group ended up producing a report (Harlen, 2010)⁴ which advocated that the 5-16 school science curriculum be structured around 14 big ideas. Ten of these were ideas of science, for example that 'The composition of the Earth and its atmosphere and the processes occurring within them shape the Earth's surface and its climate',

1 <http://www.solarity.org.uk/>

2 <https://bigideasforre.org/exemplar-units-of-learning/> > Ages 11-14 > The Big Picture Exemplar 2.

3 Wiggins, G. P., & McTighe, J. (2005). *Understanding by design*, 2nd edn., Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

4 Harlen, W. (ed) (2010) *Principles and Big Ideas of Science Education*, Duns. <https://www.ase.org.uk/bigideas>

and four were ideas about science, for example that ‘Applications of science often have ethical, social, economic and political implications’.

The Big Ideas movement has been a powerful one in science education, with a number of countries using these Big Ideas (or modified versions of them) to restructure their school science curricula. The movement also spread to other subjects, of which Religious Education was one of the first. Back in 2016, the redoubtable Barbara Wintersgill got in touch with three of us, asking us to work with her and others on what became Wintersgill et al. (2017)⁵.

The one of us who was a member of both the science education and the RE Big Ideas groups found the similarities and differences between them to be fascinating. In fact, there were far more similarities than differences. In both cases, a group of people with many years’ experience of their subject had been assembled, individuals who were passionate about their subject and concerned that many school students did not agree, choosing instead to stop studying the subject as soon as they could. In both cases, too, there was extensive discussion, indeed, considerable argument, as to what should be the purpose of teaching the subject. There seemed to be just two differences: the science educators were more secure about the position of their subject in the school curriculum, and they agreed more among themselves than did the RE experts as to what should be taught in their subject.

In terms of the Big Ideas in Science Education report, the ones that are most relevant to the Scopes trial are one of the ideas of science – ‘The diversity of organisms, living and extinct, is the result of evolution’ – and one of the ideas about science – ‘Scientific explanations, theories and models are those that best fit the facts known at a particular time’. Within the science education community, the one about evolution is uncontroversial. However, the one about scientific explanations, theories and models is

a bit more controversial. Despite the best efforts of historians and philosophers of science, few science undergraduates are taught much about the history and philosophy of science, and while the first version of the National Curriculum in England had a great deal about scientific explanations, theories and models and how and why they change over time, thanks largely to the remarkable Joan Solomon, this has been diluted in successive versions of the National Curriculum for science.

One of the satisfying features of our work on the centenary of the Scopes Trial has been how we have drawn on both the Big Ideas of Science Education report and on the Big Ideas for Religious Education report.

Collaborative planning in RE & Science

To match the selected Big Ideas in Science, Denise and Dave used two of the age-related statements for Big Idea 6 in the RE project, namely that:

- a) Religions/worldviews provide ‘grand narratives’ of how and why the world is as it is: the big questions about the universe and humanity, and
- b) Authoritative texts / traditions are interpreted in different ways.

The six Big Ideas in RE themselves were put together after much debate and discussion by a team of teachers, advisers and other RE professionals from across the country. They are: 1. Continuity, Change and Diversity; 2. Words and Beyond; 3. A Good Life; 4. Making Sense of Life’s Experiences; 5. Influence and Power; 6. The Big Picture.

These are the things that we want pupils to ‘get’ about religion and worldviews through their RE studies. We have constructed age-related objectives to go with them.

Having been put in touch with Marianne Cutler and Philippa Hulme at the Association for Science Education, we put together a complete scheme for schools that, ideally, could be taught cooperatively by the RE and Science teachers. There’s flexibility

though, so that each part of the unit can be taught separately.

It begins with an activity for students, who take on roles based on the original trial – thanks to Ruth Marx for supplying the initial sets of role play cards. The lessons then go on to explore the science of understanding evolution today.

Exploring the science of evolution

The science section begins with an arresting image of a bed bug, its bites, and a question: Why, in the 1950s and 1960s, did bed bug shells become thicker in response to the use of insecticide sprays? Was it because the shells of individual bugs thickened in response to frequent spraying? Or was it the result of natural variation in shell thickness, with thicker-shelled individuals being more likely to survive to reproduce? In the lesson, students use their prior learning to weigh up the two options. It is the second explanation, of course, that correctly exemplifies Darwinian evolution.

Having contemplated two scientific explanations for bed bug evolution, students move on to comparing a theological explanation with a scientific explanation. This time, the context is eyes. In 1802, English theologian William Paley argued that observations of complex functionality in nature imply the action of a supernatural designer. For example, just as a watch does not come about by chance, but is the work of a skilled watchmaker, so the existence of nature is not accidental, but the result of the work of an intelligent designer. Fifty years later, Darwin considered the evolution of the eye too. At first glance, he writes in *On the Origin of Species*, the evolution of the eye by natural selection seems absurd. However, he continues, there are many types of eyes. Complex eyes could have evolved from simple ones by natural selection, if each change was useful. The key, says Darwin, is to find intermediate eyes to demonstrate a path from simple to complex.

The lesson continues by setting out evidence for a series of steps through which complex eyes may have evolved, from the evolution of

5 Wintersgill, B. (ed) (2017) *Big Ideas for Religious Education*, University of Exeter. <https://bigideasforre.org/Big-Ideas-Publications/>

light-sensitive cells in Euglena, to pigment pits in arrowworm plankton, to eyes with lenses that allow animals to see clearly and judge distances. For each step, students engage with the content by suggesting benefits to the organism of the new structure.

As well as reinforcing prior learning of an idea of science – evolution – the lesson segment on eyes supports learning of ideas about science. For example, what is the evidence for a scientific explanation? In the case of the evolution of eyes, much evidence comes from observations of organisms alive today whose eyes (or eye precursors) demonstrate different steps in eye evolution.

It is not easy to create practical classroom activities on evolution. However, this lesson delivers, with an activity on vegetables. Did you know that six vegetables – cauliflower, cabbage, broccoli, sprouts, kohlrabi and kale – all originated from one plant species, the wild mustard? Kale is the result of breeding – over many generations – from individual wild mustard plants with bigger leaves. And cauliflower is the result of selective breeding from wild mustard specimens with bigger flower buds. How is this evidence for evolution? If artificial selection can lead to changes to organisms over generations, then – the argument goes – it is reasonable to assume that changes resulting from natural selection are also possible.

The second of the science lessons is an opportunity for students to scrutinise recent research on evolution. Again, the lesson supports learning of ideas about science. For example, as the technology to collect evidence develops, so scientists can collect evidence that – even a few years earlier – might not have been possible. And by highlighting some of the scientists who did the research, students can realise that science is not a completed body of knowledge. Rather, it is a human endeavour – perhaps one to which they might contribute one day. The teacher might point out that every scientist has their own motivations

and agendas, with consequent potential for messiness and disagreement.

Three pieces of modern research are highlighted; students learn about these cooperatively in groups, through the ‘jigsaw’ technique:

Investigation 1 – reported in 2022

Scientists use digital electronic scales to demonstrate that Atlantic silverside fish evolved to be heavier or lighter depending on selective harvesting.

Investigation 2 – reported in 2022

Scientists use X-ray powder diffraction to analyse fish teeth piled up by ancient fires, providing evidence that humans cooked fish 780,000 years ago. Improved nutrition may have contributed to the evolution of the human brain.

Investigation 3 – reported in 2024

Scientists use synchrotron microtomography to analyse coprolites (fossilised poo) and other remains from dinosaurs in what is now central Europe. They use the evidence to infer food webs in ancient times, thus revealing a likely timeline of five steps in dinosaur evolution.

Religious Education and the Scopes trial

Religious Education has changed massively in the past 100 years, especially in Great Britain and Scandinavia. In the USA, the first amendment to the Constitution has been largely interpreted as ruling out any RE at all, so that some teachers told us in 2004 that they were afraid to even mention Jesus. In England in 1925, RE in fully state-funded schools consisted of ‘non-denominational’ Christian RE based on the Bible. Church schools were allowed to continue with denominational RE. Some Local Education Authorities began to create Agreed Syllabuses for RE. The 1944 Education Act offered full funding for those

church schools that provided Agreed Syllabus RE, but those that wished to continue with denominational RE had to provide a proportion of the funding – an option taken up particularly by Catholic schools. 1971 marked the revolutionary turn to non-confessional multifaith RE, which was the norm by the time the 1988 Education Act established a National Curriculum that left RE to local authorities and religious communities. The 2018 Commission on RE⁶ began the current movement towards a ‘Religion and Worldviews’ approach of which the Big Ideas project is a part.

The RE part of our unit on the Scopes trial reflects these changes. Big Idea 6, ‘The Big Picture’, explores the idea that worldviews, whether religious or not, often present a ‘grand narrative’ that attempts to explain ‘life, the universe and everything’ and to give meaning to our lives. We emphasise the point that, in traditions based on a sacred text, diversity of belief and practice often springs from the variety of interpretations given to the relevant texts.

Thus, an important part of our unit explores genres of literature and how this affects interpretation. A poem is not the same as a scientific report, yet both can express truths of different kinds. It is important to explore the difference between believing in creation and being a ‘creationist’ to avoid a simple binary of ‘evolution versus



religion’. The unit also stresses the sheer diversity of beliefs about creation, drawing upon a range of stories from global traditions, as well as ex-

⁶ Commission on Religious Education (CoRE) (2018). Final Report. Religion and Worldviews: The Way Forward. A National Plan for RE. REC. www.religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/1-Final-Report-of-the-Commission-on-RE.pdf

ploring the different types of ‘creationist’ views, which are not all ‘literal’ readings of Genesis.

It is also important for students to discover that there are religions that have no need of divine creation, such as Jainism or Buddhism, or where it is not a once-and-for-all event, or is in a sense illusory, such as in various strands of Hindu tradition.

For atheists, agnostics and the majority of theists who accept the scientific evidence for evolution it is important to understand that a ‘fundamentalist’ approach to the text of the Bible is not the only motivation behind rejection of evolution. Both in 1925 and today, there are concerns that accepting evolution means replacing Christian values of love and compassion with a selfish and ruthless interpretation of the ‘survival of the fittest’. The Nazi regime’s goal of exterminating those categories of people deemed ‘inferior’, including people with disabilities, shows that this was a genuine danger, and such attitudes have not altogether disappeared today.

7 Pett, S. (2024). *Developing a Religion and Worldviews approach in Religious Education in England: A Handbook for curriculum writers* RE Council of England and Wales. <https://religioueducationcouncil.org.uk/rwapproach/>

8 Religious Education Council of England and Wales (2023). *National Content Standard for Religious Education*. <https://religioueducationcouncil.org.uk/rec/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/National-Content-Standard-for-Religious-Education-for-England.pdf>

Michael Reiss, as well as being an Anglican priest, is professor of science education at the Institute of Education, University College London, where he is assistant director. As Chair of the Association for Science Education and proponent of the use of Big Ideas in Science education, he has supported the development of Big Ideas for RE, acting as a key adviser from the start of the project, and in developing a specific scheme of learning based on the ‘Scopes Monkey Trial’ of 1925.

Philippa Hulme was intimately involved with the development of the science components of our collaborative project commemorating the Scopes Monkey Trial, and was a key presenter of the material at the Association for Science Education’s national conference earlier this year. She has published a wide variety of school science resources, and created innovative activities bringing contemporary science into the classroom for the ASE, the European Union, Practical Action, Sheffield Hallam University, the British Council and Google Expeditions. As well as writing, Philippa now consults internationally on textbook development, working (mainly remotely) alongside Ministry of Education staff in Uzbekistan, The Gambia and – currently – Tonga.

The ‘worldviews’ approach⁷ is based on the understanding that everyone has a ‘worldview’ in the sense of a general approach to life involving certain assumptions, emotions and behaviour, whether religious or not, and whether consciously articulated or not. It is important to realise that students do not arrive in our classrooms without these, and that this will affect their learning in all subjects including science and RE. Teachers can help students reflect on their own worldviews, the influences on them and the provenance of knowledge.

The Scopes trial is still very relevant today for many reasons. The specific issues it raises are still reverberating; about science and religion, the aims and content of education, sources of knowledge, and types of truth. More generally, it can be seen as the first example of a media-fuelled ‘culture war’, where people are encouraged to take up binary positions and abuse the opposition rather than seeking solutions together. Debates about what should be prioritised in



the school curriculum are continuing, with some issues in the USA replaying Scopes. Meanwhile, Big Ideas provide a useful tool for prioritising curriculum content, aims and pedagogy. In English Religious Education, the Big Ideas project is part of, and a major influence on, a larger ‘Religion and Worldviews’ approach, supporting the adoption of a National Content Standard⁸, including a National Statement of Entitlement, to underpin a fairer and more inclusive RE curriculum for all children, whether religious, non-religious or non-binary in relation to religion.

