

sfia

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Resisting: Strategies and Ethics



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



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CONTRIBUTIONS

The Editors welcome submissions to Sofia – articles, poems, reviews and books for review. Articles may be edited for publication. Please submit unpublished articles that have not been submitted elsewhere, or if previously published, please state where and when. Contributions express the individual writer's opinion. They do not necessarily represent the views of the Editors or SOF Network.

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Front. Image: *A Mighty Blow for Freedom. Fuck the Media*. Michael Sandle (b.1936). Photograph © David Phillips under CC (BY) license

Back. Poem *Ukraine* by (SoF member) Jane Olive

Editorial. Resisting: Strategies and Ethics

The final edition of this year looks at the strategies and ethics of resisting. Some might argue that we live in a democracy and the only legitimate way to influence government is through debate and the ballot box, but leaving aside any questions about the efficacy of our democracy, many people feel driven to do more than just talk and vote, and want to put direct pressure on decision makers.

In *The Ethics of Pressure* Patti asks whether it is possible to say that some methods of pressuring people are ethical and fair and some are not. Is it possible to critique the methods separately from the message? For many people, the use of violence is never legitimate and they argue instead for nonviolent resistance, pointing to celebrated examples such as Mahatma Gandhi's nonviolent resistance to the British rule of India, but Mustafa in *The Violence of (White) Nonviolence* argues that nonviolence is only successful in the presence of what he refers to as counterviolence. Furthermore, he challenges us to be aware of how white supremacy can be established and maintained by violence, even if that violence is structural and cultural rather than direct. Different types of violence, and the entanglement of violence and religion, are explored by Paul in his piece on Johan Galtung's study of *Violence, Religion, and Peace Building*.

As John discusses in *Protest*, the world is still on a pathway to climate catastrophe and it is not surprising that campaigners are turning to pressure tactics such as direct action. If the aim of pressure is to change people's minds, we need to understand if and how that might work, which is the theme of *How Minds Change*, reviewed by Digby.

Also on an environmental theme, Edwin discusses unnecessary consumption - a timely topic as we head into the

season of excess and waste otherwise known as Christmas!

We read of resisting by three brave individuals. Fidele, in *Hope, Activism and Ubuntu* discusses his background in Rwanda and the importance he attaches to the worldview of Ubuntu, resisting the individualism of western society. Kiran, in *Religion in my Life*, has had to resist racism all her life, and the inner compass that comes from her adherence to Sikhi has led her to take action in solidarity with the people of Gaza. Also motivated by support for the people of Gaza a number of *Sea of Faith* Network members have taken part in the campaign by the organisation *Defend our Juries* to put pressure on the government to reverse the proscription of Palestine Action. In *Defend Our Juries: Lift the Ban* Caroline describes her experience of taking part and getting arrested.

In a reflective piece, Jasbir explores the nature of religion and philosophy, and in his regular *Worldview Navigator* column Dave wonders about the 'obvious'. I was surprised how much I enjoyed reading a book about the life of a Christian Missionary and I tell you about it in a brief review.

There are some challenging ideas in this edition of *Sofia* and I need to issue the usual disclaimer: the views expressed in the articles are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of either the editor or the *Sea of Faith*. But I stand by the inclusion of everything in this magazine, and even if you don't agree with everything you read (in which case write in and tell the editor!), I hope you will find it interesting and stimulating.

This is the last edition of *Sofia* that I will be editing and I now hand over to the very capable hands of Paul.

David Chapman 26th November 2025

Looking ahead to 2026

New editor, and an appeal for an Arts Editor

Paul Overend takes over as editor in the new year. He is seeking one or more individuals to serve as arts editor(s) for *Sofia*. The voluntary role will work closely with the editor in sharing in the exploration of religion and spirituality through written, creative, and performative arts and crafts. If you are potentially interested, please contact the editor for a conversation and an explanation of the aim of this section of the magazine. If you know a suitable person who is not a member (such as an English or arts student or teacher) who would value the opportunity of gaining experience working in print media, please pass this invitation on.

Copy deadline 16th January 2026

Send contributions to:

- *Sofia* Editor: Paul Overend, editor@sofn.uk
- Books Editor: David Lambourn, books@sofn.uk
- Letters Editor: Stephen Mitchell, letters@sofn.uk

The 2026 issues

Three of the next four issues of *Sofia*, in 2026, will take the themes of the faith, hope and love (agapē, I Corinthians 13. 13).

Spring edition 2026: 'Faith – in this life'. The editor invites articles broadly relating to the title or theme of faith, hoping for a variety of approaches to the concept. Please contact the editor early at editor@sofn.uk if you have an idea you would like to explore.

Please also send short paragraph-long recommendations of new fiction and non-fiction books exploring religions and worldviews as human creations to book@sofn.uk, but please contact the books editor early with offers of longer page-length reviews..

Short paragraph-long recommendations of new fiction and non-fiction books and films exploring religions and worldviews as human creations are also welcome, as are older books if they relate to the theme of the magazine (e.g. Martin Hägglund, *This Life*, 2019, for the Spring edition), but please contact the editor early with offers of longer page-length reviews.

Pass It On!

A small campaign to boost Network coverage

Earlier this year the SOFN Steering Committee decided to reproduce a leaflet explaining what the Network does and who it might appeal to. You should find a copy tucked inside this edition of Sofia.

Having gone to the trouble of redesigning, rewriting and reprinting 1000 leaflets we had to decide what to do with them.

Some were distributed at the summer conference; some at this year's RE Lecturers and Advisors Conference. But that still left a hefty pile sitting in a box in my study.

There are various community or religious venues where we could leave some for passers-by, of course, but this seems rather passive. And how long before someone has a helpful 'clear-out' and dumps unwanted literature in the recycling?

Pass it on

We have decided to try a more active approach – albeit on a modest scale – and need Sofia readers' help.

Do you know someone who might be surprised to learn that exploring and celebrating religion – maybe even worshipping – does not necessarily entail belief in the supernatural?

If so, we invite you to give that one person the enclosed SOFN leaflet.

How you do so is entirely up to you.

Pop it in the post.

Tell them a bit about the Network and what you get out of it.

Or say: "I was asked to give this to **one person**, and thought of you".

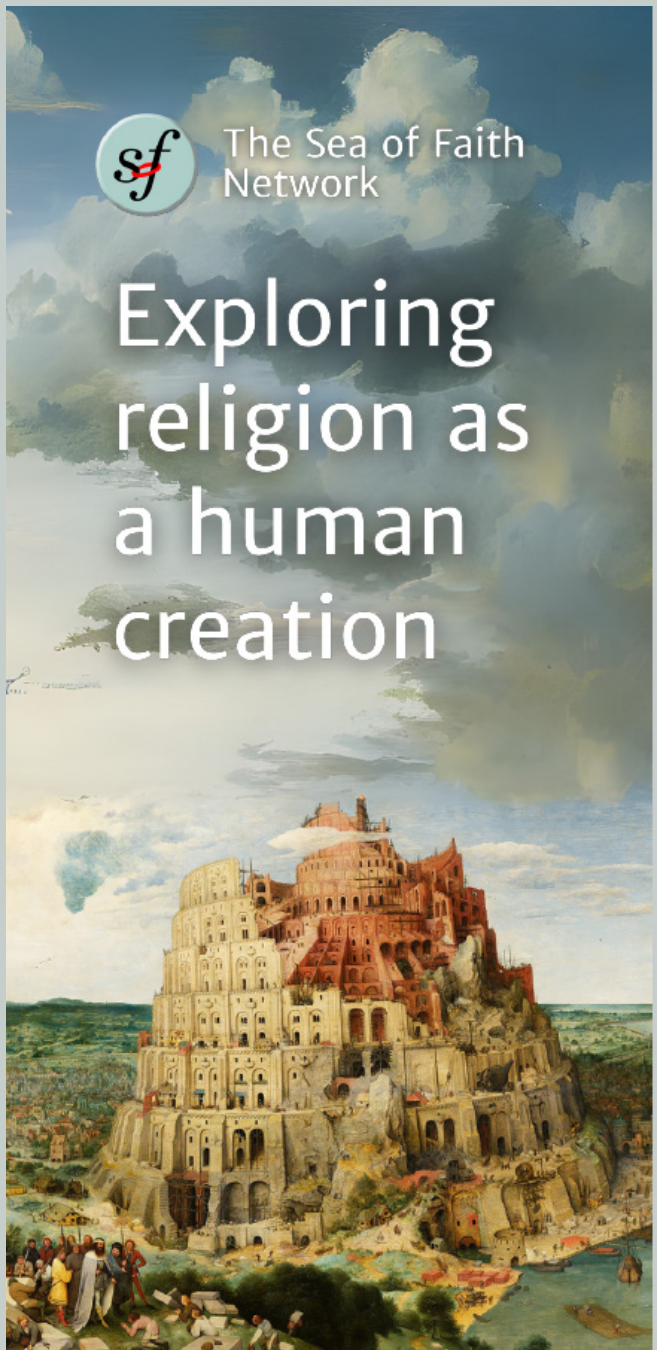
Zero hard sell required

The purpose of Pass It On is not actually to persuade people to sign up as members – although we would be delighted if anyone wants to – rather it's to spread awareness.

I am a newish member of the Network, having joined in 2023, and a newish adherent to the idea that it's possible to appreciate religion as a human-made phenomenon. Earlier this year I was confirmed at Southwark Cathedral, where my son is a chorister.

When I talk to friends about my 'faith' most of them look askance. But if, when probed, I tell them more about how I got here – via Don Cupitt videos on YouTube and the Sea of Faith Network – I often get a reply along the lines of: "Oh yeah, that makes sense" or "That's sort of how I see things actually."

The point is, most people – certainly most youngish people – seem genuinely surprised that such an approach even exists.



If you know someone who might be interested to learn there can be more to religion than the binary I believe/I don't believe, please pass on this leaflet.

Oh and if you're wondering why we're bothering with paper in this digital age, it's because we feel giving someone an actual leaflet is somehow more personal. You might not agree. Technophiles will find a PDF version to pass on at <https://sofn.uk/about>

Let us know

1. How you get on,
2. If you need any more leaflets,
3. If you think this whole thing is a terrible idea.

Sam Alexander - SOFN Steering Group member.

The Ethics of Pressure

Patti Whaley

In November of 2024, I led an on-line discussion about the ethics of “pressure tactics” as a means to achieving a political end. This came up because of me questioning my own different reactions to the differing sentences handed out in 2024 to protestors in different parts of the political spectrum, and whether my reactions were purely dictated by whether I agreed with their aims, or could also be a reflection on their methods. What I wanted to ask was: can we create an ethical critique of pressure tactics in (formal or informal) campaigns? That is, aside from the question of whether my aims and purposes are ethical, or my methods are effective, is it possible to say that certain methods of pressuring people are ethical and fair or not ethical and fair -- can I critique the methods separately from the message? Or is pressure just a neutral tool whose ethical nature relies entirely on the ends to which it is put?

This doesn't seem to be a question that is asked very often. People usually ask: do I agree

with the aim? And: is the technique effective? There is a body of writing in the field of civil disobedience, and a few papers from the business ethics community, but very little that I could find elsewhere on the ethics of pressure itself.

Let's first map out what we're talking about.

Who applies pressure techniques? There are two main groups: Direct stakeholders or constituency groups, and indirect stakeholders – usually civil society groups. Constituency groups represent their members – e.g. unions, tenancy associations, etc. They represent their own interests, although they may be responsive to the interests of other stakeholders. They usually have close/contractual links to the parties they are trying to influence, but they may also try to influence public opinion.

Civil society groups promote gen-

eral causes based on a set of shared beliefs or principles such as human rights, environmental protection, or prevention of cruelty to animals. They may defend the interests of civil society generally, local communities, specific groups or even the unborn. They might pressure governments or companies to live up to professed standards, pay attention to longer term impacts, listen to those with less power. They need to build broader social support, research and publicise their issue to win support, raise money, etc. There are many subgroups here: charities, religious groups, and informal social movements. They may be large, highly organised groups, or ad hoc responses to an event or a crisis, and one may morph into another. Online groups can be very amorphous. The people they are trying to influence can be governments, other policy makers, corporations, or employers, but “public opinion” is usually at least an indirect or secondary target. They may have hopes of imminent change, but they may simply be trying to influence the “Overton Window”, i.e. the range of solutions that it is publicly acceptable to discuss.

And what do I mean by “pressure techniques”? Pressure is what you use when the simple force of argument doesn't win the day, and the established paths of effecting change are not working. If you're marshalling evidence and reason to demonstrate that your position is correct -- publishing research, writing to your MP, or generally engaging in the “marketplace of ideas”, I don't consider this on its own to be pressure. Taking people to court to compel them to comply with existing law would not be considered pressure unless legal threats are used in a bullying or silencing way. Voting is also an attempt to work within the existing avenues of power, whether that is voting in a national election, or buying stock in a company in order

to pass shareholder resolutions at an AGM. Humor can be used in effective ways to illustrate a point without necessarily pressuring people; for example, when campaigners advocating for better paternity leave publicised their cause by putting baby dolls in baby slings on public statues of prominent men. These are all, in my view, working within established “fair” mechanisms to bring about fair outcomes. But the strength of argument rarely suffices on its own, so then we resort to pressure of different kinds:

Force of numbers: petitions, mass letter-writing campaigns, opinion polls, and other ways of demonstrating how many people agree with me. Of course, the fact that lots of people agree with me is no proof that I am right; it might prove that you'd be wise to listen, if you're a politician, but it's not an argument per se. Mass demonstrations are another use of the force of numbers. Demonstrations can be nonviolent; they can be peaceful but obstructive; they can be peaceful but refuse to disperse, e.g. sit-ins; or they can become violent, but we'll address violence later.