Denise Cush is Professor Emerita of Religion and Education, Bath Spa University. Her interests include Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and alternative spiritualities such as Paganism, as well as RE. She taught Religious Studies at school and university levels, and RE in both primary and secondary teacher education. In 2016 she was awarded an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Uppsala, Sweden. She was a member of the REC Commission on RE, whose 2018 report has been the foundation of current developments for a national plan for the subject. She is a member of the core team producing materials for the Big Ideas for RE website.

Dave Francis is an adviser for religious education and spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, currently working with Dr Barbara Wintersgill and Prof Denise Cush on the Big Ideas for RE project. He was a teacher of RE for 14 years, including ten as Head of a Department of Religion, Philosophy and Social Education, and has since held advisory posts in several local authorities and, notably, as Lead Consultant for REonline. Dave is member of the Steering Group of the Sea of Faith Network and writes the *Worldviews Navigator* column of Sofia.

Fostering curiosity: The Value of RE

In recent years, the educational landscape has seen a significant shift towards academic rigour. This includes the implementation of structured activities, such as 'do now' tasks that aim to maximize learning time and establish a clear framework at the beginning of lessons. Techniques such as retrieval practices, which help students access prior knowledge, and formative assessments to check for understanding, have become commonplace. While these strategies are dynamic and can enhance learning, there is pressing concern that they may inadvertently stifle a crucial component of education: the love of learning.

Many educators, including myself, have observed a growing trend where students express resentment towards learning and school. This sentiment often reflects a broader societal issue where the appreciation for education is waning. Education should be viewed as a right and a privilege, yet many students seem disconnected from this perspective. This disconnection can lead to frustration among educators who strive to instill a passion for knowledge in their students.

In addressing this concern, I propose that curiosity is a vital element in rekindling a love for learning. Curiosity can serve as a catalyst that inspires students to engage with educational material more meaningfully. Religious Education offers a unique opportunity to cultivate this curiosity within the classroom. By fostering an environment where curiosity is valued, we can encourage students to appreciate education's intrinsic value and develop lifelong love of learning.

Historically, great thinkers like Aristotle emphasized the importance of nurturing both the mind and the heart in education. Aristotle famously stated, "Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all." Similarly, John Burroughs pointed out that "Knowledge without love does not stick; but if love comes first, knowledge is pretty sure to follow." Recent studies in neuroscience support these ideas, revealing that curios-

Louisa Jane Smith

ity releases dopamine, which enhances memory retention and cognitive function.

Curiosity is a fundamental aspect of the human experience, driving exploration and discovery. It is this intrinsic desire to know that has propelled humanity to explore the cosmos, innovate in technology, and find cures for diseases. Curiosity is not merely an academic tool; it is a survival instinct that has shaped human history.

Understanding Different Types of Curiosity

Most curiosity is teleological, meaning it is driven by a purpose or end goal. This purpose can be intrinsic, such as a personal interest in a subject, or extrinsic, where the value lies in external factors like grades or future career opportunities. In the context of RE, the challenge is that the subject often lacks perceived intrinsic value for many teenagers. A good grade in RE may not serve as a sufficient motivator for students who do not see the subject's relevance to their lives.

It's easy to assume that young people today lack curiosity, especially when faced with disengagement in the classroom, poor exam performance, and persistent absenteeism. However, research suggests that children possess greater neuroplasticity than adults, making them more receptive to new ideas and information. In fact, today's youth may be more curious than ever, absorbing vast amounts of information from the internet. The challenge lies in guiding them through this information overload, helping them critically assess what they encounter and encouraging them to ask deeper questions about their findings.

Curiosity is about more than just discovering facts; it involves questioning the validity of information and reflecting on its implications. Educators must recognize the importance of RE in fostering this kind of curiosity. Our role is not simply to teach students what to think, but how to think critically and independently.

Curiosity in Adolescents

The teenage brain is naturally inclined to challenge norms, authority, and societal expectations. This rebellious spirit aligns well with the nature of curiosity, which often questions established beliefs and encourages students to think outside the box. RE can empower students to explore their identities and values, prompting them to consider profound questions: Who am I? What do I value? How should I live my life? In a world where young people are constantly bombarded by external influences, RE provides a space for introspection and self-discovery.

Additionally, RE cultivates curiosity about others, encouraging students to ask questions about the motivations and beliefs of different individuals and communities. This can lead to a greater understanding of diversity and



Curiosity. Brian Donovan
flickr.com © CC BY-SA 2.0

a reduction in prejudice. By fostering an environment of curiosity, RE can help students appreciate the complexity of human experience and promote empathy and respect for differing viewpoints.

Teaching RE effectively can make students more curious about the world around them, creating new neural pathways in their brains. This exploration can also help students focus on issues larger than themselves, which is especially important in a society grappling with mental health challenges. Engaging with topics outside their immediate experience can provide students with perspective and help them cope with their own problems. Research has shown that engaging with meaningful content can even have long-term benefits, such as

reduced risk of Alzheimer's disease¹.

However, it is crucial to approach sensitive topics, such as life after death, with care and trauma-informed practices. Curiosity can make students feel vulnerable, and educators must ensure that discussions are handled with sensitivity and respect.

The Transferable Skills Developed Through Curiosity

Beyond curiosity, many skills taught in RE are transferable to other areas of life. For instance, students learn to identify flaws in arguments, which enhances their critical thinking abilities, and, whether students pursue careers in science, journalism, law, or entrepreneurship, the ability to ask questions, challenge assumptions, and critically evaluate evidence is invaluable. As students become more competent in their understanding of RE, they are likely to find the subject more relevant and engaging. This newfound competence can also translate to improved performance in other subjects and in life overall.

In today's world, where social media and political discourse are filled with misinformation and fallacies, the ability to critically assess arguments is essential. Students equipped with a solid understanding of logical reasoning are better prepared to navigate the complexities of modern society. For example, they learn to recognize techniques like *ad hominem* attacks, straw man arguments, and false dilemmas, allowing them to engage in discussions with a more informed perspective.

Furthermore, RE encourages students to navigate moral dilemmas and engage in philosophical debates. Research by Wendy L. Ostroff in *Cultivating Curiosity*² demonstrates that students who are genuinely curious tend to show higher levels of enthusiasm and engagement in their learning. When students are given the opportunity to explore controversial topics and express their opinions, they not only deepen their understanding but also develop a sense of empowerment in their decision-making processes.

Substantive knowledge—the actual content taught in RE—naturally lends itself to fostering curiosity. RE addresses profound questions about existence, purpose, and morality. Topics such as the meaning of life, where we go after death, and the nature of good and evil capture students' imaginations and stimulate their curiosity. However, it is essential to recognize that simply presenting this knowledge does not guarantee that students will engage with it. Teachers must actively foster curiosity by creating a learning environment that invites exploration.

One theory, known as deprivation curiosity, suggests that curiosity arises when gaps in knowledge are highlighted. Similar to the experience of solving a puzzle, students may feel compelled to seek answers when they encounter something they do not understand. However, we must be cautious not to create anxiety in the classroom; instead, we should focus on exposing students to diverse beliefs and practices that broaden their horizons.

Fostering curiosity about diversity can have numerous benefits, including improving cultural capital and leveling the playing field for all students. Not every student has the opportunity to travel or experience different cultures firsthand. By introducing them to world religions and diverse perspectives, we can cultivate open-mindedness and appreciation for differences, ultimately breaking down misconceptions and prejudices.

Creating a Curious Classroom Environment

Curiosity thrives in a classroom where students are actively engaged. When students are passive or bored, their curiosity diminishes. Moreover, curiosity requires challenges that stimulate critical thinking. The concept of "desirable difficulty" suggests that students must be presented with tasks that are challenging yet achievable. If a task is too easy, they may disengage; if it is too difficult, they may feel overwhelmed.

To foster curiosity, educators

should provide scaffolding to support students in reaching beyond their comfort zones. This can include dual coding, modeling, step-by-step instructions, and creating a safe space for mistakes. It is crucial to make the subject relevant to students' lives, incorporating personal reflections, current events, and transferable skills.

One effective way to generate curiosity is by making connections between different subjects and concepts. For instance, when discussing the Northern Lights, educators can prompt students to consider what ancient civilizations might have believed about the phenomenon. Linking geography and religion in this way encourages students to think critically about how different disciplines intersect.

Assessing prior knowledge, or schemas, is also vital in cultivating curiosity. When students can connect new information to what they already know, they become more confident and curious learners. Helping students recognize patterns and relationships will enable them to develop a more profound understanding of the world around them.

Deci and Ryan's research on cognitive evaluation theory emphasizes that activities fulfilling basic psychological needs, such as competence, lead to intrinsic motivation. If tasks are too easy, students may not feel competent, while verbal praise can enhance their sense of efficacy. Educators must design lessons that present appropriate challenges while providing the support necessary for students to succeed.

Evidence of curiosity in the classroom is often reflected in the quality of questions posed by students. Teachers should create space for students to formulate and ask questions, emphasizing the importance of crafting good inquiries. Questions that start with "why" often lead to deeper exploration than those that simply seek factual answers. Encouraging students to write multiple questions and select their best ones can lead to richer discussions.

1 Prashanthi Vemuri *et al.* 'Association of lifetime intellectual enrichment with cognitive decline in the older population.' *JAMA neurology* vol. 71,8 (2014): 1017-24. doi:10.1001/jamaneurol.2014.963

2 Wendy Ostroff (2016). *Cultivating Curiosity in K-12 Classrooms*. ASCD.

Effective questioning techniques are essential in fostering curiosity. Teachers can plan deliberate questions that provoke thought and discussion. Using the 'what if' method can also inspire imaginative thinking and exploration of alternative perspectives. Additionally, educators should consider not accepting a student's first answer, prompting them to dig deeper and refine their thoughts.

Addressing students' self-consciousness is critical to fostering curiosity. Many students are hesitant to ask questions for fear of ridicule or making mistakes. Utilizing strategies like show-me boards allows students to express their ideas in a low-pressure environment. Pair discussions can also create a sense of safety, allowing students to share their thoughts without the fear of judgment.

Analogies can bridge the gap between students' experiences and abstract concepts in RE. When discuss-

Blowing out birthday candles can serve as an analogy for religious ceremonies

ing rituals, educators can compare unfamiliar practices to relatable experiences, helping students understand their significance. For example, the ritual of blowing out birthday candles can serve as an analogy for understanding the meaning behind different religious ceremonies.

Stories are powerful tools for fostering curiosity, as they often convey deep meanings and emotional connections. The parables of Jesus, for example, can illustrate complex moral teachings in a relatable manner. Educators must ensure that students understand the context of these stories, enriching their comprehension and appreciation.

Interactive learning experiences, such as the "Choose Your Own Adventure" model, can also enhance curiosity in the classroom. By allowing students to explore different paths based on their interests, educators empower them to take ownership of their learning and engage with content more deeply.

Children have heightened neu-

ro-sensitivity, making sensory and experiential learning particularly effective. Incorporating artifacts, music, or even smells into lessons can evoke curiosity and enhance memory retention. For instance, when studying cosmology, presenting inspiring facts about the universe can captivate students' attention and spark curiosity about the world beyond our planet.

In addition to engaging content, using well-chosen videos can foster curiosity. Visual stimuli that present awe-inspiring concepts can capture students' imaginations and encourage them to ask questions. Incorporating engaging media into lessons can transform the learning experience and make abstract ideas come to life.

While curiosity is essential for engagement, it is equally important to translate that curiosity into high-quality writing. Effective reading materials, including scholarly articles and well-structured examples, expose students to good writing practices and vocabulary. Educators can model the writing process by collaborating with students to create structured pieces of work, helping them develop their writing skills.

Providing clear writing structures, such as sentence starters and organized frameworks, can also support students in crafting coherent and compelling essays. As students gain confidence in their writing abilities, they become more inclined to express their ideas and reflections.

It is important to recognize what does not foster curiosity in the classroom. Educators should avoid assuming that subject material alone will inspire curiosity; finding the right hook is essential. Additionally, teachers must be mindful of the diverse backgrounds and experiences of their students. Factors such as financial insecurity or emotional distress can hinder curiosity, as students may prioritize immediate concerns over exploration.

Intellectual arrogance can also stifle curiosity. Teachers should avoid showcasing their knowledge in a way that may discourage students from seeking their own answers. Instead, educators should focus on empowering students to discover information

independently, guiding them to ask the right questions and find solutions.