Publicity/shame: exposing a target's failure to live up to their professed standards, their illegal or exploitative behaviour, their lack of transparency or conflicts of interest; or basically, publicising any information that the target don't want shared or publicised – filming factory farms, for example.

Ridicule and harassment is similar; for example, projecting “I crashed the economy” behind Liz Truss while she is giving a talk.

Moral pressure through public stances or public self-sacrifice – including anything from “taking the knee” to hunger strikes and self-immolation. Closely related is refusal to obey: civil disobedience, conscientious objection, refusal to pay your taxes or your water bills.

Economic harm: damaging your target via product boycotts, strikes, divestment, sanctions, or other property damage.

Is it possible to say that certain methods of pressuring people are ethical & fair? This doesn't seem to be a question that is asked very often

Fear, shock, and distress: Influencing people by warning of dire consequences if they don't vote your way. Or seeking to provoke a very emotional response, for example through photos of bloody aborted fetuses, without taking into account that other forms of surgery are equally bloody without being morally suspect.

Inconvenience & obstruction: campaigners may "force" people to take notice of them by blocking access to a building site, stopping traffic, refusing to let people speak, or otherwise interfering with peoples' lives.

Violence: finally, protestors may resort to physically damaging property, rioting, taking hostages, or even physically harming other people.

For all of these methods, I emphasize, the pressure technique itself can be separated from the rightness of its cause; any of these can be used for ends that I do, or do not, approve of.

I'd like to propose a five-point framework for assessing the ethics of any of the above techniques:

- Is your aim legitimate?
- Have you picked a legitimate target?
- Are your tactics fair?
- Have you considered the direct or indirect consequences of the tactic?
- And...who are you?

Let's look at each of these in detail:

Is your aim legitimate?

At first I wanted to separate purposes from tactics, but it's important to establish some ground rules for what a "legitimate purpose" should look like (which is separate from whether I agree with the purpose or not). A legitimate purpose is:

Soundly and honestly argued, with good reasons and relevant data: no distorted or inaccurate information, no information taken out of context, no sly insinuations (no Trumpian "well I'm just repeating what some people say..."), no skewed analysis of statistics or events.

Clear and transparent: No hidden agendas! The stated aim must be the real aim. If you have a personal interest, you must disclose it.

Aware of the wider picture: a lot of campaigns are led by special interest groups who give the impression that they don't care what happens to anyone else as long as they get what they want. One thinks here of NIMBYs who accept that something should be done, but not in their neighbourhood; or other campaigns that ignore the wider picture or the common good. This is a tricky area, as sometimes it is necessary to advance a particular point of view to ensure that it gets a hearing and influences the final solution; for example, following the Rwanda genocide, Amnesty International campaigned for everyone accused of participation in the genocide

Double standards are the root of all evil

to receive a fair trial that met international standards. When I objected that this was clearly impractical, the Secretary General said "Yes, of course. But if we don't advocate it, the people who advocate no process at all will be unopposed." So, while you may advocate for a particular solution, you must at least be aware of how your position fits into the wider picture.

No double standards, no special pleading: Double standards are the root of all evil! Don't advocate principles for yourself that you wouldn't want to apply to other groups.

Have you picked a legitimate target?

An ethical action should apply pressure to the people who are responsible for the perceived harm, or have some power to change it. In some cases, the target is straightforward: relevant legislators, for changing a law; your employer, if you want better working conditions. You may target someone directly, or you may legitimately seek to raise awareness in the general public, in the hopes that they will also apply pressure to the responsible parties.

Sometimes campaigning groups select one target out of a wider com-

munity, such as selecting one company that exemplifies a problem across a wider sector; this must be thought through with some care. Attacking one company for an industry-wide problem may look like victimisation, particularly if you've chosen that company because they are vulnerable, or because it's likely to generate more publicity, rather than because they are the most powerful or the most guilty. Because supply chains are so complex these days, it can be very difficult to assign responsibility for wrongdoing, and campaigners often aim at the company with the biggest profile. For example, it is often oil companies who are blamed for oil spills, when it may actually be the shipper who is at fault.

It should go without saying that you must avoid conflicts of interest when choosing targets; it's wrong to campaign against one company, while sparing another because they donate to your cause.

Are your tactics fair?

This is the heart of the matter: are your tactics necessary, proportional, and effective?

Is it necessary? That is, have you tried non-pressure routes – evidence, persuasion, negotiation, dialogue, reasoning, action through political channels – before resorting to pressure? This is a complex question, because whether political channels are "reasonably available" may depend on your position in society; to take an extreme example, one cannot blame suffragists for bypassing the political system when that system had shut them out. Whether persuasive channels are available to you may depend on your class, your race, your educational level, your financial resources, and many other factors.

Even if those channels are reasonably available, you may feel that you have already tried them all, to no avail. Certainly environmental protestors feel that they have been raising the issue of global warming for some decades now, and it has made little difference; one can hardly blame them for feeling that they

must shout louder if they want people to listen. As one listener in our online session said, “these days, we all feel disenfranchised; no one in Whitehall listens to us.”

Is it proportional? The pressure applied needs to be proportional to the harm you are trying to correct; so, for example, striking or withholding services is usually seen as a proportional response to low pay, but looting stores or damaging company property is not.

Is it effective? Is it counterproductive? I said above that I’d like to assess whether an action is ethical, separately from whether it is

likely to be effective, but I can only separate these to some extent. An ethical action should be part of a reasonable strategy or theory of change, not just a prank or an expression of outrage or a publicity gimmick, although such actions may make the protestors themselves feel better.

These days there is a lot of discussion about the usefulness of pressure tactics that severely inconvenience or alienate the target audience, and whether such alienation is counterproductive (for example, actions by Just Stop Oil or Extinction Rebellion). There’s a lot to think about here. If I look at the reactions of white southerners to the nonviolent actions taken during the USA civil rights movement, for example, I am inclined to think that

anything other than submission to the prevailing racist regime would have alienated some white people, so alienation was a risk that had to be borne. Most protest is, by its very nature, inclined to disturb people.

There is also research suggesting that while extreme actions do alienate people, they also help the cause; they make the moderates for that cause more acceptable. The suffragette Emily Davison, who carried out years of provocative and unlawful actions before dying in the 1913 Derby, was at one point sacked and disavowed by the Women’s Social and Political Union; but she did sway public opinion in the end.

What about the role of surprise? Is it ethical to spring something on a target, and not give them the opportunity to defend themselves? Ethical reporters will often contact a target before they publish a story, and give them the right of reply; is this always necessary? Sometimes campaigners will notify the media of an impending action, but not notify the target; is this fair? Perhaps whether it is fair depends on whether the element of surprise is really necessary for the success of an action, or whether it is just a technique to ensure that only one side of the story is presented.

Does legality matter? People have differing attitudes towards illegality. Civil disobedience, defined as “a public, non-violent and conscientious breach of law undertaken with the aim of bringing about a change in laws or government policies” is generally not considered unethical. The public is surprisingly supportive (50 – 67%) of campaigning organisations who break laws as long as no violence or destruction is involved.

The acceptability of lawbreaking increases when people feel that the laws themselves are unfair

The acceptability of lawbreaking increases when people feel that the laws themselves are unfair; the UK is currently taking a very punitive stance towards environmental protests and pro-Palestine protests, to the extent that people are now often arrested for protesting about their right to protest. Or, as a recent Palestine Action protestor said, “when injustice becomes law, resistance becomes duty.”

It would be foolish, though, to think that legality no longer matters. In the USA, it is often only the courts who are willing and able to stop Trump’s illegal executive orders; Trump is himself attacking the rule of law, and he must not be allowed to succeed in that. If the rule of law matters when we judge Trump, then it should matter when we judge ourselves. That doesn’t mean we should never break the law; it means we must rigorously examine why we are doing so, and be confident that we can justify it in any particular set of circumstances.

But avoid violence if at all possible, especially physical violence against people. Violence against property is unfortunate but can serve a legitimate purpose. Try to avoid violence against property that doesn’t target the people directly or indirectly responsible for the issue; burning and looting is often simply an expression of rage and frustration taken out on whatever property is near to hand.

Some people suggest that campaigners should avoid “harm”; but harm is a very loose term, which can encompass anything from delays in health care, to financial losses caused by strikes and boycotts, or disruption to traffic by environmental protestors, to simply offending the sensibilities of the “privileged”. To rule out anything that could be construed as “harm” would be to make pressure tactics almost impossible.

Use of emotion and distress: Is it legitimate to use emotion and distress to override reason? Consider for example the cases of parents who want

Environmental protestors feel that they have been raising the issue of global warming for some decades now, and it has made little difference; one can hardly blame them for feeling that they must shout louder if they want people to listen.



Emily Davison

a medical treatment for their child, against the advice of the medical team about the child's best interests, and who use public sympathy to pressure medical staff. It might be understandable, but is it ethical? Consider also how some anti-abortion campaigners show bloody pictures of aborted fetuses in an attempt to equate physical horror with moral horror. This is flawed and manipulative; many types of surgery are gruesome and bloody but that doesn't make them wrong.

And, again, no double standards, no special pleading. Don't use tactics that go against your own values or that you would find unacceptable if they were used by your opponents. Your means should be compatible with your ends, or as a Quaker friend said, "the means are the ends in the making." For example, heckling or "cancelling" people in the name of "free speech" is self-contradictory. There were gay campaigners in the past who chose to "out" closeted gay people as a means of advancing the cause of gay rights; this seemed cruel, and demonstrated a disregard for the dignity and rights of other gay people that seemed contrary to the cause.

Have you considered the direct or indirect consequences of the tactic?

Make sure that you have considered who will be harmed by your action – will your primary victims be the people that you are actually campaigning

against, or other stakeholders, or innocent bystanders? Unions going on strike, for example, may have little regard for the interests of customers (or patients) or may take extensive steps to ensure that harm is minimised. Campaigns can also have indirect consequences. A campaign to outlaw child labour needs to consider the impact on the family if children cannot bring in income. A campaign to boycott or sanction a country needs to consider how it will harm the most vulnerable people in that country.

And...who are you?

Why are you here? Do you have or represent a legitimate interest? As the legal gurus would say, do you have standing, or do you have other reasons for causing trouble? We hear a lot about "external rabblers" coming in to stir up discontent, and often that is regarded as illegitimate.

On the other hand, many activists in the American civil rights movement were accused of being "Yankees come down here to cause trouble", but we now think of some of them as heroes. There is a strong shift in the nonprofit sector towards ensuring that oppressed people are enabled to speak for themselves rather than having campaigners speak "for" them. Think through why you are showing up, and whether you should be taking a front seat or a supporting role.

Is your own house in order? Make

sure there are no inconsistencies between your cause and your own behaviour; walk the talk. If you are challenging prejudice or discrimination, make sure you are tackling it internally as well. Examine any potential conflicts of interest with care.

Own your stuff. Take responsibility for what you say and what you do. Do your research and check your facts. Avoid anonymity unless it's absolutely necessary for the success of the action or for your own safety. If you break a law, taking your punishment is part of the deal.

Finally: always, always, always assess context and power. The points above need to be thought through when deciding whether a pressure tactic is ethically justifiable, but there are no hard and fast rules. You must always take into account the context, the options available, and the

Do not give up

relative power of the parties involved. I cannot emphasize enough that the points above are not go-or-no-go options; they are simply a framework of things that you should think through in order to satisfy yourself that you are acting with as much integrity as you can muster in the circumstances.

In the year since our original online discussion, the atmosphere for protest has become much darker. In the UK, the standoff about Palestine Action now seems to be less about the genocide itself, and more about protestors insisting on their right to object to that genocide, and their refusal to accept that protest against genocide equals support of terrorism. In the USA, ICE is itself behaving like a terrorist organisation, and the government seems determined to punish any individual or organisation that stands in its way. Meanwhile, the planet continues its march towards environmental catastrophe. It may seem, in these circumstances, that any form of resistance is justifiable. In response, I can only say, yes, I understand...but think carefully. Do not become the enemy. Do your best. And do not give up.



The Violence of (White) Nonviolence

Syed Mustafa Ali

In what follows, I offer a brief critical and exploratory reflection on the entanglement of non-violence with whiteness against the backdrop of what is almost two years of genocide enacted against the Palestinian people by the Zionist settler colonial state of Israel with the enabling complicity of the United States, other white settler states historically originating from the United Kingdom, and various European states.

While those who manifest whiteness, consciously or otherwise, claim to advocate for nonviolence and against violence, I argue that their advocacy can function as a form of violence that contributes to the ongoing oppression of non-white people. Consistent with that reading, I further argue that violence – or rather counterviolence – may be necessary to end this oppression. Although nonviolence might help end oppression, that is usually by virtue of its situation within a wider context of counterviolence. I will show that commonly invoked examples of effective nonviolence were successful due to contemporaneous counterviolence, notwithstanding that the counterviolence might not have been intentionally linked to the nonviolent action.

I start by setting out what I mean by ‘whiteness’, and why I refer to whiteness rather than some other phenomenon such as ‘neoliberalism’, ‘capitalism’, ‘Eurocentrism’, ‘Westernism’, ‘colonialism’, ‘imperialism’, ‘hegemony’ etc. What work does whiteness do that these other terms do not – perhaps cannot? Underlying this question is another line of questioning having to do with the extent to which the concept of ‘whiteness’ is strategically useful, or whether it risks perpetuating rather than dismantling racism? Put another way, to what extent might ‘whiteness’ alienate potential white allies and undermine

the attempt at building strategic alliances and international solidarities to achieve shared goals?

Following sociologist Steve Garner (2007), by ‘whiteness’ I refer to a racialised identity – being ‘white’ – that needs to be understood as existing in dynamic relational tension to and with other racialized identities (for example, being black, being Muslim etc). Crucially, whiteness or white identity is not merely one identity among others, but rather that identity which is dominant. Going further, Garner points to whiteness as functioning in at least two ways: first, as an invisible background and standard against which non-whiteness is understood and ‘measured’; and second, as a persistent, albeit contested, globally-systemic political structure, viz. white supremacy. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, white supremacy was established and is maintained, expanded, and refined through thought, speech, and action that is violent, directly through the exercise of physical force – on occasion exterminatory as in the racial-colonial prosecution of

genocide – and indirectly through deceit (Fuller, Jr., 1984). It is in relation to the latter – that is, indirect violence or deceit – that I want to consider the entanglement of whiteness with non-violence. Put simply, and anticipating what follows, I am interested in exploring the whiteness of non-violence as a means by which whiteness enacts violence against its victims by a ‘disarming counsel’ – that is, an encouragement to adopt exclusively non-violent means in the pursuit of justice with such as the principled injunction that ‘violence is never the answer’. Nowhere is this perhaps more blatantly evident than in the disavowal of those who call for the legitimacy – and perhaps necessity – of Palestinian armed struggle against the Zionist settler colonial state of Israel, and the legitimacy – and again, perhaps necessity – of challenging militarism within the enabling Western ‘core’ of the modern/colonial world system.

Before proceeding, however, I need to clarify that in exploring the entanglement of whiteness with non-violence, I’m not suggesting that non-white people have not developed and assumed principled nonviolent orientations of their own on various grounds – metaphysical/theological, ethical and otherwise – although it is crucial to question the extent to which these orientations are separable from

While those who manifest whiteness, consciously or otherwise, claim to advocate for nonviolence and against violence, I argue that their advocacy can function as a form of violence that contributes to the ongoing oppression of non-white people.

frantz
fanon

les damnés
de la terre

préface de
jean-paul sartre

cahiers
libres
n° 27-28

Violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect

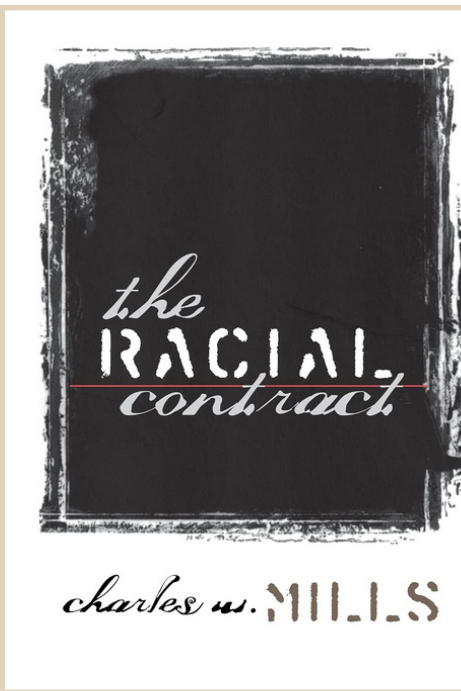
Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*

Frantz Fanon (1925 - 1961) was born in Martinique, studied medicine in France and worked in a hospital in Algeria during the uprising against the French. He was an articulate advocate of the rebels, known especially for *les damnés de la terre*, translated as *The Wretched of the Earth*.

whiteness, at least subsequent to the latter's becoming dominant. In addition, I'm not arguing that non-white people should never adopt nonviolent means strategically in pursuit of liberatory projects, nor that violence is something desirable in and of itself. (In this connection, I find myself in good company with Franz Fanon, Malcolm X and, most importantly, adherents of the Islamic tradition going back to the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him.) Rather, and at the risk of labouring a point, my focus in this piece is on exploring how nonviolence is used as a means to maintain, expand, and refine whiteness. In short, and adapting von Clausewitz, nonviolence as the continuation of violence by other means.

Furthermore, in engaging with the whiteness of nonviolence, I am not suggesting that all white people are committed to maintaining, expanding, and refining the 'project' of whiteness as understood on the lines sketched above, although I insist that under contemporary conditions of global white supremacy this is the default arrangement. Consistent with the late Charles W. Mills, author of *The Racial Contract* (1997), who argues that white people are the intended beneficiaries of the 'contract' of white supremacy, I maintain that white people can choose – and some have chosen – to refuse, reject, 'tear up' this contract, turn 'race traitor', and work alongside black, brown, red, and yellow people in attempting to dismantle this unjust global structural and systemic reality. I suggest that the possibility of race treachery provides a response to those concerned that calling out whiteness might alienate white people and thereby undermine the potential for strategic alliances and solidarity. That said, in what follows, I want to explore how whiteness is at work in at least some of the ways in which arguments for nonviolence and a disavowal of violence

White people can choose to refuse, reject, 'tear up' this contract, turn 'race traitor', and work alongside black, brown, red, and yellow people in attempting to dismantle this unjust global structural and systemic reality.



The peculiar contract to which I am referring, though based on the social contract tradition that has been central to Western political theory, is not a contract between everybody ("we the people"), but between just the people who count, the people who really are people ("we the white people"). So it is a Racial Contract .

Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract*

Charles Mills (1951-2021) identifies an implicit "Racial Contract" whereby only white people are accorded full rights, with non-whites deemed less than fully human.

are made. My means of approach is through critical engagement with a few examples drawn from history. (In this connection, one glaring omission, relevant on account of certain ostensible parallels with Palestine, is South Africa and the resistance of the ANC which assumed various forms including armed struggle against the apartheid regime. Unfortunately, limitations of space preclude engaging with that example here.)

In an article for OpenDemocracy discussing, among other matters, the effectiveness of nonviolence in relation to the Second World War, freelance lecturer in conflict studies, activist, and 'nonviolent trainer' Jorgen Johansen – a white person – concedes that "there is no reason

to believe that nonviolent defence any more than armed defence could stand against a well-prepared military force without serious preparation." However, he goes on to maintain that "the German army was well prepared to meet

armed resistance, but less able to cope with strikes, civil disobedience, boycotts and other forms of nonviolent action." Importantly, Johansen points to the actions of "6000 'Aryan' German women [who] took part in a nonviolent protest in February and March 1943, outside the prison in Rosenstrasse in Berlin, to get their

Jewish husbands and friends released. Thanks to these brave women 1700 prisoners were indeed released. These examples illustrate that some groups

It was the counterviolence of the Nazi, Italian, Japanese and their surrogate Axis powers that neutralized the violence of the British Empire and allowed Gandhi's nonviolent movement in India to obtain independence

have more impact than others. It was difficult for the Nazis to attack German women." Indeed. According to Johansen,

While the Allies were busy bombing civilians in Hamburg and Dresden, the nonviolent resistance movement saved thousands of people from concentration-camps. Although military strategists were aware of the existence of gas chambers, they destroyed neither the camps nor the infrastructure for transporting prisoners.

Granted, yet would such nonviolent resistance have been possible without the violent action of the Allies? Here, I refer to the important intervention of Black Panther – and Muslim – Russell 'Maroon' Shoatz analysing the dialectical relationship between violence, nonviolence, and counterviolence in the context of Gandhi's and Martin Luther King's struggles in India against the British and in America against white supremacy, respectively. According to Shoatz, one cannot

make sense of the effectiveness of either of these nonviolent interventions (liberation from British rule in the case of Gandhi, and the civil rights struggle against white supremacy in the case of King Jr.) without understanding the wider systemic context in which violent and counter-violent (as contrasted with nonviolent) forces interacted. Briefly, according to Shoatz, “World War II ... served as the counterviolence to the British Empire’s violence – which was otherwise holding Gandhi’s nonviolent movement in check.” (Shoatz 2013, p.233) Crucially, as he goes on to argue, “Gandhi’s nonviolent non-cooperation campaign did not free India from British rule at the end of World War II (in 1947). Instead, it was the counter-violence of the Nazi, Italian, Japanese and their surrogate Axis powers that neutralized the violence of the British Empire and allowed Gandhi’s nonviolent movement in India to obtain independence through a synthesis between the kinetic forces that dominated these events.” (ibid, p.234)

In the case of “Martin L. King Jr. and the gains made by the civil rights movement in the United States, we can easily recognize similar counter-violent forces working to neutralize the violence being levelled against that movement. In this case, the counterviolence came from two major arenas: the police and military forces of the United States government, and the rising anticolonial struggles in the (so-called) Third World – the latter being closely associated with Russian and Chinese Cold War opposition to the United States.” (ibid, p.234) In short, counterviolence is a necessary facilitator of nonviolence, a position similarly endorsed by white anarchist Peter Gelderloos who draws attention in *The Failure of Nonviolence* (2013) to the ambiguity and incoherence of ‘violence’ as an objective analytical concept and category given its entanglement with power, mounting a critique of the reduction of oppositional direct action to exclusively nonviolent forms. (That said, I think one can and should distinguish between violence – that is, force targeting persons – and destruction – that is, force directed

at property. On this reading, direct action, vandalism, sabotage, civil disobedience, unrest, riot, boycott, protest, strike, disruption, uncivility, etc. should all be understood as non-violent. However, in arguing along

to be reduced to a simple binary, between Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s nonviolence and Malcolm X’s ‘by any means necessary’. However, on her reading, force – from work stoppages and property destruction to armed re-

There's nothing in our book, the Qur'an, but you call it 'Ko-ran', that teaches us to suffer peacefully. Our religion teaches us to be intelligent. Be peaceful, be courteous, obey the law, respect everyone, but if someone puts his hand on you, send him to the cemetery. That's a good religion. In fact, that's that old-time religion. That's the one that Ma and Pa used to talk about. An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth, and a head for a head, and a life for a life, that's a good religion. No one resents that kind of religion being taught but a wolf who intends to make you his meal.

Malcolm X / Al-Hajj Malik Al-Shabazz, ‘Message to the Grassroots’, 1963

these lines, it is crucial to appreciate that the line between the two can – and often does – blur. For example, targeted destruction of property – especially where the latter assumes the form of critical infrastructure necessary for the maintenance and flourishing of life – can result in violence to person, the devastation wrought on Palestinian life through the destruction of civilian infrastructure in Gaza being an obvious case in point. The distinction between violence and destruction also collapses where persons are transformed into property – as happened to enslaved African people during the Transatlantic slave trade, for example.) Crucially, in relation to the argument I am making in this piece, Gelderloos also points to “the utility of nonviolence for colonialism and for suppressing and co-opting liberation movements, as well as the paternalism and racism of white progressives in using nonviolence to control the movements of people of colour.” (p.283) In this connection, mention needs to be made of *We Refuse: A Forceful History of Black Resistance* (2024), in which black historian Kellie Carter Johnson explores the dismissal of ‘Black violence’ as an illegitimate form of resistance as a manifestation of white supremacy, a distraction from the insidious, unrelenting violence of structural racism. Building on her 2019 work exploring violence in relation to black abolitionism, Carter Johnson argues that black resistance to white supremacy tends

– has played a pivotal part in securing freedom and justice for Black people since the days of the American and Haitian Revolutions.

I will conclude by continuing with the theme of revolution and turning to Malcolm X’s ‘Message to the Grassroots’ (see box). Notwithstanding the importance of attending to the historical context within which the speech was delivered, I suggest it retains its analytical force and relevance in relation to the contemporary world – a world that continues to be plagued by the entangled violence of white supremacy, colonialism, and capitalism.