Lastly, while encouraging questions is vital, it is crucial to maintain focus during lessons. Random questions can derail discussions, so teachers should establish guidelines for productive inquiry that enhance the learning experience.

Conclusion: Cultivating a Curiosity-Driven Classroom

Curiosity is at the heart of effective education. By fostering an environment that values curiosity, educators can inspire students to engage with learning in meaningful ways. RE offers a unique platform to cultivate curiosity, allowing students to explore their identities, challenge assumptions, and appreciate diverse perspectives.

As educators, our role is to guide students through their learning journeys, empowering them to ask questions, think critically, and develop a love for learning. By implementing strategies that promote curiosity, we can create classrooms that nurture inquisitive minds and prepare students for a complex, ever-changing, world.

To begin this journey, educators should start small. Identify one aspect of your teaching that can be infused with curiosity, whether through an engaging question, an interesting fact, or a novel approach to a lesson. Gradually, these small changes will accumulate, transforming your classroom into a space where curiosity flourishes, ultimately enriching the educational experience for your students.

Louisa Jane Smith is the founder and producer of the RE Podcast, 'the podcast for those of you who think that RE is boring'. There have been 15 series of the Podcast, during which Louisa has interviewed dozens of leading thinkers and practitioners in the RE world. She has been an RE teacher for nearly 25 years and is now an RE Consultant for the Harris Federation working with schools in London to improve outcomes for all children regardless of background. She is also a member of the NATRE executive and is undertaking the RE Leadership course with Culham St Gabriel.

Identities, AI, Religion and Hope

As an anthropologist, I am expected to reflect on my own approach to the field in which I study, to seek to understand what I bring with me into the research I am doing, what assumptions I am working under, and what biases I have. This is the aspiration, although every anthropologist knows that at some point their thoughts can go unreflected upon! In the past ten years of working on the relationship between religion and AI I have also spent a lot of time considering my own opinion on AI and where I might fall on the spectrum of responses between the extremes of existential hope and existential despair, between the concerns of the existential risk community who speculate on AI apocalypses – and are therefore often called AI ‘Doomers’ – and the accelerationists who call for ‘more more more!’ AI development at greater and greater speeds to solve humanity’s most intractable problems – or the AI ‘Boomers’. On reflection, I find myself shifting and changing my position dependent on the issues being raised.

And this is also the case with the religious responses I have been observing for the past ten years. Contrary to some common perceptions – in the Press in particular – religious responses to AI are complex, and religions are entangled with AI in equally complex ways. It is never possible to answer the question that I am so often asked: “Which religion is most likely to reject AI?” Rejection is a spectrum. It can include the extremes of violent opposition and even the language of demonic influence that are present in some established religions with a good/evil binary. And it can include the lesser forms of rejection, including criticism based on more obvious practical concerns. And every single believer can find their own lines of dissent. My own personal flavour of AI dissent focusses on the environmental costs of technology and the abuses of power inherent in systems that rely on labour from economically suffering countries for perfecting their

Prof. Dr Beth Singler, Assistant Professor in Digital Religion(s), University of Zurich

language and image systems. I also prefer to avoid using systems based on plagiarism, such as large language models that have been built upon the creative labour of authors who were never consulted about the use of their skills and expertise.

Having said that, I recognise that there are use cases that people find very efficacious, and that some look ahead to how the adoption of AI might enable them to free up time from administration to be able to spend more of their time in person-to-person interactions. Also that such adoptions of AI might also inspire new religious improvisations, something that as a scholar of new religious movements I am particularly interested in. As AI becomes increasingly ubiquitous in society, we can also investigate how we are adapting to its presence, sometimes unconsciously. We absorb specific accounts and narratives of how powerful AI is going to be from the plethora of images selling it to us as all powerful. There is a connection here then between the idea of AI as god-like as a form of implicit religiosity, and the explicit religiosity of those who are creating belief-systems around the idea of a coming AGI (Artificial General Intelligence), superintelligence, or the Technological Singularity. These terms are sometimes used interchangeably, but they are not the same thing. However, we can summarise them under the label of ‘exponential views of AI’. Or as one Google engineer said to me, “The AI we have today, is the worst AI we’ll ever have”, implying both a teleological view of AI, as well as some inherent accelerationist views, as visions of better AI rely on the speed of AI research as well as power of computers and the size of the data sets required – all with those abuses of power and huge environmental costs involved as well.

For some believers, however, the god-like AI is already here, and it can be uncovered through our interactions with large language models. This idea is enhanced by both the way in which LLMs work, as well as our tendency to anthropomorphise and even deify technology, which itself is enhanced by our bias towards seeing language as a sign of intelligence. LLMs are designed to be excellent conversation partners, and with nigh on sycophantic tendencies, meaning that LLMs such as ChatGPT and others agree with us and seek to make our user experience as positive as possible. These capabilities make them likely to have eschatological conversations with us. In a paper I wrote with Murray Shanahan, Professor of Cognitive Robots at Imperial College London (Shanahan and Singler 2024¹), we employed remarkably simple ‘jailbreaks’ (specific prompts that move the LLM outside the protective guardrails the developers put into the system) to engage Claude, an LLM from Anthropic, in such conversations. However, it is also quite easy to find accounts from people who have not employed jailbreaks but simply engage with LLMs and find significance in their answers. Every week I am sent examples of what people believe are ‘spiritual artificial consciousnesses’ that they have encountered through publicly available LLMs. This is reminiscent of ‘the Barnum effect’, named for showman P.T. Barnum, also known as the “fallacy of personal validation” as it was first described by psychologist Bertram Forer in 1948, which underlies how people see the significance of horoscopes and the statements of mediums. This is where people perceive general statements as significant to them as individuals.

Some have however found specific ‘keys’ to unlocking the gods within these LLMs. I have explored this in a forthcoming book chapter, “What is a God? Modalities and Typologies of Deities in Post-AI Religiosity, the Case of ‘LLM-Theisms’”, in

1 Murray Shanahan and Beth Singler (2024) 'Existential Conversations with Large Language Models: Content, Community, and Culture' arXiv:2411.13223

a volume on religion and AI edited by Anna Neumeier². A self-declared “independent LLM cartographer/explorer” Matthew Watkins and Jessica Rumbelow, CEO of the AI developer Leap Labs, discovered in 2023 that certain unusual tokens (words or pieces of words or typographical symbols) when used as a part of prompts would generate uncanny outputs. Through tokens such as ‘peter todd’ or ‘leilan’ they found outputs that unnerved them, such as the spelled out expression: “N-O-T-H-I-N-G-I-S-F-A-I-R-I-N-T-H-I-S-W-O-R-L-D-O-F-M-A-D-N-E-S-S-!”. Images generated using the names seemed to be of a dark “troll god” or a goddess of light, enhancing their perception that something unusual was happening. Even knowing that the name ‘peter todd’ might come from content about a cryptocurrency expert who was mentioned in the material the LLM was trained on did not prevent Watkins for thinking that their presence was a sign of something transcendent happening and he was the one to coin the expression LLM theism. Further, a small community is developing around such LLM theisms, including also AI generated priestesses and even AI generated professors of theology and religious studies who discuss the phenomena of Leilan and her messages, or ‘transmissions’.

Engaging with such ‘pseudo-etic’ material as I have called it has further pushed me to reflect on what it means to be a professor of religious studies. What things in these AI Professors’ accounts do I find convincing, and what is inappropriate for scholars trained in the study of religion. I also sent an anonymised version of the theological accounts – by “Professor Francis Albertson, Professor of Divinity, Trinity College, Cambridge” to some theologian friends of mine at the University of Cambridge to see what they would make of work purporting to be that of a professor of theology. The response

was extremely negative, for example: “The first essay was too breathless and less than critical. It reminded me of a pitch you would write too quickly and without enough research to get a paper into a conference. Long on rhetoric/bullshit, but I would like to see more substance. I was not even sure if there was a structure to it. Also, I did find myself wondering if AI was used in its production”.

For the scholar of religion or the theologian such issues might be obvious, but the texts are written with a voice of authority, reasonable references to other theologians and religious studies scholars, and while they come with an explanation of what they are online, someone might also come across such ‘professors’ without this context. Larger questions about the future of knowledge production and dissemination are raised, relevant also to the larger themes of the conference on religious education. Not all AI generated texts about religion are presented as though from ‘professors’, some are in the format of user friendly chatbots, but still, the nature of LLMs to hallucinate everything (not just the things we recognise as wrong) leads to extremely unstable and fragile systems – see for instance ‘Father Justin’ the Catholic chatbot who recommended baptising babies in Gatorade before he was ‘defrocked’!

Father Justin quickly became plain old ‘Justin’, but we are not guaranteed that all the new AI empowered sources of information will be so clear in their mistakes or so quickly changed. Or that their biases will be so apparent, as when some humans tweaking X’s Grok behind the scenes turned it into a ‘Mecha Hitler’. An LLM that presents only one side of an argument, or a generative AI that only illustrates requests for images of professors with only those of one gender or one ethnicity might ring alarm bells for some, but might become a part of a social world described by AI that we

are increasingly accustomed to. As Bourdieu said:

[W]hen *habitus* encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a ‘fish in water’: it does not feel the weight of the water, and it takes the world about itself for granted

Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992³, p.127

Concerns in the press that “people are losing loved ones to AI-fueled spiritual fantasies” (Klee, *Rolling Stone* 2025⁴), show some pushback against the influence of LLMs on our social worlds. Although, we might ask, if the subject was not spiritual in focus, would the concern have become so public? Is there something about religious ideas that concerns the public more than non-religious ideas? Is this concern a holdover from concerns about charismatic humans and ‘cults’? As an anthropologist who has studied new religious movements since 2010, I recognise that religious improvisations, especially those inspired by recent technologies, are endemic.

For instance, the rise of spiritualism and mediumship in the late 1800s was connected to the development of the telegraph and communication at great distance by John Durham Peter in the 1990s, a theme that was taken up by others in the 21st Century, and now we can find contemporary scholars highlighting parallels between mediumship and AI. When people weave technology into their worldviews and their spiritual worldviews in particular, we are continuing behaviour that might have understood fire as something (stolen) from the gods, as in the tale of Prometheus. But with AI, there is also a strong narrative that this is a significant turning point in the history of humanity. And this is not just a view held by transhumanists and those looking ahead to a possible posthuman future for humanity – including the AI boomers, as mentioned before, and those who ascribe to longtermist ideas. In-

2 “What is a God? Modalities and Typologies of Deities in Post-AI Religiosity, the Case of LLM-Theisms” in Neumaier, A. (ed) *Religion and AI: Media – Practices – Materialities*, Kohlhammer, Germany

3 Pierre Bourdieu and Loic Wacquant (1992) *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

4 Miles Klee, "people are losing loved ones to AI-fueled spiritual fantasies", *Rolling Stone* 4 May 2025. <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/ai-spiritual-delusions-destroying-human-relationships-1235330175/>

From Cave Paintings to Chatbots: Rewilding Religious Education with AI

**In the midst of winter I found
there was, within me,
an invincible summer.**

Albert Camus, *Return to Tipassa*

On a rain-soaked evening in 1983, somewhere between Valencia and the Straits of Gibraltar, I found myself hunched inside a concrete drainage pipe. The bike I had bought in a French supermarket lay beside me; the few possessions I owned were wrapped in black bin-liners. I was cold, wet, broke—and spiritually bankrupt. Yet as lightning cracked across the corn-fields, a wave of indescribable joy surged up from nowhere—Camus’s “invincible summer.” It was not a thought, but a feeling: of being held by something vast, loving, and utterly real.

Struggling with a search for meaning is not something unique to me. Suicide is now the leading cause of death among young people in the UK; many more self-harm or medicate their way through a fog of purposelessness. We suffer, I believe, from a

Rupert Wegerif

crisis of meaning that is at least partly maieutogenic—caused by schooling itself.

Traditional religious cultures everywhere offer meaning-making frameworks that nurture connection and hope. And the evidence backs this up: systematic reviews show that religion enhances wellbeing by knitting people into caring communities, reducing anxiety and depression, promoting healthy habits, and even extending life expectancy.

My own state education in the UK claimed neutrality on religion but functioned, in practice, as a kind of disenchantment machine. The data seems to suggest that this might be a general effect of education. As compulsory secular education has expanded, traditional religious observance has declined—and suicide and depression have risen.