Of all our studies, history is best qualified to reward our research. And when you see that you've got problems, all you have to do is examine the historic method used all over the world by others who have problems similar to yours. Once you see how they got theirs straight, then you know how you can get yours straight ... I cite these various revolutions, brothers and sisters, to show you that you don't have a peaceful revolution. You don't have a turn-the-other-cheek revolution. There's no such thing as a nonviolent revolution ... The white man knows what a revolution is ... Revolution is bloody, revolution is hostile, revolution knows no compromise, revolution overturns and destroys everything that gets in its way. And you, sitting around here like a knot on the wall, saying, “I'm going to love these folks no matter how much they hate me.” No, you need a revolution. (Malcolm X 1965 [1963], pp.8-9)

Insofar as the decolonisation project remains unfinished, the legacy after-

lives of colonialism and new forms of colonialism building on such legacy manifesting in the contemporary postcolonial era, I find myself returning to a statement I made over half a decade ago:

I'm not arguing that counter-violence is – or should be – the preferred means by which to effect radical, revolutionary change.

If the modern/colonial world system is indeed a violent global systemic hierarchy, then perhaps some form of 'counter-violence' is necessary to bring 'The World' to an end and replace it with another, different and hopefully better world. (Ali 2017, pp.300-301).

I stand by this, but I don't want to be misunderstood. I'm not arguing that counterviolence is – or should be – the preferred means by which to effect radical, revolutionary change. What I am arguing is that it cannot – must

not – be discounted as a means among various other means enabling such transformation; in this connection, I find myself, once again, in the company of Malcolm X, the latter of whom has "a very utilitarian vision of the utility of violence" (Sawyer 2020, p.114).

In short, by any means necessary.

Acknowledgements

I should like to thank some friends and colleagues – black, brown, and white, male and female, Muslim and non-Muslim – for providing feedback on drafts of this essay which has improved the final version in various ways. While anonymous, I trust you recognise the traces of your provocations in the final version of this piece.

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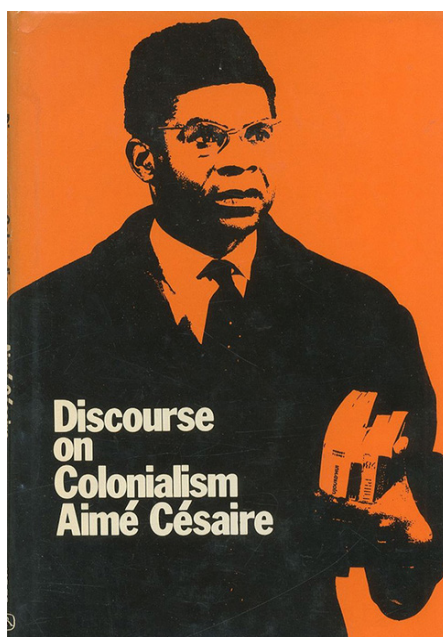
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But let us speak about the colonized... I am talking about societies drained of their essence, cultures trampled underfoot, institutions undermined, lands confiscated, religions smashed, magnificent artistic creations destroyed, extraordinary possibilities wiped out.

Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*

Aimé Césaire (1913-2008) was born in Martinique and co-founded the Négritude movement, celebrating Black identity and resisting colonialism. In *Discourse on Colonialism* he links European "civilization" to violence, racism, and economic exploitation.



Hope, Activism and Ubuntu

David Chapman in conversation with
Fidele Mutwarasibo

Dr Fidele Mutwarasibo is a Senior Lecturer in Work Based Learning at the Open University and is much in demand in the public life of the city of Milton Keynes. I know him personally through our membership of the (ecumenical) Church of Christ the Cornerstone, and was aware that he has been through life experiences far removed from anything I have had to deal with. His experiences, to my way of thinking, give him the authority to speak of things which are purely theoretical for the rest of us. Specifically, he has been exposed to extreme violence and I wanted to understand how he emerged from this with what seems like remarkably little bitterness and a lot of wisdom and generosity.

Fidele was born in Rwanda and was there at the time of the genocide. The details are too painful for him to recount, but during the '100 days of madness' he faced many near-death experiences, and he escaped to Goma in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), a place which itself is now in the news for all the wrong reasons. After a year in Goma he migrated to the Republic of Ireland where he studied for his PhD and was active both in the life of the Church and the community. He was not afraid to speak out on difficult issues such as racism in Irish society, which even led to online death-threats. After 19 years in Ireland he moved to Milton Keynes to work at the Open University.

I especially wanted to understand how, given his experiences, he retained what seems to me to be a remarkably positive outlook, and he talked about hope: hope in situations where hope is unrealistic. Hope means that you appreciate where you are, but recognise that nothing is at a standstill.

You can envision a better tomorrow, which can sometimes be unrealistic, but you can envision a situation where all these things will go away

Or maybe you can't even envision it,

but you continue to hope for it.

You are in a desperate situation but the fact that you don't see how to get out of these predicaments does not mean you have to say "OK all life is lost". The situation may look atrocious... but if I survive, if I get the chance to get out, this is what I might do

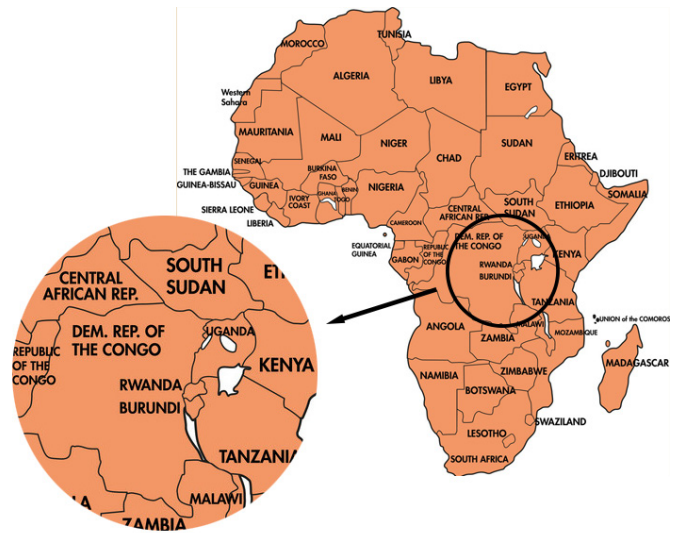
If you have hope that things can change it might help you identify the part you might play to make the situation different tomorrow.

What resources do I have? When I talk about resources, I am not only talking about money. I am talking about your friends. I am talking about people who might open doors which look otherwise locked.

I know from what Fidele has said before that when the trouble came some of his 'friends', Westerners with resources and routes to escape, melted away and offered no help. Yet he was not bitter.

What I've learned, and this is also hope, is to think maybe this is happening but I may get the chance to go and tell them they abandoned me. That will give me some sort of spirit ... because you are saying there is a lesson to be learned here, and I have to go and tell these people, and say, in my hour of need where were you? But if you are already a victim you are not going to be able to say it. The hope is that you may be able to go and, not confront, not fight, but tell them to their face, by the way you abandoned me

I wanted to press him, though, on how he could avoid bitterness. His response was in terms of understanding and empathy and he asked me: "If there was a bomb that explodes. What would you do?". "Run away" I said.



Yes, you try to escape. Maybe there is someone sitting beside you but you will not have thought "what have I done, have I forgotten someone". So I wouldn't blame them. People are trying to save themselves. It is potentially only afterwards, once the dust has settled, when you start saying, I wish, I wish, I wish. They should have done more but based on the circumstances, on the choices they had to make, they were probably traumatised

Another OU academic that I admire was born to a Jewish family in France in 1930. His parents were murdered in the holocaust and he was hidden in Free France until coming to the UK at the end of the war. He once told me

You can't change the past. The present you may have some influence on but certainly the future you can change

that one thing he learned in therapy was that 'regret' is the most useless of emotions. I mentioned this to Fidele, and he strongly agreed:

I have an analogy because I am always thinking positively, that my glass is half full not half empty. I say that my vehicle does not have a reverse gear. You can't change the past. The present you may have some influence on but certainly the future you can change. Being stuck in the past trauma you can have a situation where your descendants, people how have never experienced what you have experienced, get intergenerational trauma. You can have children who can never meet their grandparents, never meet their biolog-

ical cousins. You have go where you are, create a new family – you can call them a surrogate family. If you want to survive I think you have to press the reset button

But returning to Fidele’s Western friends who abandoned him, had they not previously claimed the moral high ground, preaching about loving your neighbour? The American journalist and Presbyterian minister Chris Hedges has argued that one of the terrible fallacies of the West (especially the atheist West) is a narrative of moral progress due to the enlightenment: that alongside technological progress has come moral progress. For Fidele:

The whole idea of having moral superiority or otherwise is something which I take with a pinch of salt. I think we have good people in each and every society. If we are looking for moral high ground I look to my ancestors, many of whom did not have the benefit of Western education that I did. I would say their morals were much better than mine because they grew up in a society with the worldview called Ubuntu.

Ubuntu is based on the premise that ‘I am because we are’ and ‘we are because I am’. If you practice it I cannot think of a better philosophy of life. It's just like we Christians talk about loving your neighbours yourself and obviously on paper it's great, but in practice is difficult. But I learnt a lot from my ancestors when I was growing up, and I'm just now giving them justice by writing about Ubuntu. I have two book chapters out, I have two more coming and I'm probably going to do more about it

We need to ask why are people so desperate to come here.. Maybe they will tell us “you gave the dictator the arms to come and bomb me and now I’m coming to hide in your place here”

because they inspire me - as opposed to me inspiring them with my enlightenment. So if the enlightenment in this case promotes individualism, it is this individualism which makes people forget about their friends and everyone else, and just save themselves. It is as if the world starts and ends with you. In some societies we eat too much, for example, and there are people would be delighted to go to our bins and take what we throw out, whereas in collective societies people will not eat if there

Ubuntu. I am because we are. We are because I am.

Ubuntu gained prominence through South African leaders' words and practices in the post-Apartheid era. According to Bhengu (1996, 10), Ubuntu is the "art of being a human being". Mbiti (1992, 2) suggests that “to be human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of that community”. Desmond Tutu (1999, 34-35) offers an explanation of Ubuntu in the following words: "Ubuntu ... speaks to the very essence of being human. [...] We belong in a bundle of life. We say 'a person is a person through other people' [...] I am human because I belong, I participate, and I share. A person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, [and] does not feel threatened that others are able and good; for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes with knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are".

(Taken from: Fidele Mutwarasibo, 2024¹)

are people outside who are hungry. So are we going to bring our civilizations to the world when we are obviously destroying the environment and we are behind many of the world conflicts? Or then if we are talking about the boats crossing the channel we need to look at the causes and effects. We need to ask why are people so desperate to come here, not withstanding the weather, not withstanding how they may be received and the people who are going to be antagonistic? Why, why, why? Maybe then we will say, are we informed? Are we buying resources from those places, minerals, oil or otherwise? Are we paying the fair price for the things we import from there? Are we? And then we can ask them why they are coming here. But maybe they will tell us “you gave the dictator the arms to come and bomb me and now I’m coming to hide in your place here”.

I suggest it is about the explanatory narratives that dominate the national discourse. Who determines the dominant stories?

Fidele noted that history is always written by the winners, and specifically the male winners. Maybe women would tell the story differently. But we have to be careful when talking about a moral compass and the enlightenment – whatever that means.

We have had many civilizations. If you go back in history, wherever we are, the Romans and their empire, we can go to Egypt and the empires, we can

go to the Incas in Latin America, we can go to Timbuctu, where they set up universities and libraries long before we started talking about it. Those civilizations didn’t survive long enough to come here and tell us they have a high moral compass. But there are things we can learn from one another and that’s what I try to do. I try to learn from ‘the enlightenment’ and draw from my own background, my cultural heritage, because I think there is a lot of good things I can take from one or the other.

To finish the interview we talked more specifically about resistance, and about fighting back against injustice. Fidele was aware that I have been on street protests and rallies, but it is not something he does.

I have been an activist for so many years, but my activism is certainly different from other people's activism. Although I support people who go in protests, I don’t go on protests myself. That’s not because I don’t think they have their place, it is just that I tend to be a pragmatist. I want to go and talk to people and try to convince them through a moral argument. I have seen my approach work. I've seen it work where we've got some changes which have never been fundamental, but they've been subtle. But sometimes over time, the subtleties become something big

And what about the role of violence in resistance?

Some people will advocate it and the irony is that somebody’s terrorist is a freedom fighter for somebody else. And you have to define what violence is and

Continues on page 15

Johan Galtung - On Violence, Religion, and Peace Building

The Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung (1930 – 17 February 2024) was a central figure in the foundation and development of the discipline of peace and conflict studies from the 1950s. His work conceptualised the nature of violence to help to build a positive peace. Negative peace is the absence of violent conflict, but the cessation of hostilities alone is not positive peace.

Peacebuilding involves the building of collaborative and supportive relationships for positive peace.

In his 1987 Right Livelihood Award Acceptance Speech he summarised a threefold his understanding of violence

“If peace is the reduction of violence, like the abolition of war and related phenomena, then we have to start with a better conceptualization of violence than the word “war” alone. I have found it useful to distinguish between three types of violence:

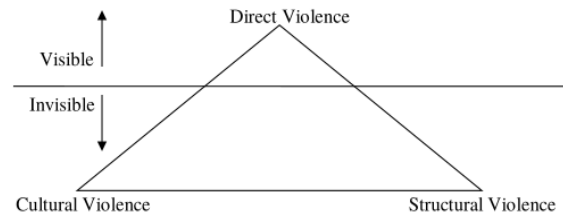
- Direct Violence, often expressed as military power, usually killing quickly, and intended to do so;
- Structural Violence, often expressed as economic power, usually unintended, killing slowly;
- Cultural Violence, often expressed as cultural power, legitimizing the other two types of power, telling those who wield power that they have a right to do so, even a duty – for instance because the victims of direct and/or structural power are pagans, savages, atheists, kulaks, communists, what not.”

“I have come to see the first two as relatively simple. There are ways of reducing large-scale abuses of military and eco-

Paul Overend

conomic power, And there are ways of reducing large-scale abuses of economic power through economic self-reliance, ...

But cultural violence, in the form of religions and ideologies that announce themselves as the only valid faiths, for the whole world and in addition with a Chosen People appointed to spread that faith to others, not only as a right, but as a duty, is more difficult to handle.”¹



Forms of Direct and Structural and Types of violence can be seen in Table 1 on page 20. But cultural violence supports and legitimises Direct and Structural violence, and unless cultural violence is addressed did not result in positive peace.

In a paper ‘Cultural Violence’², Galtung explains that cultural violence can be found in religion and ideology, language and art, and empirical and formal science. Galtung of course recognises that religion can also provide a basis for peace reconciliation, and social justice, should interpreters emphasise the themes of compassion

Continues on page 20

From page 14



I think that the definition of violence itself is up for debate. A fundamental point is that by and large people who engage in violence make their political point do so because they feel they have exhausted all the other tools they could have used. In political science they call

it infrapolitics and is normally what people will do when they don't think there is any alternative. For me as a political strategy I don't do violence and I don't do protests. I tend to have an approach whereby I try to win people over by making the argument, getting some case studies if necessary and using some statistics. I know sometimes I need people outside shouting in order to make my point, and there is complementarity, but if violence is going to create more division, it's unlikely to have a better outcome. Protest, people protesting and exercising their political right, although I don't join in, is not something I see a difficulty with. But property damage does something else.

I pressed Fidele on the activities of Palestine Action in spraying paint on warplanes and smashing the windows of arms manufacturers. Was that justified?

I think it's the cause which I have an opinion on. People should not be forced

to go to that level. Something should happen to prevent people feeling the only way they'll be heard is to go and spray paint on aircraft or break windows. We shouldn't get to that and if everything is working as it should, people get their hearing. Unfortunately when it becomes violent people are going to be entrenched in their position. If you are polarized everyone will think they are right, and so who is right?

I started by wanting to understand how Fidele remains so positive and not bitter, after all of that he has been through and how he has been treated. It might sound trite, but he has managed to hold on to who he is and his values throughout. He has never become defined by his circumstances or by those who want to do him harm or undermine him. He has never had the mentality of a victim. And perhaps most of all he holds on to the world-view of Ubuntu.

1 Mutwarasibo, F. (2024). Ubuntu Virtues as a Coping Mechanism in the Face of Racism and Discrimination. In: Chitando, E., Okyere-Manu, B., Chirongoma, S., Dube, M.W. (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of Ubuntu, Inequality and Sustainable Development*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-69573-5_32

Protest

John Pearson considers the efficacy of climate (and other) protests

The Climate Crisis is not something that can be read about, reflected upon and then set aside. Each of us, individually, with our hearts and consciences fully deployed as much as our intellects, have to keep checking in on our own level of commitment at any particular moment

So writes Jonathan Porritt, environmental campaigner extraordinaire, most recently associated with Just Stop Oil, a body disbanded only this year. He spoke at a public meeting in Newcastle upon Tyne this October.

The focus has drifted somewhat over time, he suggests - away from concerns regarding climate change. There has been a general unravelling of society due to the “Polycrises”: the socio-economic climate is against us all. Perhaps we should all have some sympathy for our Politicians and World Leaders, faced with numerous crises to address? But, not too much! These are the people who make promises at International Conferences, only to renege on them more often than not.

Climate change is very real, and by way of introduction, Jonathan detailed seven significant announcements made during the second half of this October alone:

- The Leader of the UN suggests we have already lost the fight to keep temperature increases to within the 1.5 per cent target limit.
- There was an increase in CO2 in the atmosphere of 3 parts per million in 2024, the largest annual gain since measurements began, back in 1967
- 500,000 thousand people are dying every year as a consequence of heat shock
- The Antarctic Sea has its lowest level of ice ever
- Mosquitoes have been found surviving in Iceland, one of the last two regions they have never been found before.
- Worldwide subsidies of the Fossil Fuel industry has reached over £2 BILLION per day
- More coal is burnt in power stations now than ever before!

Some shocking new revelation appears approximately every other day across the year.

And what do the World Leaders do, at their much heralded COP Conferences? Very little from one gathering to the next. Grand statements are made but real progress in the right direction is always sabotaged, it is suggested, by those countries with vested interest in the status quo. At COP 26 the proposed closing statement promising the ending of coal use was amended, at the in-

sistence of only three countries, just to its “phasing out”.

The tearful Secretary General, exasperated by this last presumably, suggested that the above “reflects the interests, the contradictions and the state of political will in the world today”.

Faced with the above scenario, what might we be justified in doing in our search for climate justice? What protest can and should we make?

We live in a country whose citizens are blessed, in theory, with the right to a degree of free speech. Generally, if we are unhappy with some situation we are allowed to publicly complain about it. This affords groups the opportunity, one might think, of gathering to highlight concerns, protesting against the course of action their Government is taking, and so on.

But in practice the above right is ringed around by other laws, those prohibiting discrimination, libel etc. as to content, and the nature of any protest will be further governed by laws on assembly and whatever the Courts consider to be Criminal Damage. Our own Government is currently seeking powers to prohibit repeat demonstrations, and so an end (in Newcastle, for example) not only to protests against the housing of illegal immigrants in hotels but also against the treatment of Palestinians in Gaza, Climate Change, and so on.

It is suggested (Ayer, 2025¹) that since the 1930s it has been almost unheard of for members of the public to be imprisoned for peaceful protest. Of late, “public nuisance” has become punishable by up to ten years imprisonment.

How much does the law prohibit/inhibit us, and do such restrictions in themselves drive the aggrieved to ever more prominent and ever more vociferous protest? And when/how does the vociferous, driven by frustration or whatever, spur on criminal damage and actual physical violence?

I understand the frustration which compels people to complain. I appreciate their further frustrations when they feel their voice(s) go unheard.

What is reasonable? We feel passionately that the world faces a very dangerous future. How DO we make our case? By speaking truth to power?

Zack Polanski, new leader of the Green Party, appears to break a long-standing mould. To me, most of his predecessors were somewhat polite, timid even in their attempts to make our case. Polanski is far from timid, calling-out the current Government not just for its indifference and half hearted responses to climate change but in respect of the deeper underlying inequalities that many labour under.

I confess that I myself am not a natural protester. brought up to turn a blind eye, or keep a stiff upper lip in the face of adversity and so on. I am loathe to nail my colours to the mast if that involves doing more than turning up to a silent protest, and would I go as far as to use a

Grand statements are made at COP but real progress in the right direction is always sabotaged by those countries with vested interest in the status quo

¹ Ayer, A. (2025) *Love, Anger and Betrayal; Just Stop Oil's Young Climate Campaigners*. Mount House Press

hammer to do the nailing?

My parents might have added to their mantra “Children should be seen and not heard” that protestors should not even be seen; a very reserved approach, where daring to say boo to a goose would be extreme, hurting that goose or its property quite out of the question!

I can understand the frustration of seemingly/clearly not being heard, and am not afraid of expressing an opinion myself. But is that enough?

At the end of the day one might equally pose the question; what good will the protest do? What difference will it make? So: why bother? Why bother – because what happens otherwise? Changes go ahead unchallenged.

When the world comes to a terrible end in just the ways we have warned of will we still be around to say “told you so”?

Much “taking action” costs little in terms of effort, shame or reputation, and, equally, delivering leaflets, holding private meetings all risks getting little or no concrete response. So must we resort to Direct Action – It is suggested that the aggrieved should be willing to take direct action against, and harm, property. Not so, against people.

If international diplomacy cannot be relied on, then what can interest groups do to be heard? Porritt examines the factors that may or may not effect change

- Civil Dissent; Express disquiet at every opportunity and at every level, but this may just be ignored.
- Civil Disobedience; in a form of organised revolution the young people in at least six countries have declared that they have had enough of the way that things are going. Street protests, if on a large enough scale, might begin to influence those in power.

However, he suggested that real change would only come about through the sufferings of the really big financial institutions – not banking, which he suggested was corrupt beyond repair, not Investment institutions, who exist solely to make profits, ignoring opposition – but through the insurance industry. As the incidence of more and more climate-change related disasters hits this industry mortgages will no longer be offered, new ventures will not be financed and so on... as they are all simply too risky to insure. When this reality is grasped then the Establishment will be forced to come to terms with the scale of the problem.

Maybe we can get the responses we crave if enough of us protest in earnest, and maybe some concrete action does need to be taken. It can be argued that without the throwing of a few bricks, and the damage of certain property, then women today would still not have the vote.

Anna Holland, a contributor to the above book, herself imprisoned for throwing soup at Van Gogh’s “Sun Flowers” wrote, in a poem from prison;

There is no art so beautiful as action

We may not all agree.

To date, there have been some 38 Marches against Israeli actions against the Palestinians, sometimes bringing together as many as 100,000 protesters. This in itself has not brought about concrete change in Gaza, but our politicians cannot claim that there is not an issue to be addressed, and most have come round to a kind of sympathy with the victims. As the numbers of those arrested at such marches rises above the 2000 mark (merely for supporting a slogan) they must ask themselves, surely, just how realistic are the laws which call for these arrests?

And what of the Police? Put in an invidious position, perhaps caught between the warring factions? Having to “keep the peace”. Whose side are they on? Officially neutral, their actions on the ground have sometimes brought this into question. At most organised protests nowadays,

Real change would only come about through the sufferings of the really big financial institutions



even in the case of an apparently minor street corner altercation, someone for sure will have their mobile phone at the ready, will film the police’s actions, and post this on Social Media and so on. On the other hand, where the Police themselves film individuals or groups there can be outcry from the Civil Rights brigade.

The impact of your protest may in reality be greater than you currently suppose. Recent releases of Cabinet Papers (after the expiry of the 30 years ban) have shown that Government were genuinely “rattled” by citizen action in certain past protests.

The latest direct action tactic of protestors is, apparently, Citizens Arrests targeting those seen as personally responsible for the flouting of regulations. And so, chief executives of water companies, some openly admitting repeatedly breaking the law by their actions or inaction, have been arrested by groups who then alert the Police. The hope is that the latter cannot then avoid pursuing prosecutions against the executives, something which they otherwise seem reluctant to do. Maybe this is, indeed, the way forward?

Defend Our Juries: Lift the Ban

David Chapman

Defend Our Juries (DOJ) was established to "shine a light on the constitutional crisis taking place in our courts":

Juries of 12 randomly selected citizens put the moral intuitions of ordinary people at the heart of the criminal justice system. Over the last few years, when juries have heard evidence of why people have taken direct action to advance climate or racial justice, or to stop genocide in Gaza, they have repeatedly reached not guilty verdicts.

These verdicts are deeply embarrassing to the government and the arms and oil industries, contradicting the narrative that the public supports the 'crackdown on protest'. Lobbyists for the arms and oil industries, such as Policy Exchange, embedded within government, have been working to put a stop to them.

As a result, extraordinary measures have been taken that violate the most basic principles of natural justice and the right to a fair trial.

... And, now, following these stitched-up trials, more and more people are being jailed for years, for taking peaceful and proportionate action to prevent mass loss of life. In the midst of Britain's prisons crisis¹.

A current campaign of DoJ is to 'Lift the Ban', aimed at getting the British government to reverse the proscription of the organisation known as *Palestine Action* (PA). PA takes direct action, such as spraying paint on fighter jets which they say are destined to be used in Israel's assault on Gaza, but they claim that they do not target people. The government argues that the activities of PA amount to terrorism and parliament voted to proscribe the organisation. Because PA is proscribed, anyone expressing support for them is committing a criminal offence. The 'Lift the Ban' campaign involves mass civil disobedience, with thousands of people peacefully displaying signs which express support for PA.

At least three members of the Sea of Faith Network have taken part in Lift the Ban actions so far. I was arrested in Parliament Square on 9th August, while David Lambourn and Caroline Pickard took part on 6th September and Caroline was arrested. Caroline describes her experience below. She has since been 'Released Under Investigation' (RUI) and is waiting to hear if she will be charged,

1 About Defend Our Juries: <https://defendourjuries.net/about-doj/> Accessed 19/11/2025

Impressions of the *Lift the Ban* demonstration in Parliament Square on 6th September 2025

Caroline Pickard

Iwas there for the one o'clock start, wrote my placard and was arrested at seven by two officers from Lancashire. My neighbour had been picked up at six by police from Humberside... people and police had come from far and wide for the demonstration protesting against the proscription of Palestine Action as a terrorist organisation.