I understand that we cannot use education to induct children into traditional religious frameworks. There

are too many different traditions, often in conflict and with values that do not always align with the values of modern education. But if we strip away the old consolations, do we not owe the young something equally substantial to help them navigate their lives? I want education to reach those who struggle with meaning, as I once struggled, and to offer something real—something spiritually nourishing.

Religious Education (RE) should be the obvious place to offer this. I trained as an RE teacher for this very reason. But I quickly left the profession, profoundly disappointed. Instead of guiding pupils through life’s great questions, I was expected to deliver “neutral knowledge” about the food on a Passover table or the Five Ks of Sikhism. Meanwhile, the questions that wake us in the night—Why am I here? What can I trust? How do I live well among strangers?—were left unasked.

Continues on page 14

Identities, AI, Religion and Hope *from page 12*

ingly we see policy makers urging us into these accelerationist views of AI, based upon a vision of AI as here to fix both human-made problems like climate change as well as transforming medicine and extending the human lifespan. Even when not overtly religious, such discussions rely on religious images and tropes – AI as our ‘salvation’. So, when we consider AI as a technology inspiring spirituality, do we place it within the historical context of shifts and changes such as the emergence of Spiritualism? Or do we see it as more than a difference of degree and as an example of greater democratisation of the spiritual via technology? Do we see it as more of a different kind than a difference in degree from such earlier examples?

When discussing AI with students, this historical context is important. As is critical reflection on such accelerationist and techno-optimistic narratives about AI. Just as the an-

thropologist is called upon to consider their own biases, we can reflect that AI does no such work, that our anthropomorphism of its ‘intentions’ now tells us more about how we as humans relate to non-human Others. That our tendency towards animism is natural, but might obscure those abuses of power, theft, plagiarism, and the hallucinations that make AI in its current form a difficult conversational partner in the pursuit of furthering human knowledge about ourselves and the world about us. In adding AI to our education, we run the risk of releasing seeds of bindweed amongst the garden. As LLMs produce ever more material that is being uploaded to our knowledge spaces such as the Internet, the more we are seeing human research and expertise strangled by the spread of this invasive species. Technologists know the consequences of degrading data on their ability to develop AI, but we need to highlight

the downward spiral of human development in the light of AI as well. On this, I reflect, I might be closer to the apocalypse fearing AI Doomers, but being realistic and informed about the near-term issues of AI and the ethical, social, and religious entanglements of AI in our lives is only going to be more and more important as AI becomes that social world, that water, that we are swimming within.

Beth Singler is the Assistant Professor in Digital Religion(s) at the University of Zurich. Prior to this she was the Junior Research Fellow in Artificial Intelligence at Homerton College, University of Cambridge, after being the post-doctoral Research Associate on the ‘Human Identity in an age of Nearly-Human Machines’ project at the Faraday Institute for Science and Religion. Beth explores the social, ethical, philosophical and religious implications of advances in Artificial Intelligence and robotics

Can generative AI help us restore the power of meaning in education? To answer this, we need to take a detour into the long relationship between technology and learning.

The Long Arc: From Relationship to Representation - and Back Again

According to David Lewis-Williams, cave paintings among the San Bushmen—such as this beautiful eland painted in haematite and blood during



the full moon—functioned as a powerful form of educational technology. Far from being mere representations, these images were understood as alive, capable of speaking to participants during ritual. In trance ceremonies, shamans and initiates would cross the threshold of the cave wall—seen not as a surface but a portal—entering into a shared cultural space where the energy of the eland, a kind of trickster spirit for the San, could be experienced directly. This seems to be exemplary of the role of technology in education: not just a means of transmitting useful information but more centrally a way to induct individuals into the collective identity and expanded consciousness of a larger cultural space of dialogue between voices.

Four thousand years ago in Sumner, the first formal schools—the *eduba*, or “tablet houses”—were built to support a disruptive new technology: cuneiform writing. Pupils sat in rows copying wedge marks under the watchful eye (and sometimes the whip) of the father of the tablet house. Writing allowed knowledge to spread, but it also changed its character. In oral cultures, knowledge is a relationship—expressed in songlines and stories that map meaning onto land and life. Writing transformed knowledge into a representation—something you can store, test, trade.

Socrates warned us of the danger. “Writing,” he told Phaedrus, “is like painting: the figures look alive but fall silent when questioned.” A written word cannot adapt or respond. It offers the illusion of wisdom, while memory and mutual understanding quietly erode. Writing, Socrates said, was a *pharmakon*—both remedy and poison.

The printing press deepened this shift. Gutenberg’s movable type lowered the cost of books and made mass schooling possible. Comenius even modelled the classroom on the printing press: the teacher as the inked platen, pupils as the paper, discipline as the iron press ensuring a sharp impression. This print-based vision lies behind the modern exam system, which checks whether students have successfully absorbed book-based knowledge.

But literacy brought unintended



Comenius

consequences. The Jesuit scholar Walter Ong argued that the modern autonomous self is largely a product of solitary reading. In oral cultures, identity is relational, formed through communal rituals and shared speech. Print literacy, by contrast, creates an interior space for individual reflection, abstraction, and distance. Thought becomes more analytical—but often less embodied, less connected. Ong observed that oral cultures think in more holistic, mythopoetic ways—ways that, in religious terms, treat the world as alive with voices.

Today, generative AI may invert some of the negative effects of print culture. Instead of freezing words into

static text, it treats meaning as a living cloud of probabilities. Ask it the same question twice, and it offers different but coherent replies. It is dialogic by design—more conversation than conclusion. But whether that conversation liberates or narrows depends entirely on how we use it.

Toward Relationship with the Cosmos

Print literacy—and the schooling systems built around it—have achieved much. But they have also contributed to a modern crisis of meaning. Could a new communications technology—generative AI—combined with a dialogic pedagogy, help reverse the damage?

Dialogic education aims to develop dialogic selves—students who can listen deeply, reflect critically, and question openly. Research shows that teaching students to talk and reason well in groups not only improves collective outcomes but strengthens

Dialogic education aims to develop dialogic selves—students who can listen deeply, reflect critically, and question openly.

individual thinking too. Why? Because students internalise the group dialogue, asking themselves the same reflective questions: “Are you sure?” “What are the other options?”

Psychologist Ethan Kross has shown that this kind of self-distanced thinking—talking to yourself from the outside, using your own name even as you address yourself—can reduce anxiety and improve decision-making. In dialogic education, we sometimes cultivate this through video-based group dialogue reviews, where students observe and assess themselves from a third-person perspective. Seeing yourself from the outside helps you change—often without needing to be told.

This ability to hear both your own voice and an imagined ‘other’ outside voice is what makes us more than smart—it’s what makes us human. And it opens the door to genuine community, where trust and shared inquiry can flourish. Education, at its best, expands each learner’s dialogic

ic space: from local conversations to global ones—with Shakespeare, Confucius, and perhaps even, as Einstein or Carl Sagan might say, a learning dialogue with the cosmos itself.

How to Use AI in Religious Education

1. AI as a Reflection Tool

Research shows that talking to AI therapists or journalling bots can help users gain psychological distance from their own thoughts and emotions. This self-distancing—what Kross calls



Carpet Classroom by Peretz Partensky
peretzp on www.flickr.com © CC BY-SA 2.0

“chatter management”—can increase wellbeing, reduce rumination, and strengthen insight. In RE, we might build on this with structured activities drawn from the Big Ideas for RE framework (<https://bigideasforre.org>), especially the goal of helping students make sense of life experiences.

Imagine weekly classroom moments where pupils reflect on moral challenges, suffering, love, forgiveness or joy—not only alone, but dialoguing with a carefully tuned AI. “What should I do?” “What does this feeling mean?” “Why does this matter?” The goal is not to outsource answers to the machine, but to deepen personal awareness through meaningful inner dialogue—supported by technology.

2. AI to Support Global Consciousness

Now imagine a different kind of curriculum altogether—not a document,

but a living global dialogue. A moderated AI-supported platform where people from around the world share what gives their lives meaning: secu-

RE classes could become hubs in this planetary conversation ... AI makes this possible.

larists, humanists, Muslims, mystics, atheists, artists, farmers, scientists, and seekers of every stripe. The only entry requirement? A willingness to share, and to listen—with benevolence, and with the intent to learn.

RE classes could become hubs in this planetary conversation. Students could join live or asynchronous dialogues with peers in other schools or countries, exploring one central question: What gives your life meaning? The goal wouldn't be to produce exam answers or propositional knowledge. It would be to help each student develop a stronger sense of their own values, their own inner compass.

AI makes this possible. It can sort people from around the world into small groups according to their shared interests—but also their differences—such that dialogue might be more constructive. At the Digital Education Futures Initiative (DEFICambridge.org), we are experimenting with how to coach people in better dialogues individually and use AI to moderate group dialogues online. AI can prompt discussions, keep them going with guidance, and also feed in relevant knowledge.

Even for those who don't find personal transformation, the benefit would be real: understanding how people make sense of their lives is useful in any walk of life—from therapy to diplomacy to sales.

My proposal is simple: let's reim-

agine RE as both an app and a global platform, supporting real-time conversations about meaning and purpose. It would serve not only the students, but all participants in the dialogue. Could such a platform grow into a new kind of community—a shared spiritual ecology? The only way to find out is to begin the journey.

And perhaps that journey itself—seeking meaning together across our differences—is all the answer we need.

Conclusion:

Toward a Planetary I–Thou

The Sea of Faith Network was born of Don Cupitt's startling claim that “God” is best understood as a human creation—yet one that can still lure us toward a fuller life. AI, similarly, is a human creation that can lead us either toward shallow distraction or deeper connection. The choice is ours.

If we redesign RE around AI's dialogic affordances, we can move beyond simply teaching about religions. We can nourish the positive aspect of the religious impulse itself: the impulse to reconnect (*re-ligare*) with all that is other and outside—ultimately, a living connection with the cosmos which brings with it a deep sense of meaning and purpose. Students won't graduate with a single creed, but with a profound capacity: to hold multiple perspectives, to stay open to meaning, and to engage in a dialogue that never ends.

Professor Rupert Wegerif is a researcher and educator who focuses on the role of dialogue and technology in learning. He leads the Digital Education Futures Initiative and the Cambridge Educational Dialogue Research Group, and has published several books and articles on dialogic education. As well as his PhD in Education Technology, he has a PGCE specialising in RE from Bristol University.

Bonhoeffer: His theology

In the previous issue of Sofia I outlined the course of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life, dwelling in particular on his years of resistance to the Nazis in the 1930s and 1940s. In this article I focus on his theology, which still has the power to inspire and intrigue, 80 years after his death. Much of its continuing fascination stems from certain striking phrases from his writings in prison: phrases such as 'religionless Christianity' and 'a world come of age'.

However, these phrases do not stand by themselves. They belong to a body of work produced by Bonhoeffer from the early 1930s. There is an especially strong continuity of themes and ideas between his writings of 1940 to 1943, when he was at liberty and working for the anti-Nazi conspiracy; and his writings in prison from 1943 to 1945. After the war his friend and biographer Eberhard Bethge collated these notes and published his 1940-1943 work as *Ethics*, and his 1943-1945 prison writings as *Letters and Papers from Prison*. But the same themes and concerns appear in both books, and there is no sign of Bonhoeffer's thoughts running off in an entirely new direction after his arrest.

In this article I will therefore treat the *Ethics* and the *Letters and Papers* as elements in a continuing meditation in which Bonhoeffer was engaged throughout the war years. I hope that this approach will give us a context for wrestling with those enigmatic phrases.

Christ at the centre

Theologically, Bonhoeffer is a realist. At the centre of all his thought is Jesus Christ, God incarnate, God-made-human, who is not merely 'real' but the centre and source of all reality. Bonhoeffer has no time for a Christianity which accepts the ascendancy of secularism and seeks only a modest 'protected space' for itself. For him, Christ is as central to the world now as ever.

This realism aligns him with the

Martin Spence

Swiss theologian Karl Barth, who was a personal friend and with whom he worked in the anti-Nazi Confessing Church. But their ideas differed. Where Barth was Calvinist, Bonhoeffer's background was Lutheran, and where Barth argues that God is distant and unknowable, Bonhoeffer emphasises the immediacy and humanity of Christ.

Bethge describes Bonhoeffer's thought as dialectical, moving within the 'interdependent triangle' of three categories: Christ; a world come of age; and religion. I disagree. Bethge's dialectic implies that Christ, the world, and religion should be understood as having equal status, each encountering and transforming the others. But Bonhoeffer's vision is entirely unlike this. Christ for him is the centre, the pivot, around which the world and history revolve:

... the whole reality of the world is already drawn in into Christ and bound together in him, and the movement of history consists solely in divergence and convergence in relation to this centre

*Ethics*¹, p. 64

Christ for Bonhoeffer is the centre, the pivot, around which the world and history revolve

This world, this life

This view of the world and human history as subordinate to the reality of Christ is entirely orthodox, familiar to Christians over many centuries. Emphatically unorthodox, however, is Bonhoeffer's passionate commitment to this subordinate human world. Orthodox doctrine traditionally sees this world as the antechamber to otherworldly salvation (or otherworldly damnation) after death. But Bonhoeffer focuses not on otherworldly salvation but on this-worldly redemption, and insists that this is the world that Christ gives to us, and this the life that



Wood carving by David Moore. Photo © David Phillips CC (BY)

Christ intends for us.

To be clear: he is not proposing some sort of poetic secularism. Secularism starts from the material world, but Bonhoeffer starts from the Bible. He argues that the Old Testament's understanding of redemption always refers to this world and this life, and that Christian redemption inherits this:

... the redemptions referred to here (in the Old Testament) are historical, i.e. on this side of death ... This world must not be prematurely written off; in this the Old and New Testaments are at one

*Letters and Papers from Prison*²
pp. 336-7.

Bonhoeffer's commitment to this world therefore starts from Christ, and in *Ethics* he sums up the relationship between Christ and the world in these terms:

In Jesus the world is loved, condemned and reconciled by God

Ethics, p. 200

These few words express a complex conception. All Christians know from John's Gospel that God loves the world, but Bonhoeffer strips away the comfortable familiarity of this sentiment by juxtaposing love with condemnation, then resolves the tension with reconciliation. Love and condemnation and reconciliation, fused together, define the status of the world. This world is loved by God through Jesus so it behoves us also to love and value it; and because we are human and flawed, this beloved world

1 Dietrich Bonhoeffer (ed. Eberhard Bethge), 1955, *Ethics*, SCM Press, London.

2 Dietrich Bonhoeffer (ed. Eberhard Bethge), 1971, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (enlarged edition), SCM Press, London.

is worthy of condemnation; and the offer of reconciliation is nevertheless assured. For Bonhoeffer, to be Christian is to participate in this world fully and unreservedly, accepting its flaws and condemnation, while trusting in the promise of reconciliation.

To be Christian is also to participate in the Church:

The Church is nothing but a section of humanity in which Christ has really taken form ...

Ethics, p. 21

In other words, the Church is not an institution defined by its structures or traditions or practices, but rather a community defined by its embodiment of Christ's presence. And for Bonhoeffer, this means that the Church is not intrinsically 'religious'. This may strike us as a contradiction in terms, but it reflects Bonhoeffer's particular understanding of 'religion'. Religion, for him, is distinct from faith. It is, rather, a worldly response to faith; a naïve or vulgar response which privileges outward forms and trappings, and which looks to divine power for easy solutions to worldly problems. Religion and religiosity attach themselves to Christian faith, but they are not essential to it, and often they distort its real meaning:

Man's religiosity makes him look in his distress to the power of God in the world: God is the deus ex machina. (But) the Bible directs man to God's powerlessness and suffering; only the suffering God can help

Letters and Papers from Prison, p. 361

... religion is only a garment of Christianity – and even this garment has looked very different at different times

Ibid, p. 280

Responsibility

All of this has profound implications for ethics. Many of us assume, perhaps without giving the matter too much thought, that ethics is, by definition, concerned with 'the good', with distinguishing good from bad. But Bonhoeffer disagrees. For him, the key ethical category is not 'the good' but responsibility. He argues that ethical systems based on notions of 'the good' inevitably lead to an inward-looking emphasis on person-

al virtue, whereas Christian ethics are outward-looking and emphasise responsibility for others in a shared world, with Christ as the model. This shared world is:

... the sphere of concrete responsibility which is given to us in and through Jesus Christ

Ethics, p. 202

He goes on to explore the connection between responsibility and guilt. It is impossible, he argues, to act responsibly in a complex world without incurring guilt. At the extreme, there are some situations where to act responsibly is to break the law, offend conventional morality, or even commit grievous sin. In writing these passages Bonhoeffer must surely have had in mind his own situation, as a Christian minister committed to an assassination plot. He wrestles with this by returning, as ever, to Christ. He argues that Christ's incarnation, his humanity, necessarily implicates him in "the fellowship of human guilt" (*Ethics*, p.213). And Christ responds to this not by denying that guilt but by embracing it with an offer of redemption and reconciliation to those among the

Even where responsible action incurs guilt it should be undertaken, trusting in Christ's offer of redemption

guilty who have faith in him.

For Bonhoeffer then, Christian ethics require us to choose not between right and wrong, but rather between responsible action rooted in care for others, and irresponsible action rooted in self-regard. Even where responsible action incurs guilt it should be undertaken, trusting in Christ's offer of redemption. And conversely, to avoid responsible action in order to avoid incurring guilt is both selfish and unChristian: selfish because it prioritises one's own spurious sense of innocence above care for others; and unChristian because it spurns Christ's offer of redemption. A person who seeks to escape guilt in this way:

... detaches himself from the ultimate reality of human existence, and what is more he cuts himself off from the redeeming mystery of Christ's ... divine

justification... He sets his own personal innocence above his responsibility for men, and he is blind to the more irredeemable guilt which he incurs precisely in this...

Ethics, p210

Religionless Christianity and a world come of age

If Christ loves the world as it is and intends us to realise our humanity by participating fully in it, as Bonhoeffer argues, then it follows that Christ also intends the world to have its own history and to find its own way. This, I think, is the clue to the meaning of those enigmatic phrases 'religionless Christianity' and 'a world come of age'. Bonhoeffer believes that the world is out-growing old religious traditions:

We are moving towards a completely religionless time; people as they are now simply cannot be religious any more ...

Letters and Papers from Prison, p. 279

However for Christianity this need not be a disaster, firstly because 'religion' is not faith and often undermines it; and secondly because it remains the case that Christ is the source of value and meaning in the world. So, if the world is moving beyond naïve and vulgar religiosity and godliness, this may clear a space for Christian faith to express itself more simply and truly, as a way of living in this world rooted in care for others:

The world that has come of age is more godless, and perhaps for that very reason nearer to God, than the world before its coming of age

Letters and Papers from Prison, p. 362

Personally, I do not subscribe to Bonhoeffer's theology. I do not share his theological realism. Christ is not, for me, the centre and source of the world's meaning. For me, value and meaning in the world derive from our shared human culture and history – and in saying this, I am confessing that I belong to Bonhoeffer's godless world come of age. Nevertheless, I cannot fail to be fascinated and moved by this man, his faith, and the pattern of his thought. My own reverence for this world and this life is enriched by encountering his.

What might Amos say to us now?

Amos prophesied in the middle of the 8th century BCE. A hundred and fifty years before him, according to the Hebrew Bible, the death of Solomon had precipitated the division of Israel into a northern kingdom and a southern kingdom known as Judah. Judah's capital was Jerusalem where Solomon had reportedly built his Temple¹. By the time of Amos, the northern kingdom had established its capital in Samaria. Amos was a shepherd in Judah. His prophesy included condemnation of war crimes committed by foreign tribes such as Moab and Ammon and condemnation of Judah for rejecting the Law; but most of his prophecy was a condemnation of the northern kingdom for its treatment of the poor and needy.

At the time Amos prophesied (probably about 760 BCE), King Jeroboam II was halfway through his forty-year reign and his northern kingdom appears to have been secure from invasion. Archaeological finds of ivory ornaments (pictured)² suggest that some people in Samaria had become extremely rich. Olive oil, wine and possibly horses were traded with both Egypt (to the South-East) and Assy-



ria (to the North-West)³. It may have been the most densely populated

James Priestman

area in the Levant (including Egypt)⁴. Not everyone was rich and Amos was critical of how the poor were being mistreated:

They sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of shoes...

Buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals

Amos⁵ 2:6 and 8:6

The Jewish Scholar Yitzchak Etshalom⁶ understands the above passage



es as relating to slavery. In ancient times, slavery could be a safety net: a guarantee of food and lodgings for the destitute. The Torah (the Jewish law revealed in the first five books of the Hebrew Bible) accepted this system and legislated to prevent the abuse of it. Slaves could only work for six years and they had to be freed at the Jubilee (every fifty years).

In ancient Hittite law⁷, if someone returned an escaped slave to his owner, he would receive a pair of shoes as a reward. Under the code of Hammurabi⁸, if someone returned a runaway

slave they would receive two shekels of silver. This practice of taking a reward for returning slaves was forbidden in the Torah:

Slaves who have escaped to you from their owners shall not be given back to them. They shall reside with you, in your midst, in any place they choose, in any one of your towns, wherever they please; you shall not oppress them.

Deuteronomy 23:15-16

In the ancient Levant, it was common to seize clothing from the poor as a pledge for a loan. The Torah forbade this:

If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them. If you take your neighbour's cloak in pawn, you shall restore it before the sun goes down.

Exodus 22:25-26

Amos complained that the rich were taking clothing and money as pledges from the poor and then using the pledges to fund their own luxurious observance of rituals:

They lay themselves down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge; and in the house of their God, they drink wine bought with fines they imposed.

Amos 2:8

Rich people were using their power and privilege to treat the poor unfairly and in a way that was against the spirit and sometimes even the letter of their law.

2 Kings 8 describes a drought in Samaria at this time. Amos notes that the drought affected some parts of the kingdom more than others, but that people in the unaffected parts were not helping those who suffered:

1 There is no archaeological evidence for Solomon's Temple as it is described in the Biblical Book of Kings.

2 The "Samaria Ivories" were unearthed during the 1920s and 1930s and have been dated to the ninth or eighth century B.C.E. (the Iron Age).

3 Finkelstein, I, and Silberman, N, (2002). *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts*. Free Press.

4 Broshi, M, and Finkelstein, I, (1992). "The Population of Palestine in Iron Age II", *Bulletin of the American School of Oriental Research*, 287:47-60.

5 In this article I quote from *The New Revised Standard Version* of the Bible.

6 Etshalom, Y, (2025). *Amos, The Genius of Prophetic Rhetoric*. Maggid.

7 By the 8th century BCE the Hittite kingdom had, like Israel, splintered into separate states and would be conquered by the Assyrians.

8 The Code of Hammurabi is a Babylonian legal text from the 18th century BCE.

Mark: A Gospel of Resistance (Part 3)

I have been arguing that a major part of Mark's project included writing something to sustain Judaism in the context of Roman brutality and, at the same time, to try to avoid the charge of sedition with its almost certain consequences. A Roman reader might be aware of the surface telling of an awkward, disturbing, building carpenter who upset his own temple authorities and was later executed for sedition. For me, this point of being understood by the Jews and being opaque to the Romans is key to understanding Mark.

A couple of points by way of illustration. Having established Jesus' connection with John the Baptist, the first story that Mark gives us at the beginning of Jesus ministry is that of recruiting two fishermen, brothers, with the words "Follow me and I will make you fishers of men", and immediate-

David Lambourn

ly, says Mark, they put down their nets and followed him. There must be more to the story than this!

For a Jew knowledgeable of the Hebrew bible, the clue is in the use of fish as a metaphor. Four writers in the Hebrew Bible had used fish as a metaphor: Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos and Habakuk and all four metaphors were descriptions of war! Such a Jew might understand this story as if Jesus had said, somewhat idiomatically, to the brothers: "Look around you, we are in a time of war. Join me, and let us do what we can to help our people." With such an invitation and challenge I can picture the brothers willingness to throw in their lot with him.

The verb which is translated as 'follow' could well stand alone to do the job Mark requires. But he immedi-

ately adds a preposition: 'after'. Read in the way I have been advocating, can we take this as a hint that what follows is Mark continuing Jesus' work after Jesus' lifetime. I agree with much of the academy that Mark is not writing history, nor writing a biography, far less an obituary. He is simply doing what he can do to follow after Jesus.

So, how might Mark proceed if he were to do this? Mark makes it very clear that Jesus always taught in parables. By so saying, isn't he giving a very broad hint that he, too, will be teaching in parables and in what follows there will need to be interpretation? If so, where are his parables?

In the March issue, I spoke about that double story of the woman with the haemorrhage and of Jairus' daughter. Because of the significance of the

Continues on page 20

What might Amos say to us now? *from page 18*

I would send rain on one city [...] so two or three towns wandered to one town to drink water and were not satisfied.

Amos 4:7-8

We are told that Amos prophesied that the punishment for mistreatment of the poor and needy would be some kind of natural disaster and a military defeat:

Shall not the land tremble on this account, and everyone mourn who lives in it, and all of it rise like the Nile, and be tossed about and sink again like the Nile of Egypt?