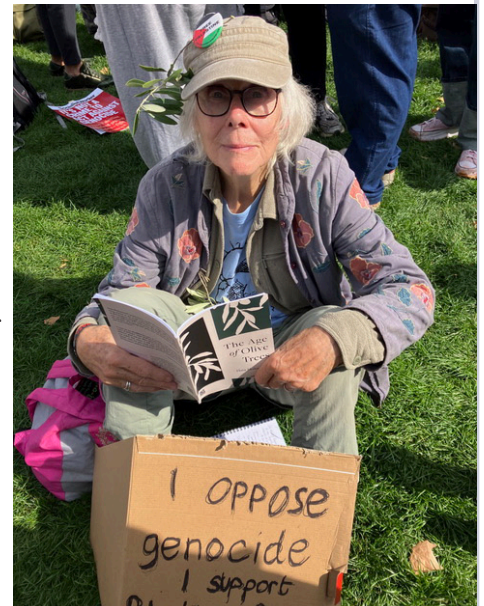
It was to be a seated, silent, demonstration and would have been quieter had not the *Palestine Solidarity Campaign* held a rally close by. However, it was by and large a quiet event and at this point I would like to add that I did not see any violence at all although I know there have been reports of disturbances.

Is there an etiquette I wonder for such events? There were people just walking about among us and one man stood right in front of me, chatting occasionally, with his rather large backside right in my face. Eventually I had to tell him that I felt he was invading my space and he had the grace to move away.

I was surprised at what seemed a profligate use of police time. I was carried to a paddy wagon by four officers; there were just two of us demonstrators in it, both of us with two officers and the driver who took us to Millbank. Here we disembarked and waited in a long queue for two and a half hours, some demonstrators still insisting on being carried, until we reached a tent labelled *Prisoner Reception Point*. The sole point of it as far as I could see was to give my arresting office a number! After that the queue was short and moved us quickly to the *Prisoner Reception Tents* and there were twenty of them.

In mine Mitchell, Julia and Chris, in plain clothes, explained my rights; I had been quite prepared to refuse to give my name but I'd forgotten that I still had my wallet with me. The police have the right to search you and of course they found my driving licence! Silly me.

So I was given street bail and instructed to attend at Plumstead Police station at the end of November, I walked back to Westminster tube station, past Parliament Square where at 10.30 the police were still busy arresting and the paddy wagons lined up. They took nearly 900 people that day and I am proud to be one of them.



From Religion to Philosophy

Jasbir Bhoda

There has always been ‘religion’ I have read somewhere though it makes me wonder if that has indeed been the case. ‘What is religion?’ This is not a serious question for me - the word is just a label, like ‘Occasionalism’, the Ontological Argument and the like. What comes under this label might bind us together though as often it succeeds in dividing us. But *Before Philosophy* is the title of an actual book published some time ago. Mythological thinking was an attempt to make better sense of things, it claims – until Philosophy. And religion, one might add.

Arabic has the word *falsafa* which is clearly derived from Greek but increasingly it began to be used in a dismissive sense – it caused nothing but trouble for the powers that be: they wanted a single framework of thought for their subjects, as more or less did Constantine earlier. Just over 200 years later Philosophy was subsumed under Theology – the new intellectual defence of religion; Christianity was too philosophical a religion to drop Philosophy altogether. This would have been impossible with St Paul leading the way and St John bringing up the rear. Other religions wish, at least from time to time, that they could dispense with philosophical questions but these keep rising unwontedly. That is just an aspect of being human which is always under threat. Now we have the new putative threat of AI; it may take Philosophy with it. Some no doubt think that would be no bad thing. They might find ammunition in Quine – for him sound Philosophy had to be something like scientific knowledge.

Although I am unable to argue against (Willard Van Orman) Quine – said to be the greatest logician after Russell – it is clear to me that he is/was simply mistaken! Kierkegaard, for example, did not argue against Hegel; he simply went about doing things his own way. More recently, Mary Midgley tried to turn the tide along with Philippa Foot, Elizabeth Anscombe and Iris Murdoch; these four are being studied afresh as *The Quartet*. There

have been other neglected Philosophers such as Susan Stebbing; I used her book *A Modern Introduction to Logic* for my ‘A’ level Logic. There are others steering Philosophy away from the scientific-mathematical model – John Cottingham calls his ap-

When revolutionaries take over a place, it is the philosophers they detain early on

proach humane Philosophy. Bernard Williams, talking to us students, said he didn’t know how to write Moral Philosophy – just after he’d been appointed Knightbridge Professor in the subject. And then he went on to write some wonderful stuff.

When revolutionaries take over a place, it is the philosophers they detain early on; these theoretical people are seen as dangerous. They talk – about anything and everything under the sun. Nothing is taboo for them, nothing is sacrosanct but they do it all within the parameters of politeness. They don’t, though, go for ‘style’ but for forthrightness which may appear rude to some others. Some of their comments may sound trivial but there is usually a serious purpose behind them – intellectual clarification; they are not trying to find a practical answer to a particular question such as ‘how many angels can dance on the head of a pin?’ The underlying issue is: do angels ever occupy physical space? How miniscule can that be? What exactly is the ‘physical’? (Later Berkeley would ask: what is this thing called matter?) The Ancient Greeks raised that question; and the Ancient Indians: what is the spiritual? That’s what really matters.

Just as Greek developed a wide-ranging philosophical vocabulary, Sanskrit developed a spiritual one. The Greek world continued making further distinctions, the Indian continued holistically; the first approach led, in the modern world, to experimental science. Here follows a

sample of the other line of thought.

I have adapted most of the following from *Man and Time* by J.B. Priestly - the text itself is a bit dated now. ‘Passing time’, he says, fails to reveal the self; he turns to Ancient Indian thought for help. There is *Atman* and *Brahman*. The idea floated is that we are truly free when these two come together.

Sanskrit developed a whole new vocabulary to talk about such things. Those seasoned seers, called *rishis*, begin, quite acceptably, with the senses and their objects. Then they take off. Did they get lost in their abstractions? Objects, senses and observing the world. But that is not all, there is also *manas*, mind – this works through the senses. The senses register the impressions, the mind interprets. There is yet more – or are they beginning to invent now instead of discovering? *Buddhi* is the discerning intellect which is distinguished from reason; this is pure intelligence which opens us to the source of reality. This takes us not only beyond the senses but beyond the ordinary functioning of the mind and opens us to transcendence.

Now give your imagination free rein and you will find yourself, beyond *buddhi*, in *mahat*; this is ‘great world’, the world of gods and cosmic powers. We have already gone beyond the higher self – here we be-

Indian music is the only music in the world that is aware of breaking the silence

come aware of the world of spirits; this is the psychic world to which we belong. Each of us is a member of this Great Self.

But hang in there – there is more. There is the unmanifest. Obviously! Gods, angels, etc. are the manifestation of this – the source from which they all come. But the resting point is not even here – we have *purusha* or *pramatma*; this translates as Person, the Supreme from which all comes. Beyond this there is – nothing. And that is the goal; we have now reached the ultimate. The Absolute noths noth-

ing being perfectly still; it is the unstruck chord – just listen! The sound of silence. As Paul Scott says in his *The Raj Quartet*, Indian music is the only music in the world that is aware of breaking the silence.

We have progression – from the

Philosophy is essentially an activity, not a body of knowledge

senses, through the mind, though each stage has to be consolidated with the next one otherwise we cannot move along. Take your pick – where do you want to rest on the journey? At the senses? That suffices for worldly affairs – but Ancient Indian thought continued to develop other levels of consciousness, etc.

The question we can ask is: is this philosophy or religion? Let's give it a different name: soteriology. The mo-

tivation is soteriological, not philosophical even though it is still, here, in embryonic form. There is nothing like the Socratic *elenchus* here, for example. Historically such thinking went on to develop the religion of Brahmanism, an unashamedly elitist account of human life that persists to this day. When it encountered Greek thought, there was a mismatch. In a Venn diagram, the two circles don't quite overlap. In *How the World Thinks*, Julian Baggini suggests we should not define 'philosophy' that precisely; I disagree. Philosophy is essentially an activity, not a body of knowledge. It proceeds by questioning.

But it cannot replace religion – nor can anything else. And nor can religion replace philosophy; Wittgenstein remarked on how peculiar a subject it was – what exactly is one doing

in philosophising? Of his one-time note-taker, Professor G.E. Moore, he said – if he really *knows* that he has two hands, as he claimed, we will grant him everything. This is in *On Certainty*, his last and perhaps best book. (In one episode of Columbo, he says: I know he did it. The smart lawyer-culprit challenges the claim: he knows I did it?)

Such thinking, philosophy, is not to be found east of Istanbul. No doubt there are individuals who cogitate and worry like that but it is not a general characteristic – that is more spiritual and religious for good or bad for the world. T.S. Eliot, for one, worried about becoming too Eastern in his thinking. *Om Shanti*. That is a direction to move towards – and a pious hope though it is not philosophy. Please don't ask 'what is philosophy?'

Johan Galtung, from page 15

and forgiveness. But religion is included here, as religious doctrines or interpretations can promote exclusion, intolerance, structural discrimination, or even violence against other groups.

God), The Unchosen Ones (by God, chosen by Satan) and Satan; the chosen heading for salvation and closeness to God in Heaven, the unchosen for damnation and closeness to Satan in Hell. However, Heaven and Hell can also be reproduced on earth, as a foretaste or indication of the afterlife. Misery/luxury can be seen as preparations for Hell/Heaven - and social class as the finger of God.

Such religious legitimation of direct and structural violence could be found throughout history in the Crusades, Christian Antisemitism, Jihadist movement,

Hindu Nationalism, Sectarian conflicts between Sunni and Shia Muslims, and so on. Religion also gave legitimation to direct violence in the sectarian conflicts in Northern Ireland, and to segregation in the structural violence of Apartheid in South Africa. But the example Galtung gave in the paper Cultural Violence (1990) was Israel's use of religion as cultural violence.

For a contemporary example consider the policies of Israel with regard to the Palestinians. The Chosen People even have a Promised Land, the Eretz Yisrael. They behave as one would expect, translating chosenness, a vicious type of cultural violence, into all eight types of direct and structural violence listed in Table I. There is killing; maiming, material deprivation by denying West Bank inhabitants what is needed for livelihood; there is desocialization within the theocratic state of Israel with second class citizenship to non-Jews; there is detention, individual expulsion and

Table I. A Typology of Violence

	Survival Needs	Well-being Needs	Identity Needs	Freedom Needs
Direct Violence	Killing	Maiming Siege, Sanctions	Desocialization Resocialization	Repression Detention
Structural Violence	Exploitation A	Misery Exploitation B	Secondary Citizen Penetration Segmentation	Expulsion Marginalization Fragmentation

The type of religion he points to is belief in a transcendent God, as this belief is associated with distinctions found in Table II, which gives the binary logic of the chosen and the not chosen, or the saved and the damned, which is involved in the cultural violence of religion. He explains

Whom does God choose? Would it not be reasonable to assume that He chooses those most in His image, leaving it to Satan to take the others, as indicated in Table II? This would give us a double dichotomy with God, the Chosen Ones (by

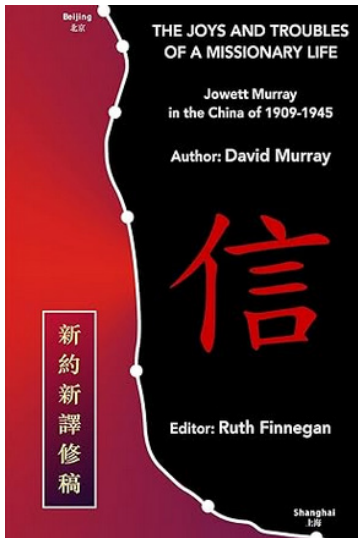
Table II. The Chosen and the Unchosen

God Chooses	And Leaves to Satan	With the Consequence of
Human Species	Animals, Plants, Nature	Speciesism, Ecocide
Men	Women	Sexism, Witch-burning
His People	The others	Nationalism, Imperialism
Whites	Colored	Racism, Colonialism
Upper Classes	Lower Classes	'Classism', Exploitation
True Believers	Heretics, Pagans	'Meritism', Inquisition

The Joys and Troubles of a Missionary Life: Jowett Murray in the China of 1909-1945

by David Murray (Author), Ruth H Finnegan (Editor). Callender Press (Milton Keynes 2025) 212 pages, Pbk £19.99

Discussed by David Chapman



This is not a book I would have read were it not that I knew the author and the editor, but in the end I was glad that I did. David Murray and Ruth Finnegan (David's wife) were both senior academics at the Open University and David was Jowett's son. Ruth took the book through to publication after David died at the end of 2023.

I came to the book with a liberal's deep suspicion of missionary work, but it was clear that this was the starting point for David too. As Ruth explains in the preface:

Like many of his generation [David] began with quite negative views of the missionary project and hence of his missionary father, it looked to be a typical 'colonialist' project to bring the

superior 'enlightenment of the west' to the assumedly uneducated heathen - the 'oriental pagans'. ...