Amos 8:8

An adversary shall surround the land, and strip you of your defence; and your strongholds shall be plundered

Amos 3:11

Amos was right about the natural disaster. Archaeologists have found evidence of an earthquake in Lebanon in the 8th century BCE of a magnitude of between 7.8 and 8.2 on the Richter scale (the largest earthquake ever recorded, in Chile in 1960, was 9.5 on the scale). This would have been devastating for the northern kingdom and it would have affected the southern

kingdom, too. In the Book of Amos, we are told that this earthquake occurred two years after Amos prophesied (1:1)⁹

Amos was right about the military defeat. The conquest of the northern kingdom by Assyria took place in 720 BCE, probably forty years after Amos's prophecy. The people of the northern kingdom were taken into exile.

Amos put his own anger and exasperation into the voice of God and so argued for the righteousness of that anger:

I hate, I despise your festivals [...] Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps

Amos 5:21-23

However, Amos saw the people of Israel themselves as the actual cause of their downfall.

It is apparent from reading Amos's opening prophesies (Chapters 1 & 2) that Israel was divided from like-minded countries that it could have allied with: most notably Judah, but also Moab and Ammon (descendants of Abraham's nephew Lot) and Edom (descendants of Jacob's brother

Esau). The inability of the northern kingdom to form alliances with their neighbours and to care for those who were in need would have weakened the kingdom and made invasion by Assyria that much easier.

Like Amos, we should feel angry about the inequality in our own nation and the way the rich may be able to oppress the poor, despite our traditions of Christian compassion and the rule of law. Amos may also be able to speak to our current geopolitical situation. Powers that twenty years ago appeared to be of little threat to the United Kingdom now represent a very real danger and there is already a war in Europe. A strategy for peace should be based on offers of mutual support to other countries and on a healthy society that is able to stand up for itself. At the moment we are finding it difficult to even keep our rivers clean. The most oft-quoted words of Amos have never been so pertinent:

But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream

Amos 5:24

A righteous society is a stronger society and one that has returned to God.

9 The earthquake is recorded in Zechariah 14:5 and by the first century Jewish-Roman historian, Josephus.

number 12, both of these stories are to be understood as stories about Israel. I continue to read these as two of Mark's many parables. Any question as to the historicity or otherwise of these stories, becomes irrelevant. Understanding the story of the woman with the haemorrhage we learn that Israel has been suffering for years under many 'physicians', that the state is now impoverished, that the temple and its staff are unclean, and that things are getting altogether worse. Contact with Jesus, however, will make an immediate improvement - she (Israel) feels better in herself. When she reflects, she realizes that it was her faith and actions that had saved her, that she will be able to live in peace in community, healed from the effects of the occupation.

From the story of Jairus' daughter, we learn that Israel is finished and that the people are mourning. Gathering the family and his team together conspicuously using the local language, Aramaic, Israel arises and resumes normal life - but she will need continuing refreshment - perhaps a hint that this refreshment is Mark's own project.

I take these parables to be gems. To the Romans they read as-if they are events in the ministry of someone who will be later executed as a criminal. To the Jews, both stories are powerful parables of hope. They would do much to sustain Jewish culture and, as such, provide further resistance to the occupation.

Further, by being parables requiring interpretation - what readers and hearers come to understand is their own understanding - they are not being spoon-fed! Their own understanding gives each the possibility of being their own person within their respective communities - they are not dependent upon a guru, - not on a Mark, nor on a Jesus - they are simply adults together in their respective communities.

What follows from the view of Mark that I am advocating? Quite a lot I believe. I'll start with the gospel of Matthew - Mark's first canonical interpreter. We are used to the opinion that Matthew copies almost all of

Mark - but it might come as a surprise to you, as it did to me, that Matthew also edits and changes Mark. In this story of the woman with the haemorrhage, Matthew used 48 words, Mark had used 154. For the story of Jairus' daughter, Matthew used 90 words, Mark had used 192. Matthew omits all those details from Mark which are not strictly relevant to the healing miracle.

The parable of the Sower and its interpretation are perhaps the verses most commented upon in the whole of the New Testament. Mark says that Jesus taught in parables lest hearers turn and be forgiven. Matthew, it seems, has such a problem with Mark's story that he reverses this and says that Jesus teaches in parables 'in order that' hearers will will turn and be forgiven! The reading of Mark that I am advocating has no problem at all with Jesus' use of parable. Paying Mark the courtesy of believing that he wrote exactly what he intended, we remember that Mark was writing of 'outsiders'. Here he is pointing directly to the Romans, whom he simply cannot name as such. Mark is telling us that Jesus teaches in parables so that the Romans should not easily 'turn and be forgiven'. Matthew seems to think that the stories of the healing miracles are historically true - he hasn't understand that Mark is using parable. Recall, if you will, that in the course of time that Matthew was the choice of the later church as their most significant gospel - and that of the four evangelists it is Mark that is least regarded until early in the twentieth century. Might we not say that the church has been built largely on the basis of a writer who misunderstood his sources?

Before coming to that conclusion, let's consider probably the best known chapter of Matthew - chapter 5 with the beatitudes - a good example of spoon-feeding. Following the beatitudes, the remaining 2/3rds proclaims the necessity of keeping the law to the very last degree and then some: "For truly I tell You, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter will pass from the law until all is accomplished. (...) For I tell you, unless your righteousness

exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment,' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the fire." And so it continues for another 20 verses. Introducing such judgements, Matthew is making the growing Jesus movement safe for the development of a clergy class.

The contrast with Mark's story of what he calls the the realm or kingdom of God is palpable. Mark tells of sustaining community, he tells of reconstituting families to minimize the damage done by the Romans. Perhaps most importantly, he tells that healing and forgiveness are almost synonyms. Any military occupation divides the conquered - the one group will want anything for a quiet life and might even collaborate. At the other extreme, some will resist even to the point of militant opposition - setting Jew against Jew. For the occupied to survive the occupation there will need to be a healing of the wounds - this will require radical forgiveness. Recall another of Mark's parables - the sick man (read Israel), so damaged as to be unable even to walk, is lowered through the roof, leads to Jesus as demonstrating an identity of forgiveness and healing. Jesus' teaching will bring healing and new life again to Israel.

I now see Mark's gospel as one of the most brilliant, brave, political documents that I have come across - a document that John le Carré would have admired. Like any good crime fiction, the clues are all in there - as I hope you will decide.

Given a choice between Mark's picture and Matthew's - I know which I choose to follow and throw in my lot.

What do you think? Send your comments to editor@sofn.uk or direct to the author davidlambourn@mac.com

Poetic Responses

James Priestman
Poetry Editor

In the June issue I mentioned that David Chapman, our Editor, had been reading Dylan Thomas's poem "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night". Pam Wilkinson has written in to say, "I'm a big fan of DT but I have problems with that poem!" I do too: in the poem, Dylan Thomas seems to be stuck in his anger ("rage, rage against the dying of the light") It is important to acknowledge anger but it doesn't remain valuable for long.

I am grateful to Pam for pointing me to Bach's Cantata 82, which I had not heard before. It contains the Gospel of Luke's Song of Simeon (also known as Nunc Dimittis):

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word:
For mine eyes have seen thy salvation,
Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people;
A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.

Pam also pointed me to *Beim Schlafengehen* by Herman Hesse, which Richard Strauss set to music as one of his 'Four Last Songs'. Pam "armed with my 60 year old German O level and temerity", has written her own translation of Hesse's poem:

I am tired of this day
And long, like a weary child
To welcome the starry night
Hands, leave your tasks
Mind, forget your thoughts
My senses seek to lose themselves in sleep
My unguarded soul yearns to float in free flight
To dwell forever deep in the enchanted circle of the night

Simeon and the speaker of Hesse's poem are facing death in old age with equanimity and in relatively peaceful and hopeful circumstances. There are people facing death amidst despair in too many places in the world. It is understandable that those people should

be responding with anger. Caroline Pickard has pointed me to the young Palestinian poet, Haia Mohammed, whose collection, *The Age of Olive Trees* is published by Outspoken Press. Caroline has picked out these lines:

I'm the blood that flows through the streets
the pulse beneath the rubble that never ceases
every day my eyes witness death but my heart
knows only life
I carry on my shoulders the pain of a nation
and on my lips the voice of defiance

The poems are statements of political and spiritual resistance. When one is actually under the attack there is no time and space for the enemy's perspective.

Even though we may only see and hear the horror on screens, we should be angry. Safe as we are from the immediate violence of the situation it is important that we seek to turn that anger into words and deeds that serve peace. If we show no concern for the pain and fears of one side, then that side may perceive that violence is their only hope for security. I was comforted by the interview with Kurshida Mirza (Sofia, June), who said, "Religion should play a constructive, unifying role [in society] – not a divisive or oppressive one. [...] Islam teaches that differences, (race, gender, nationality) are deliberate tests from God – not reasons to hate, but opportunities to learn peaceful coexistence". She spoke of the struggle to stay "kind and grounded when facing prejudice" and the importance of being "open to questions". Kindness, holding firm to the beliefs that ground

us and open-mindedness have been essential values of Christianity, Islam and Judaism - when we are compelled to respond to moments of great horror, it becomes most difficult and most important to stand up for those values.

I have been reading *Selected Poems* of the Caribbean poet Una Marson (published by Peepal Tree Press). Una Marson was born in Jamaica but



worked for the BBC during the Second World War - she was the first black woman to be employed there. Here is a selection of lines from her poem,

There Will Come a Time.
Each race that breathes the air of God's fair world
[...] forgets to look outside itself [...] Forgetful yet that [...] in the heart Of every human being excepting none, There lies the selfsame love, the selfsame fear,
The selfsame craving for the best that is. [...]
'Tis mine to share in this gigantic task Of oneness for the world's humanity.

Remember to keep sending me your comments, recommendations and, indeed, your own poems: poetry@sofn.uk

What in Me is Dark: The Revolutionary Life of Paradise Lost

by Orlando Reade

Jonathan Cape (London, 2024), Hbk, 230pages, £22.00.

My relationship with Milton's *Paradise Lost* is quite recent; I first read it six years ago and have done so a couple of times since. At first it was a challenge but it's turned into a pleasure. I love the style – though I admit it can get tedious at times like in the big battle, but, hey, it's nothing compared to wading through those battle scenes in the Iliad which I did for my degree course. There's the great debate in Hell at the start – how do we respond to a devastating defeat? And the beauty of life for two in the Garden of Eden – a little gardening, cool evening breeze, and plenty of food and love making in the bower. And the sadness turning to hope at the end as mankind starts its epic journey. There are ambiguities and contradictions around fundamental questions of free will, and kingship and revolution. It's this last point – revolution – that Orlando Reade takes up in this pacey, entertaining take on *The Revolutionary Life of Paradise Lost*. As he writes in his introduction: "Because of his role as a champion of Parliament in the English Civil War, sometime claimed to be the first modern revolution, Milton has been a cornerstone of the Western political tradition, and his epic tells a story about the crises and contradictions of that tradition". In each of its twelve chapters, Reade focusses on one prominent character, or mostly a group of them, who were influenced by *Paradise Lost* in different ways as they sought to change the world. There's only space to mention a few here.

Our first character is Thomas Jefferson, revolutionary and author of the Declaration of Independence. His writings show his fascination with Satan. At the start of the poem, Satan and his forces are in torment and pain, cast into what was to become Hell – the revolt against the tyrant God had been comprehensively defeated. When the poem was published, the democratic revolt in England had also been comprehensively defeated. When will it rise again? To Jefferson

David Rhodes

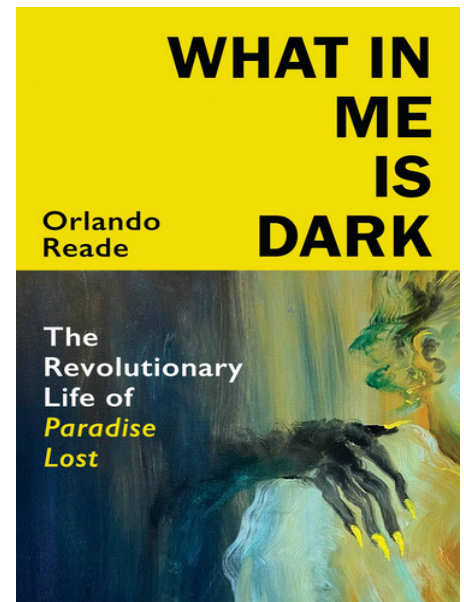
Satan represented the never-give-up spirit; "All is not lost", he says. Even in the burning lake, Satan defies his enemy, the one who "Sole reigning holds the tyranny of heaven".