But David gradually discovered there was another side to Jowett. [He was] a pilgrim learning from Chinese tradition. He was sharing the Christian message so that it could be taken forward in the Chinese language by *Chinese* evangelists and through Chinese churches.

Jowett was with the London Missionary Society (LMS), and the LMS mission in China was both evangelical and educational. Quite a few of the 'troubles' alluded to in the book title relate to tensions between the two: what is the priority for LMS resources? This was a battle internal to LMS and in my opinion the book spent too much time on the 'office politics' of the Society. But running through the book are also riveting narratives and major world events impinging on Jowett and the LMS, and we are drawn to Jowett and find ourselves rooting for him - even if we are not always on board with his motives.

A significant incident occurs after a period back in the UK, when Jowett returns to China on a Japanese ship, the Yasaka Maru, in 1915. The ship is torpedoed by German U Boats and Jowett is on a drifting lifeboat when, in the dark, a small French gunboat reaches them.

As the lifeboat and gunboat rolled towards each other in the dark, a voice was heard calling for them to jump. But

in the dark of the night, with no ships' lights, in a heaving sea, not one the seventy in the lifeboat responded. Then a Japanese stewardess from the Yasaka Maru... launched herself into the dark to be caught by the crew on the French gunboat.

Everyone in the lifeboat, including Jowett, then followed and was saved. Jowett used this leap of faith in the dark in his later sermons, but also saw in the incident 'divine confirmation of the decision to return to China to serve Him'. It is a remarkable story, but, rather than a divine message, I see the extraordinary humanity of the crew of the French gunboat and the bravery of the Japanese stewardess.

Jowett is in China at the time of the civil war and the Japanese invasion of 1937. How the mission navigates these turbulent and dangerous times, and their relationship to key actors such as Chiang Kai-Shek (who became a Christian) is fascinating, and Jowett shows wisdom and courage throughout. During the second world war Jowett and his family (including David) were interned, suffering great hardship and privation.

In addition to the narrative of Jowett's life, this is a highly reflective book, exploring wider questions of how people from different cultures interact and learn from one another, but also 'meta' questions of the nature of biography. My time invested in reading it was time well-spent.

Johan Galtung, from page 20

perennial threat of massive expulsion. There is exploitation, at least as exploitation B.

The four structural concomitants of exploitation are all well developed: efforts to make the Palestinians see themselves as born underdogs, at most heading for second class citizenship by 'getting used to it'; giving them small segments of economic activity; keeping them outside Jewish society both within and outside the Green Line, and dealing with Palestinians in a divide et impera mode (as in the Camp David process), never as one people.

1 The 1987 Right Livelihood Award Acceptance Speech, Transcend Media Service: *Peace Studies: Inspiration, Objectives, Achievement* (2019)

2 Johan Galtung (1990), Cultural Violence, *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 27.3, pp. 291-305.

Religion in my life

The Religion in my Life interviewee for this issue of Sofia is Kiran, a Sikh brought up in the UK. Like all of the subjects of the Religion in my Life column this year, Kiran is an activist working for the good of the community and has resisted prejudice and injustice all her life. In June this year, she joined *The Global March To Gaza*: flying out to Egypt with the intention of travelling to Rafah and crossing the border into the Gaza strip. The convoy was stopped by the Egyptian authorities and many of the participants were arrested and detained, but fortunately not Kiran. Hopefully what follows helps us to understand the motivation that led her to undertake this incredibly dangerous and brave act.

Kiran: Faith, Identity, and the Inner Compass

What is your personal experience of religion?

Growing up in the 1970s my hometown was predominantly 'white British' and I was the first Sikh child in my school. That meant being visibly different and often the target of racism. Religion, for my family, was not just a belief system, it was a lifeline. It helped us survive, stay rooted and from nothing, build community in a world that often made us feel invisible.

We didn't have a local Gurdwara at first, so our small Sikh community created one through collective effort. Religion wasn't institutional, it was lived. It was a way to teach children, learn our history, practice meditation, share food and support one another. The customs we practised became anchors and the simple act of my father and brother wearing turbans became a powerful act of resistance. Their dignity in the face of racism taught me to stand firm in my beliefs and defend others facing similar struggles.

My upbringing was a balancing act: wanting to fit in with western peers while holding onto Sikh traditions and family expectations. My parents were inclusive, encouraging me to participate in other faith traditions. I would recite the Lord's Prayer at school assemblies, sing hymns and Christmas carols, read the bible and then at the weekend, I would attend Punjabi classes and the Gurdwara and learn about our Gurus legacy. I came to understand that Sikhi is not about rigid religious identity, it's a way of life. It's about being a student on a lifelong journey, striving to become a better person.

Does the Idea of 'God' Mean Anything to You?

The British word "God" is a clumsy translation of the Sikh concept of Waheguru, the wondrous enlightener. It's not a personified deity, but a universal, formless energy. I often liken it to "The Force" in Star Wars, a timeless, all-pervading presence that connects everything. It's not something to be worshipped through fear or dogma but something to be felt, understood and lived in harmony with.

To me, this internal "Force" is a moral compass. It's the light within and around us, guiding us even when we feel at odds with our community or loved ones expectations. It demands that we follow our hearts and inner morals above external rules. Sikh philosophy aligns with certain ideas in quantum physics, non-duality, everything is interconnected and divinity is not separate from us but embedded in the fabric of existence.

We believe that the Gurbani (the writings in the Guru Granth Sahib) is a form of divine revelation. The Gurus were not considered God themselves but they were seen as spiritually enlightened and channels through which divine wisdom was expressed. However, Sikhism also emphasizes personal experience, reflection and righteous living, so while divine revelation is respected, it's not about blind obedience but about understanding and living the truth.

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

The Sea of Faith Network's assertion that religion is a human creation resonates deeply. The rituals, structures, and hierarchies are clearly human-made attempts to codify something ineffable. The impulse toward faith, the feeling of connection to something larger, might be universal but the forms it takes are shaped by culture and history and human interpretation.

This perspective helps distinguish spiritual experience from institutional dogma. It feels especially relevant in light of recent events, particularly the genocide in Gaza, which have prompted deep reflection on my beliefs and the diversity of interpretations within my community and beyond. I was disturbed to see far-right individuals claiming to represent Sikh values while disregarding the core message of universal compassion. It reminded me of a scene in *Animal Farm*, where the pigs and farmers become indistinguishable in their oppression.

This critique feels especially relevant given how Sikhi, often misclassified in the West as a religion, has been co-opted into an "-ism," losing its essence as a way of living rooted in compassion, equality and service.

Such moments underscore how human interpretations of faith can be flawed, hypocritical and even dangerous. A reminder that religion, while rooted in profound human longing, is ultimately a construct shaped by fallible hands.



Do you think or believe that life has meaning?

Yes, life has profound meaning but it's not handed down by divine revelation.

Sikhi sees life as a gift and an opportunity, to grow spiritually, serve humanity and live in harmony with divine truth. Meaning it is not some thing to be passively received, it is actively created through righteous living, compassion and connection. It's found in how we treat others.

Witnessing the genocide in Gaza galvanized people across the world to come together, transcending backgrounds, faiths, and creeds. That collective action became a new kind of "religion", a religion of immediate, compassionate humanitarianism. My decision to join 3,500 strangers from 80 countries in Cairo, attempting to march to the Rafah border, was symbolic. It wasn't just about reaching the destination but about raising awareness and standing in solidarity. In all the horror of darkness, the light of all those souls shone with blinding beauty. That is where meaning lives, in shared moral purpose and the best of humanity. Of hope.

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

Religion can offer moral grounding, community, and a sense of purpose. In my youth, our collective faith space was a sanctuary from a sometimes hostile world. It gave us strength to face racism and alienation.

But religion must evolve. It should be a force for unity and justice, not division. Sikh teachings, particularly Guru Nanak's message, remind us of the deeper truth that transcends religious boundaries. His words, "There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim", were not a denial of faiths, but a call to recognize the shared humanity that underlies them all. This vision encourages us to move beyond labels and embrace one another as equals.

The ideal role for religion is to foster compassion, encourage ethical action, and hold its own communities accountable when they fall short. It should be a moral compass that rises above rigid rules and cultural biases, guiding us toward solidarity, dignity, and love.

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

My motivation stems from early experiences of vulnerability and injustice. Watching my family stand firm in their identity taught me the importance of resilience and compassion.

That foundation continues to guide me.

From a young age, I have witnessed moments of hardship and trauma that quietly shaped my understanding of the world, experiences that deepened my empathy and strengthened my belief in the importance of safety, dignity and connection. These insights continue to inform how I serve my community.

The recent global response to Gaza reignited that drive. I saw people of all backgrounds marching together, united by a shared moral compass. That is my Force.

I have come to recognise that what I sometimes seek outwardly, has always having been within me. My role as an individual, is to ensure people feel seen, valued and connected, channelling that universal energy into positive action.

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

Reflecting on this exercise has helped me give shape to many thoughts that usually stay in my head. It's humbling to think anyone might be interested in them but here they are.

The Sea of Faith Network creates a much needed space for deep and meaningful conversations. By encouraging people to explore the roots of faith, it opens up a more genuine way to engage with spirituality, one that accepts human imperfections and shared hopes.

What I really appreciate is how the network emphasizes personal values and a sense of universal connection, rather than strict religious rules. It offers a voice to those who feel spiritually aware but disconnected from traditional institutions. I'm grateful for a place where stories like mine are welcomed and heard.



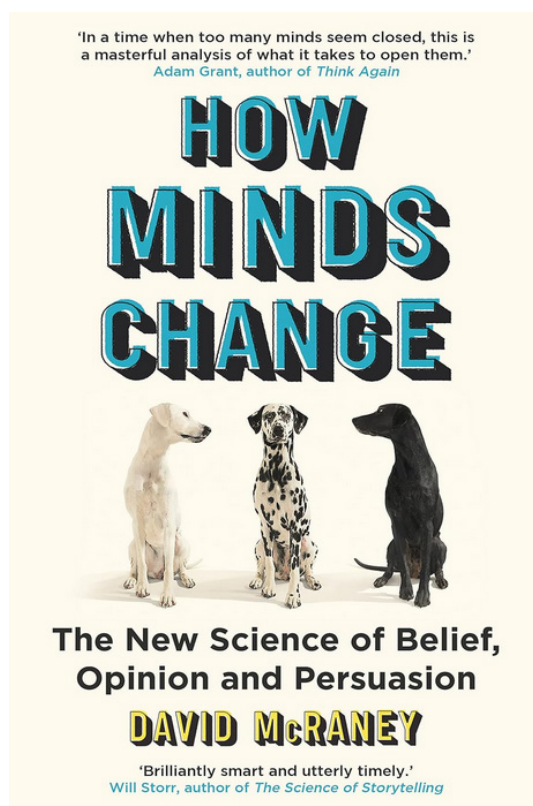
The Global March to Gaza

How Minds Change

The New Science of Belief, Opinion and Persuasion

by David McRaney. Oneworld (London, 2022) 352 pages. Pbk £11.99

Reviewed by Digby Hartridge



Journalist David McRaney has written what amounts to a very readable how-to manual on polite debate. He'd noticed some very rapid swings of popular opinion in America on gay marriage and smoking, where commentators were taken unawares, prominent public campaigns on these issues having been ignored for years. Sudden changes also occur in individuals' lives. Investigating the phenomenon, he came to adopt what he terms deep canvassing and street epistemology (where he acts as a sort of modern Socrates), and induces "comparable mental adjustment", a process he's found to be effective. Working with a group you must: establish mutual rapport, agreeing to act with complete honesty; listen to opinions with interest and without challenging participants' reasoning; repeat back opinions until you have established the words employed are shared; rate the level of agreement on a scale. If the participants are ready to explore further, ask, if applicable, how they first became aware of their view; ask what exactly they had been thinking then; and end, perhaps, by touching on an alternative view but never insistently, always stressing similarities and a readiness to differ; wish them well. Come back to it later. Louis Theroux is an example of someone who deploys such techniques.

Anyway, McRaney found that an emotional insight often induced changes or "flips"; the change might be consolidated by the universal process of rationalisation. This despite the evolving social media, which polarises debate on contentious matters and encourages conspiracy theo-

ries and flat-earthers, vaccine-resisters and 911-deniers. Not all his contributors cooperated, but any changes were more likely to withstand being rolled back than changes prompted by conventional debate. Also occurring were what McRaney calls a cascade, as when a mob goes violent or a traffic jam clears, and a few converts with weakly held views became an organic group, albeit with different levels of commitment, albeit few persuaded by every aspect of the case.

The above is a representative process, and populists reject it. However, the basic point: we do need to get round to talking properly, without confrontation, with a wide range of people, face-to-face. Have we not all seen how ordinary persons can be quite friendly towards someone of opposite views and become raving fanatics only when venturing online – and can calm down again after reflection? It's unfortunate that most journalists are passively addicted to 24/7 rolling news, excited by the ghastly rumpus at PMQs in the House, unable to envision alternatives to the blatant nonsense of it all. I found the book encouraging and have definite views on where some of McRaney's ideas could be employed to advantage. Maybe in local groups or in preparing for international meetings?