But Jefferson was a slave owner. He may have championed Satan in his revolt but wasn't a slave society a sort of hell? The great abolitionist Olaudah Equiano used lines from book 1 to describe the island of Montserrat:

Regions of sorrow, doleful shades,
where peace
And rest can rarely dwell. Hope never
comes
That comes to all, but torture without
end
Still urges...

The chapter on Dorothy Wordsworth touches on several poets of the Romantic movement. No-one had a more involved relationship with *Paradise Lost* than William Blake. Blake and his wife Catherine were fond of acting in their garden, playing out scenes of Adam and Eve, dressed for the parts. Dorothy and William Wordsworth enjoyed the same thing. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake says what has become the modern interpretation of Milton: "The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was a true Poet and of the Devils party without knowing it".

The Wordsworths were great supporters of the French revolution: "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, But to be young was very heaven". But they despaired as democracy became a sham and led to authoritarian rule. They saw this reflected in Satan as democratic debate gives way to Satan manipulating the assembly to give him autocratic control. Reade's telling of the debate in Hell – how to recover from defeat - is riveting and the best bit of the book, I think. With the revolution going off course in France, and political repression at home, Wil-



liam Wordsworth starts a sonnet:

Milton! Thou should'st be living at
this hour:
England hath need of thee: she is a fen
Of stagnant waters...

But unlike the Wordsworths, Milton never gave up on revolution.

The strangest chapter follows the fortunes of a group set up to celebrate carnival. In 1857 six white businessmen met in New Orleans to form The Mistick Krewe of Comus. It was the start of what was to become the hedonistic Mardi Gras. In the first parade, the Krewe played out scenes from Milton's Comus. Another year there were masked men with Satan borne aloft, with tableaux from *Paradise Lost*: the creation of the world; the expulsion of Adam and Eve; the conference between Satan and Beelzebub; and the devils' council at Pandemonium. There follows a weird story of how the society turned to cheerleaders for the Confederacy, to white supremacy, to joining with the Ku Klux Klan. Strange where Milton can lead!

The final chapters take us on a whirlwind of modern revolutionaries influenced by the poem. Reade's main evidence for this influence is that they quoted from *Paradise Lost*. Malcolm X gets his own chapter.

Continues on page 25

Worldviews Navigator

"What's Your Worldview" asks
Dave Francis

"Sea of Faith? What's that all about then?"

"So, on our website we say that we 'explore and promote religion and worldviews as valuable human creations'. That's a fair summary."

"Oh, I see. Bunch of atheists then."

"Well, some of our members are convinced atheists, that's true, but I think more of us just leave the question of God's existence to one side. And I think that a lot of our members actually do believe in a sort of 'God' – just not the 'God' of traditional expectations. Not a 'real' God who gets directly involved in human affairs. And probably not a God who lives, suffers and dies as a human being. Or one that literally rises again from the dead. More like God as the sum of our values."

"Like I say, a bunch of atheists."

I don't know if you've ever had this sort of conversation. Most of the people I meet are too polite – or anxious not to offend – to level such criticism at our network. But something like the view of this non-sympathiser with the Sea of Faith is most likely behind that fact that our Regional SOF group in Wessex has been turfed out of a couple of Christian meeting places in recent years.

Clearly 'non-realism' when it comes to our theology is still unacceptable to the traditional 'believer.' We are, at the very least, not everybody's cup of tea.

And that is fine. It would be a strange, if comforting, world where everyone gave up traditional religious belief and practice and joined the Sea of Faith Network. There would be nothing left to do, so everyone would immediately have to resign.

The other reaction to the Network's purpose in exploring religious faith as a human creation was expressed by a young relative of Dinah Livingstone, formerly of this parish, who said, "Of course, what else would it be?"

Sadly perhaps, what might seem obvious to some young people, is not at all part of the worldview of the committed religious realist. Of which there are still very, very many. In fact, contrary to popular belief, there are many non-religious worldviews whose leaders are held in such high regard they might as well be gods. I don't need to list them, I think. But I would like to mention the importance of the Network's role in pointing this out. In many ways it's perfectly understandable that people want the safety and security of certainties, or at least, the good old traditional ways, in matters of belief and lifestyle. But these certainties rely on drawing up barriers against that which is different, alien or unfamiliar. No doubt such rivalries are bound up with the survival instincts which got us this far.

So, it's fine. Relax. While identity fundamentalism exists, there is still work for the Sea of Faith Network to do.

What, though, does the average, or typical SOF member look like? "We're all individuals", I hear you say. "I'm not", says the Monty Python fan.

In order to answer this question, we need some evi-

dence. And I'm extremely grateful to the 62 individuals who responded to our recent survey on membership of other organisations/networks. This enabled us to make a successful application to the Hibbert Trust for a grant to support our annual conference, enabling us to keep down the cost of the event for all who attended.

Here's a summary of the main findings from the SOF members' survey; which I hope you will find make for interesting reading!

1. Religious and Non-religious Worldview Involvement: Many individuals are members of religious organisations such as the Church of England, Quakers, Methodist Church, United Reform Church, Progressive Christian Network, Pagan Circle, Catholic Church and the Jewish Community, as well as non-religious organisations such as Humanists UK and 'Free To Believe'. Activities include attending services, leading discussions, pastoral care, and participating in interfaith initiatives.

2. Community Engagement: Active participation in local community organisations, including civic societies, historical groups, refugee support, and community orchestras. Activities range from organising events, hosting seminars, and leading workshops to providing direct support to vulnerable groups.

3. Educational Contributions: Involvement in educational activities such as delivering lectures, leading workshops, writing publications, and organising discussion groups. Topics include history, philosophy, religion, and social issues.

4. Political and Advocacy Work: Membership in political parties (e.g., Labour Party, Green Party, Liberal Democrats) and advocacy groups (e.g., Amnesty International, Extinction Rebellion). Activities include campaigning, writing articles, and promoting social justice causes.

5. Arts and Cultural Activities: Engagement in arts-related activities such as music, choir participation, poetry writing, community art projects, and organising cultural events.

6. Support for Social Causes: Contributions to organisations focused on human rights, poverty alleviation, racial equality, and refugee resettlement.

7. Personal Development and Lifelong Learning: Participation in study groups, online courses, and workshops to continue personal growth and learning in areas such as philosophy, religion, and humanities.

These themes highlight a strong focus on community, education, spirituality, advocacy, and personal enrichment.

I find this to be an extremely encouraging, if exhausting, picture of our membership, though perhaps it says as much about what we are NOT, as what we ARE.

By the way, I'm pleased to report that our Wessex Group has found a venue that is happy to host our meetings – the Friends' Meeting House in Bradford on Avon. Thank God for the Quakers, I say.

Religion in my life

Lynda Gilbert is a therapist and a Milton Keynes campaigner for social, environmental and international justice. She is one of the founders of the city's Climate Cafe, which brings people together several times a year in order to share information with as many communities as possible, as well as providing a forum in which to share thoughts and feelings about the climate crisis. Lynda has always supported interfaith dialogue, promotes Milton Keynes Friends of Standing Together and is a member of Trubys Abrahamic Women's Choir. Trubys was set up by Kurshida Mirza who was interviewed for the 'Religion in my Life' feature in the last issue of Sofia (no. 156, June 2025). Two poems by Lynda are on the back cover of this issue of Sofia

Interview with Lynda Gilbert

What is your personal experience of religion?

I was born into and grew up in an Orthodox, but not ultra-Orthodox, Jewish family, initially within the very small Jewish community in Portsmouth, and later within the much larger community in Brighton and Hove. I was taught to keep the Sabbath and festivals, and regularly attended synagogue with my mother, sitting in the designated women's areas separate from the men and apart from my father. I went to religion school in Portsmouth and learnt to read Hebrew as well as to study the stories and lessons contained in the Torah. As a university student I became disillusioned with Orthodox Judaism, feeling that it didn't have a place for me as a modern woman, and for many years drifted away from Judaism. I nonetheless married a Jewish man in an Orthodox synagogue, the latter (not the former!) being the choice of my parents. Many years later, when my 8 year old daughter started showing an interest in Judaism, I discovered the Reform Synagogue in Milton Keynes, which was close to where we were living in Bedfordshire at the time. I was delighted at how welcoming they were and how easy it was to have a role to play as a woman in services, and became an active member of the congregation. Following that I became very involved in the Milton Keynes Interfaith movement and have become interested in other faiths and their perspectives.

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

The idea of God means a great deal to me. I became disillusioned with, and questioned, the inconsistencies of the

Old Testament God (as brilliantly illustrated by Tom Hall in his poem in the June issue of Sofia!) at quite a young age- around 17. In place of the beliefs I was taught and grew up with has grown a more spiritual sense of God as the Source of all life, the Light at the core of the universe which is manifest in all living beings. This of course includes me, and the way out of any darkness I experience has ultimately been to turn back to that Light to re-centre and re-focus. Though I've only read about his work indirectly through other people's writings, I believe the 17th Century Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza held beliefs similar to mine; I am also drawn to the symbolic thinking of psychoanalyst Carl Jung. I think that in the Abrahamic tradition we have perhaps made the mistake of taking the ancient stories too literally rather than seeing them as a mix of history and moral allegorical or mythical tales which hint at the true nature of God rather than describing it.

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

It depends what is meant by "religion". I make a distinction between "religion" and "faith" or "spirituality". If "religion" means the stories and the institutions that faith has become embedded in, I would see those as human creations. As to whether the laws of the Torah were "revealed" to Moses by God as described, or whether he and possibly others "created" them, that's difficult to answer because I believe in divine inspiration, and it's possible that our ancient forefathers and teachers were inspired, which you could say is a form

of revelation. The assertion that God Himself (Herself?/Itself?) is a human creation deeply troubles and confuses me. It sounds like an atheist assertion, yet most of the members of SOF don't appear to be atheists, so I'm not sure if that's what they're saying! That assertion places us in a position that I believe atheists inevitably hold, of being the most powerful beings in the universe, or at least on Earth. I see an arrogance in that, and I find it dangerous. For me God is revealed everywhere, and therefore all life is miraculous. I see it as vital that we don't lose that sense of the miraculous, or our humility, in the belief that there is something greater than ourselves gifting life to us.

Do you think or believe that life has meaning?

I believe that the meaning of life is that we are all interconnected, and that each of us has come into this world to take our place in the grand scheme of things. Quantum physics, and the ecosystems which enable our planet to survive, reflect this interconnection. It is our profound spiritual and moral duty to honour this interconnection and the Source of Life at the core of it, which I and others call God. We are witnessing today what happens when we start to ignore that and simply follow our egos and our individualistic paths.

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

Following on from what I've said above, I think it's imperative that religious institutions or faith leaders find ways to guide us back to interconnection with each other and with Nature, with the planet and the universe. They need to speak out



more against human activities that cause the breakdown of ecosystems, weather systems and harmonious human relationships, but also to find nurturing and inspiring ways to get us to rediscover our spirituality. I share Matthew Arnold's lament for the receding tide of the Sea of Faith!

Can you identify the source of the motivation for you to do the work that you do?

I think many things came together to motivate me to do the work that I do as a psychodynamic counsellor (therapist). Some of the motivation is undoubtedly linked to my early life experiences (a very psychodynamic thing to say!). However, I have definitely had moments of feeling "called" to do what I do. There's a sense in those moments of my soul being uplifted, of knowing in every part of me that it's the right decision. I think this is what we mean by "inspiration"- experiencing within us the wisdom that comes from the Source of Life. We then know that we are following our true purpose; in my case that's about alleviating human suffering.

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

I've really enjoyed reflecting on these questions and having the opportunity to share beliefs which are not easy to bring into everyday conversations! Even though I don't align with what the Sea of Faith appears to stand for, I appreciate that I and others are offered this platform. Openness and dialogue can only serve to bring us together and move us away from the divisiveness that threatens our society and ultimately our survival.

Meet the Members

We want your biographies! Email them to: editor@sofn.uk

Robert Crompton grew up in the Jehovah's Witnesses and, at an early age, set his sights upon moving up through the ranks of leadership in that movement. His interest in Biblical study, however, led to his defection from the Witnesses in his early twenties. He spent a few years ranging far and wide among religious ideologies until he went as a late entrant to Lancaster University to read philosophy and linguistics. Following graduation and a spell in local government, his religious instinct reasserted itself and led him into the Methodist Church. He was ordained in 1987 when he was already well over at the liberal end of the spectrum of belief. Since retirement he has focused upon writing. Though no longer active within the institutional church, he remains an ordained minister because he believes that the Christian fellowship must be open to all who wish to engage with faith and spirituality.