Advertisement

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>

CONSUME! Note we have carrots, also sticks.

Halloween, Black Friday, Christmas, New Year – what an exemplary spending spree. But the advertisements showed just how happy and popular we would be: it's only failures who can't afford it and miseries who opt out. There's quite a lot of irony in all this – getting and spending not what Jesus was about. But the more we buy the greater the profit, and money flows up in a privatised world hugely polarised by wealth and dangerous power (the countries ranked happiest are the more equal).

In the normal course of life we all consume (globally the richest 1% emit twice the carbon of the poorest 50%), and enticement by producers is only to be expected. But we should be alert that there may be problematic features. Try looking at the long lists of unfamiliar chemical additives (preservatives, attractive colours, flavours and fragrances ...) to many household products. And did humans really exist without the daily shower and change of clothes, the cosmetics, supplements and gyms that now seem required to endorse identity?

Particularly sinister are products to which we can become addicted: we will need no further persuasion. Of course alcohol and tobacco began in innocent ignorance. But the corporate greed that long rejected the smoking-cancer link has provided a model for climate change denial since the 1960s, and the career of nicotine continues in the vast experiment of vaping/snus. Humans did not evolve protection against much that is now all around us – criminal drugs and scams, gambling and porn, the dubious social media and influencers that replace mutual face-to-face familiarity and evidence.

Edwin Salter

Perhaps the final weapons deployed by the power of commerce are obsolescence and debt. New technology may have defects undiscovered or unrevealed, and for users there are always costs and confusions of change. In a digital world it is easy to enforce consuming the new simply by ending system provision: some, perhaps elderly, will be disempowered, unimportant casualties. As for debt, we may calculate that a mortgage or equity release is justifiable. But many debts arise without due care: the buying of money is costly (odd how interest and inflation somehow resemble money creating and consuming itself) and British household financial debt exceeds £100billion. Problems spiral destructively. If we fail repayments, and if destitute we may find no way to recover.

How we individually tackle or evade the many problems of life of course varies with our resources and situation. The human race lived for 200,000 years as hunter-gatherers sharing and cooperating in small groups, their awareness restricted to familiar time and place. Their evolution with very necessary concerns for safety and food lingers in present futile behaviours: the luxury yacht promises a safe realm, a sugary drink the energy to make change.

Improved survival since the 1800s has surged our population fivefold, just as our carbon energy consumption p.c. has similarly increased (and look where that has got us!). An excess now very plain is our calorie intake, in Europe and USA often over

3000 cals daily when nearer 2000 will do for our less active and less chilly lives (highly-processed foods probably link reward dopamine with habit glutamate). How many pounds a week go in the mouth? A wiser diet will also reduce ill-health and its social costs, and spare the natural world further agricultural invasion.

Reduce, redesign, repair, reuse, recycle

Sharing is an excellent escape from consumerism, to be understood

as enlarging rather than diminishing self. Public libraries were a fine idea, and now charity shops. More use of public transport would bring a global reduction of waste and pollution. Tackling the wider consumption and waste issue requires systematic steps to reduce, redesign, repair, reuse, recycle.

In our worrying and fast changing world even our own sense of identity can lack firm footing. Many distractions seem to make us feel better (from buying iffy glam to shouting populist slogans) in a temporary way. What we need to acquire and enjoy (does more than a decade of school much help self-understanding or practicality?) are the useful skills of adult life, not least parenting a better next generation (note the many young neglected at home during covid shutdowns). To discover, to think and learn anew are joys.

A simple positive way to cheer oneself up is to do something for someone else (back to Christmas with the redemption of Scrooge). Kindness is natural (exemplified by Jesus and key to Humanism), think of those early humans when life depended on mutual support. The response to kindness benefits both sides. A lot better than another credit card dedicated to the worship of GDP.

Worldviews Navigator

Dave Francis, understanding the obvious

Is it just older people who begin most of their conversation starters with, “What I don’t understand is...”?

You can complete the sentence with your favourite bugbear: “...why people think it’s OK to drop litter all over the place...”, “why they’re building a new housing estate on land that’s known for flooding...”, “...why they can’t fill in those potholes at the same time they do the others across the road...”, “why they’re still digging coal and drilling for oil at a time of environmental catastrophe...”, “... why they don’t just send the illegal immigrants back to where they came from...”, “...why people just can’t live together in peace...”, and so on.

The implication is, that you (and perhaps the people you’re in conversation with) are the only ones who DO understand. Everyone else, usually an unspecified ‘they’ or ‘people’, is, of course, a complete idiot. A fool. Or worse, a lazy fool. Or even worse, a big orange man-baby fool.

What is actually going on here? Perhaps it’s a boast about something that the speaker has noticed that few others have. Perhaps it’s an attempt to draw attention to a serious flaw in the fabric of society. Or human nature. Or perhaps a genuine plea for enlightenment. Or perhaps it is a confession: “I myself have now become a stupid person. The world has passed me by. Things ain’t what they used to be.”

When you next hear that confession, or are tempted to use it yourself, try substituting an alternative phrase, ‘What I can’t be bothered to think about the reasons for is...’ Because when people use the phrase “What I don’t understand is...” are they not really admitting that they haven’t really thought through the possible reasons for why something is as it is? The phrase often covers up an unwillingness to think about reasons. Which may be all very well in the context of casual conversations, but actually reveals something problematic in the way that we relate to the ‘faceless bureaucrats’ or ‘politicians’ whom we believe responsible for the woes of the world.

But here’s the thing, (and, yes, I don’t understand why everyone is suddenly using that phrase), we can probably hazard a pretty good guess at the reasons why things are as they are. As Lawrie Taylor used to say about the causes

of crime, “they are well known, but complex”. Any old AI robot can give you list of the possible reasons why people commit crimes, but not the subtlety of how those causes interact in often complex ways. Is it this complexity that we don’t really want to engage with?

This is where real learning begins, does it not? And some things are truly hard to understand, particularly when traditional belief systems, and one’s personal identity, are at stake.

Don Cupitt’s classic 1984 book, *The Sea of Faith: Christianity in Change*, begins, ‘For those caught up in it, a time of religious upheaval is peculiarly hard to understand. People’s deepest convictions, their philosophy of life and their form of religious consciousness are all in turmoil. All seems darkness, confusion and a Babel of conflicting voices. Only with hindsight, after the dust has settled, will it be possible to see clearly what are the gains, the losses – and also, the unexpected continuities’ (p.7).

So things that used to seem obvious, that is, ‘easy to see’, may no longer be so. The old dualities of truth and falsehood, of right and wrong, of heaven and earth, of spirit and matter, have been dissolved in these modern times. For us in the Sea of Faith, it may have become obvious that scientific answers to many of life’s mysteries are better than those that refer to spirit-powers from beyond, but this does not mean giving up on the whole of religion. Or even on the whole of the realm of the mysterious.

When one man survived, in Seat 11A, the horrendous 12th June Air India crash in Ahmedabad, the experts were quick to weigh in. This may have been called a ‘miracle’ in the newspapers, but was explicable by the extraordinary good fortune of a series of factors: a hole in the fuselage being torn in the plane right next to the man’s seat, which was probably “in a strong part of the airplane at the front edge of the wing.” And having survived the impact, the man, Vishwash Kumar Ramesh, also had the awareness to unbuckle himself and limp out onto the building the plane had crashed into before it was engulfed in a fireball. But why him?

Why not him? we can reply. But somehow that’s not an entirely satisfactory explanation. That’s something I doubt anyone, perhaps especially Ramesh himself, can ever really understand.

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Religion, politics and resistance

I enjoyed David Lambourn's articles on Mark (Sofia #155, 156 and 157). As a child of Empire I cannot but agree that Mark's account was pervaded by unspoken resistance to Roman rule. Some Africans in Zimbabwe, pre-Independence, expressed themselves in a similar way – mainly intellectuals. And religious observance might give way readily to secular, like Marxism.

For the majority, religion in Rhodesia provided an outlet for pursuing political aspirations. Shona spirit mediums inspired resistance in the 1890s and they long continued to play a role (a huge subject). Mission schools offered education, and independent African churches were the setting for blending traditional and introduced belief systems.

As for Whites, religion might provide a moral framework, but moderate Whites were more likely to have gained tolerance through close contact with Blacks in a job, a teacher perhaps or a farmer or soldier. And, whether Jesus is an historical figure or a symbol, it's his humanity (humanness?) that chimes with us today.

I mixed with white racists, paternalists and liberal activists, with black servants and orderlies and with conciliatory black professional colleagues. Once or twice I met black radicals. For the most part I got on well with them all; humour and discreet circumvention permitted it. But I came to realise that Blacks and Asians and mixed race people tended to be watchful, cautious, till they were quite sure of their ground. Only when they knew they would be treated as individual fellow humans would they relax.

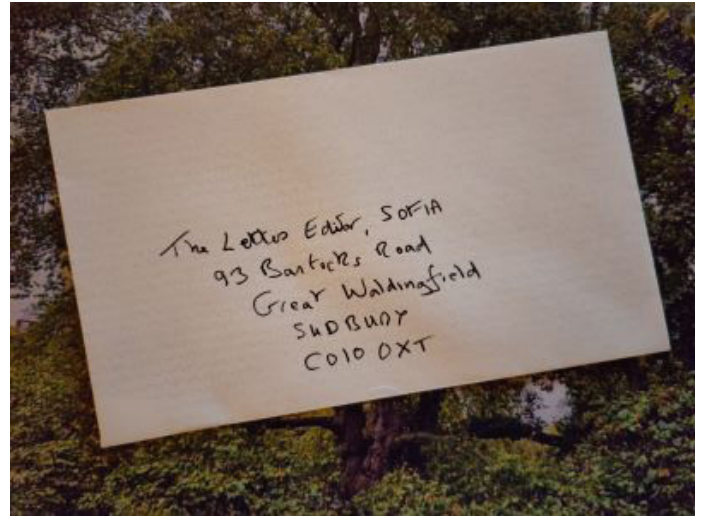
Digby Hartridge, Yate, near Bristol

The disvalue of Curiosity

It gets curioiser and curioiser – and even more curious but curiosity is not always a good thing; after all there is unhealthy curiosity. Even the Bible warns against it! (*Fostering Curiosity*, Sofia #157 p8.)

It depends on what one is curious, or inquisitive, about – and even at what age; there is a time and place for *Portnoy's Complaint*, for example.

Curiosity is not like 'courage' a (Aristotelian) cardinal



virtue or value; it's more like the ambiguous theological virtues which can be and have been questioned. As a response to mechanical learning it is salutary but not if it is turned into a centre-piece as happened with the idea of 'child-centered education', etc. What killed the cat? Do we want curiosity-based learning now?

We need 'focus' but not one word or idea; Carol Palfrey put it like this while criticising a comment I made in *Portnoy's Complaint*: it (SOFN) is a collection of interested seekers after knowledge and truth who realise that we must make our own meaning, create our own purpose and find ways of working out, how to lead a fulfilling life, not alone as isolated individuals, but together, in community. Sea of Faith offers a guide to this enterprise by proposing that we explore religion as a human creation which provides a new lens through which to view the value of religion to humanity. (My gloss: 'human creation' is not some deep and mysterious concept; to me it means 'brought about by people', i.e. not some extra-human agency, etc. Taken seriously that will always remain a revolutionary thought.)

Not Philosophy and/or World-views (or Education); E R Emmet, *Learning to Philosophise*, begins: People are naturally curious...

Jasbir Bhoda, Littlehampton

Free to Believe, and the URC

There was a reference on page 23 where Dave Francis referred to non religious organisations and included *Free To Believe* (Sofia #157). Members should be informed that *Free to Believe* began within the URC but now includes other denominations. Also under religious organisations he mentioned the United Reform Church; the actual title of the church is the United Reformed Church.

Mike Dennis, Tavistock

Janet Seargeant

It is with great sadness that we have to announce the death of long-standing and valued Sea of Faith member, Janet Seargeant, on Sunday 2nd November, following a short illness. Janet was a truly kind and deeply insightful person, who brought so much to the life of the Network. She was a member of the SoF Steering Group, and her brief biography was printed in Issue No. 155 in March of this year. She will be very dearly missed and our thoughts are with John, Ruth and her wider family.

For Ukraine

*'Everyone will sit under their own vine and under their
own fig tree and no one will make them afraid'*

Micah 4:4

I rake sweet chestnut leaves into a pile,
collect nuts that burst from star shaped shells,
lean against the smooth trunk,
and look up through the autumn canopy.

I am afraid when the leaves fall.

Drones approach, locusts,
that whine and buzz,
I cling to the grey column
to escape their sting,

hurry to the shop for bread,
look over my shoulder,
their metal rasp follows,
increase my pace, break into a run, dash

to the yew trees in the park,
and hide among evergreen leaves,
pushing my body among spines
and blood red berries.

My neighbour drove for a manicure,
for coloured glitter pictures on each nail;
as she sat, her hands extended,
a drone destroyed her car,
she ran home fast in fear
from tree to sheltering tree.

What shall we do in winter?

Jane Olive