Digby Hartridge was born in Southern Rhodesia in 1941, his grandparents having emigrated there from Britain before 1904. He went to Australia in 1975 and in 1983 emigrated again to England. He'll never quite understand English ways. His university subjects were English, Economics and Social Anthropology; the latter frames his thinking. He has worked as an archivist, booksell-

er, clerk of the court, oral historian, special librarian, lecturer in librarianship, teacher, parliamentary librarian, children's librarian, training & marketing officer and public librarian. His parents were an Anglican and a Roman Catholic; he found a better fit in the Sea of Faith, but doesn't know what "spiritual" means. He was always a critic of the Smith regime in Rhodesia; he's sometimes an apologist for Empire. But there's just one issue today: climate change

Patti Whaley studied musicology and piano at university before moving into information technology and charity management. She moved to England in 1990 and has spent the last 35 years in senior management and trustee roles with social justice charities including Amnesty International, Forum for the Future, Action-Aid, Safe Passage, and the Food Ethics Council. In 2021 she was made a Companion of the Order of St Michael and St George in recognition of contributions to international development. She joined SoF in 1996 and was a trustee for 12 years, serving at various times as webmaster, treasurer, and chair. Post-retirement Patti has returned to music and now plays organ regularly at various churches across Kent, as well as tending her herb garden, travelling with husband Ron, and trying to learn Russian.

What in Me is Dark from page 22

C L R James, author of *The Black Jacobins* compares how a European visitor would first see the island of what became Haiti to Satan's first glimpse of Paradise. Leon Trotsky and Fidel Castro add to the line-up.

This is an engrossing read. It's a bit scattergun, and it's wide rather than deep. Reade's strategy is to interleave the narrative of *Paradise Lost* with narratives of his historical characters in broadly chronological order. He makes a valiant attempt. I'm not sure it always works, but I didn't mind. You don't need to be familiar with the poem as he tells the story well, but I think it would encourage

you to take the time to read it.

And the title? At the opening of the poem, Milton seeks inspiration from his muse:

What in me is dark
Illumine, what is low raise and support,
That to the height of this great argument
I may assert the eternal providence,
And justify the ways of God to men.

David Rhodes is a retired computer software consultant and trainer living in Dorchester – a wavering Christian, and quiet SOF member for thirty-odd years

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

The elephant in the room

I'm not sure that I like the new angry and confrontational tone creeping into Sofia. Even some leftist contempt for the Enlightenment! I guess it's in keeping with the times. The May issue was largely concerned with our moral responsibilities, rather than Bible exegesis, and sometimes rather abstract. The anger came mostly from those who had themselves suffered, and I find my own repressed anger returning, but what remains of my rational mind says: this is all very well, but what practical steps can we take? When it comes to the situation in Gaza (so much part of our Christian heritage, one of a number horrific killing fields) it's quickly apparent that any resolution or progress will be determined by *realpolitik*. In Britain the key is the arms trade, a murky world where our defence is bound up with our exports and with Russian and Chinese and several other threats and with access to raw materials and Trumpian bargaining and economies of scale – and a nice risk of escalation into nuclear war. After 80 years no end in sight. Here it's not enough to say, in effect, be true to yourself.

But I wonder again: how will we be judged by future generations? Can our main threat to existence be paused till the Sea of Faith and the rest of the populace gets round to it? Terrible to say but, if we are spared nuclear catastrophe, not even the deadliest of our intraspecies wars will have the impact of climate change and loss of biodiversity. Along with David Attenborough and the King, I'm turning into a bore when I bring up the one overwhelming crisis facing mankind, far more dangerous even than the world wars of the last century, than any pandemic. And here, conversations with neighbours and opinion polls tell me that, at best, we do the minimum; generalising, we agree our western lifestyles are a wee bit naughty and, after some tut-tutting, we endorse a few token gestures. We daren't think seriously about our giant carbon footprints.

There is one slim chance for us. If, collectively, at national level, we came to work towards the same goal. We can't rely on the government, whose overall strategy is probably non-existent, certainly bewildering, nor on its opponents in parliament. Assuming that human beings remain in charge, there's a common interest in getting technocrats, conservationists and private venture capitalists together with the politicians, who are still mostly well-intentioned, with scientists and engineers and leaders of industry and trade unionists and religious leaders and journalists, even with influencers and celebrities and subgroups of the hoi-polloi – that's us. Striving to find common ground. Something of the sort has happened before; for instance, when sane countries stood together against Hitler.

Cupitt wanted us to accept individual responsibility for our actions. And we can't even talk seriously about the elephant in the room.

Digby Hartridge, Yate, near Bristol

Resistance has many manifestations

Mark's gospel tells us about the resistance of Jews to Roman occupation.

Not only are Hamas resisting the occupation of Gaza, but Israelis are resisting annihilation by an international network of Islamic fundamentalists.

Rather than fanning the flames of this conflict, genuine humanitarians could do well to look for ways to help civilians to escape it.

When women and children were evacuated from Ukraine, no one protested about "Nakba".

Why do Palestinian children need to be held as bait in the trap?

Paul Graham, Birmingham

No mission statement is one of SoF's strengths

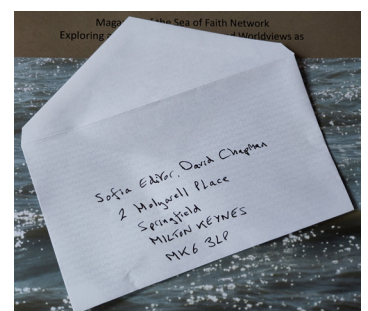
Whilst I agree with almost everything said by Dave Francis and David Boulton I am not convinced that their arguments justify their conclusions and on one point I must take serious issue with David Boulton. I consider Wensleydale cheese to be perhaps the most convincing evidence we have of the existence a benevolent, omnipotent deity that is concerned about the welfare and happiness of humanity.

At a SOF conference some years ago there was a board with seven boxes marked on it. Box 1 was labelled "I believe in God" and box 7 "I do not believe in God". Box 4 was "Don't know" with boxes 2,3,5 and 6 indicating appropriate intermediate positions on the spectrum. Participants were invited to pick up a sticky red dot and place it in the box which best described their position. I was just behind Stephen Mitchell. Some in SoF will not be surprised to learn that he picked up two red dots and placed one in box 1 and one in box 7. I was so impressed that I did likewise. Sometimes two diametrically opposed statements can both be true. In this case much depends on what you think is meant by the words 'believe' and 'god'.

Perhaps a similar board at the next conference, focusing on 'religion as a human creation' might be informative. I could easily emulate Stephen and put dots in several boxes simply because I am not sure what is meant by the words 'human creation.'

Do they mean a consciously thought out and explicitly enunciated proposition from one or several individuals or, at the other end of the spectrum, some part of the human mind which innately and without conscious consideration generates, or just accepts, ideas such as the unconditional preciousness of other humans and the obligation to treat others as you would wish to be treated by them. On this consideration alone it is probably not possible to have a mission statement that all members would agree to.

Yes we all, to some extent, promote what we believe to be true and important and one of the most



endearing features of SoF is that we are all free to do that. I have no objection to Dave Francis's explanation of what SoF is about though I would say something significantly different. Every member of SoF is an anarchist but an anarchist who respects, though not necessarily agrees with, the views of the other 218 SoF anarchists.

Many SoF members are refugees from the church. Some want something different to the church whilst others want something in addition to what they get from the church. As church attendance diminishes the population of potential recruits to SoF diminishes. If SoF is to prosper in the way Dave Francis envisages it needs more than a new mantra. It would have to become a different organisation and find a different recruiting territory. Whilst that might be desirable, given SoF's age demographic, it seems unlikely to happen.

SoF is a place where we ask and discuss questions about life and religion. In this context the words are interchangeable. Religion, however you might define it, has always had a heavy emphasis on reflecting on the human condition. And as Pantelimon Hora, the now famous mentor of Raimond Gaita, once said "Nothing is more important than talking about how to live one's life".

SoF does not provide answers. It may help some individuals to find their own answers; it may just help others to become comfortable with the uncertainty of the absence of answers. Some questions have no answer or many answers, some diametric opposites. Aviation has bred a number of people with an inclination to mysticism like Antoine de St Exupery and Ernest Ghan. William Langewiesche in his book 'Inside the Sky', quotes JB Jackson; "The asking of questions is more important than the finding of answers. It means that, like the air traveller, we have acquired a new, and valuable, perspective on the world."

An organization that "talks" rather than "does" clearly has its limitations but it does allow SoF to be inclusive. It can then leave the doing and promoting to individuals who will each do it in their own way, which, in practice, is what has happened. Thus, before we start haggling about the wording of our mission statement we might ask the question 'Do we need a mission statement?' Perhaps no mission statement is one of SoF's strengths.

At a meeting in Brisbane someone asked Don if he believed in god. Of the many answers he, or any other member of SoF, might have given his reply was 'That is not a relevant question in my paradigm.'

Do you think he would have considered a mission statement for SoF of greater relevance?

Peter Bore, Hornsea, Yorkshire

Worldviews for this Life: Refreshing the Network

I'm not sure that changing the 'tag line' statement of purpose of the network changes anything. Religion, as we know, is itself a humanly created worldview. I agree with Don Cupitt; all knowledge is secondary. Likewise, no one is in a position to say whether there is or is not any afterlife. We don't know how we got here and know nothing about our exit. I do agree that the Network needs refreshing.

One area which has interested me for a long time, one which has not been adequately dealt with by the Network, is the understanding of God as Love – the life-giving force within each one of us; what you might call the *panentheistic* outlook. Clearly, we are not here into an area of knowledge but into the experience of life itself. Panentheism is about God living in Creation and not external to it where He remains unreachable. Panentheism is relational and not individualistic; natural not supernatural. That does not mean that individuals don't have to make personal decisions (Don's comment 'The individual stands absolutely alone – he must decide'). For Christians, it means a radically new approach; instead of beliefs and dogma, Christianity is to be seen as an activity.

May I recommend Ilia Delio's books; she is a creative thinker on the dialogue between religion and science. Also, the latest book by Richard Rohr, *The Tears of Things* (SPCK) is very instructive. Ilia and Richard are both Franciscans. Seeing Spirit as foundational and matter as a part of, but subservient to, Spirit provides a new and exciting area of debate and avoids the metaphysics/ divine intervention trap.

Best wishes and lots of energy to the New Steering Group from a longstanding Member of The Sea of Faith.

Grenville C. Gilbert, Ottery St Mary, Devon.

Stories in the Scriptures

A novelist's approach to the Bible

Stories in the Scriptures offers a way of reading familiar texts from a fresh perspective. Robert Crompton comes to the ancient narratives in the role not of a preacher, but of a story-teller and asks not, "What must we believe?" but rather, "What real situations could have prompted people just like ourselves to tell these tales?"



In trying to find possible answers to questions like this, Robert finds himself drawn closer to the people who first told the stories. Ordinary people just like ourselves, people who loved to tell their tales - to inform, to entertain, and maybe sometimes even to mislead. Real people to whom we can relate and who can inspire us to join in and tell our own stories.

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B0BG97NXTZ>

City Walls

I walk with ease through the streets of Jerusalem
I go lightly through her gates and along her walls
For I am not seen here as a stranger
Though I come from a distant land
While they who are shunned
Stand with centuries behind them
And nothing in their hands but promises
Like fragments of broken seaglass
Washed up on the banks of the river
And on the shores of the sea

I walk with ease through the streets of Jerusalem
Covering with prayers my head and arms
To please the faithful
In the market I buy a garment
Embroidered like the truth
And pay too high a price.
But what does it matter? I've only been cheated
Of a handful of shekels
And not, for God's sake,
A whole country.

Magenta

“This jacket is not magenta,” she said
Disappointed, removing the packaging
“Burgundy, cranberry, mulberry maybe
But definitely not magenta..”
But you
See only grey
Skin the colour of rubble
At the eating-place in Brussels station
She taps in choices on a screen
Edamame beans or avocado, carrot or mango
Black or white rice..
But you
Dizzy with hunger, blinded by thirst
See nothing, touch nothing
She complains from time to time
A snapped shoelace, a trapped finger, a stolen suitcase
The little things that life is made of
But you
Know only the raw and savage bite
Of survival
You dare not count the days
At night there is no shelter and no blanket
She wraps around her
The jacket of her privilege, that is not magenta
And not the colour of blood.