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Faith

in this life





*exploring and promoting religion and
worldviews as human creations for this life*

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The editors invite submissions to *Sofia* exploring religions and worldviews as human creations, including but not limited to

- articles, especially relating to the announced theme of the edition
- short poems and short stories
- page length book, film and arts reviews
- paragraph long recommendations of both fiction and non-fiction books
- letters, normally fewer than 200 words, or please liaise in advance

Please contact the appropriate editor early if you are considering writing, and if you wish to view our style guidelines.

Contributions express the individual writer's opinions. They do not necessarily represent the views of the editorial team or The Sea of Faith Network.

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Sofia seeks an arts editor to share in the exploration of religion and spirituality through written, creative, and performative arts, and crafts.

If you are interested in the copy editing role, please contact the editor at editor@sofn.uk for a conversation about this section of the magazine.

Cover image:

'Floating in the Dead Sea, Israel', by Itamar Grinberg, *Flickr.com*, licensed CC By-NC 2.0, 20 February 2021.

Living Faith

editor@sofn.uk

This year marks the one hundred and twenty-fifth anniversary of the first congress of The International Council of Unitarian and Other Liberal Religious Thinkers and Workers. Hosted in London (26 May–3 June 1901), it was one of the first recorded interfaith meetings in the UK.

Unitarians, Free Christians, and Ethical Religionists, met with contacts made at the first World's Parliament of Religions (Chicago, 1893) from non-Christian religious traditions, including Jews and a representative of the progressive Hindu Brahmo Samaj movement. From Russia, a friend and ally of Tolstoy, Vladimir Tchertkoff, came to address the conference. (Tolstoy had recently been excommunicated by an Orthodox Church Synod (22 February 1901 and had written a widely-reported reply, 4 April 1901.)

The Council aimed to foster cooperation among those committed to reason, conscience, and moral autonomy; to promote free and progressive religion in light of religious modernism; and to resist dogmatism, creedal orthodoxy, and ecclesiastical authoritarianism. The first president, Unitarian Joseph Estlin Carpenter (1844–1927), chaired the Congress. He was a scholar of biblical studies, an expert in Sanskrit, and a pioneer in the study of comparative religion, building on foundations recently laid by Max Müller and others. He spoke of 'the liberal faith', understanding it as one that transcended religious boundaries.

The Congress was significant in treating religion as a cultural phenomenon to be understood in terms of ethical commitment and social

responsibility, rather than as belief in revelation, incarnation, or supernatural intervention. Theistic belief in God was regarded as optional, while ethical and spiritual life were affirmed as human achievements.

The Congress can be seen as a turning point between nineteenth-century liberal Christianity and twentieth-century religious humanism, as evidenced by the 1933 Humanist Manifesto,¹ that promoted humanism as a "religion of the future".

If religions are understood as disparate static "faiths", defined by beliefs and practices, then this early meeting of religions might be seen more as a loss-of-faith dialogue than an inter-faith dialogue. This raises the question of what is faith, relating to the theme of this issue.

Faith and Reason

Thomas Aquinas' theology is rightly taken to be an attempt to overcome the opposition between a rationalism that trusts only reason as a foundation for beliefs, and a fideism that holds beliefs only by faith, a decision or an act of will, despite evidence or reason. Lewis Carroll's Queen satirised fideism as believing 'as many as six impossible things before breakfast' (*Through the Looking Glass*, Ch. 5). However, Aquinas held that the faculties of will and reason complement each other.

Aquinas understood revelation to be both natural (in the natural world) and supernatural

Faith, according to Alan Watts (1915-1973)

Faith is a state of openness or trust. To have faith is like when you trust yourself to the water. You don't grab hold of the water when you swim, if you go stiff and tight in the water you sink. You have to relax. Thusly, the attitude of faith is the very opposite of clinging, of holding on. In other

words, a person who is a fanatic in religion, one who simply has to believe in certain propositions about the nature of God and of the universe is a person who has no faith at all – [s]he's holding on tight.

Alan Watts, *The Essence of Alan Watts* (Celestial Arts, 1974) p. 37.

125 years ago

The International Council of Unitarian and other Liberal Religious Thinkers and Workers. Group Officers and Foreign Delegates. London, 31 May 1901.



(in scripture and tradition). Where reason leads to knowledge of natural revelation, faith can complement reason by looking to the revelation of scripture and tradition. But crucially, as *the truths of faith and the truths of reason cannot contradict one another*, reason can and should always correct faith — for example, by showing where scripture is misinterpreted if a metaphor or parable is taken literally.

This does not imply that faith is merely a means of ascent to belief propositions unknowable by reason, because faith (a faculty of will) is disposition to act, in love, charity and holiness, hence is a virtue.

In a gloss on the claim, 'Faith without works is dead' (James 2. 10) Aquinas distinguishes between living faith which acts, and dead faith, which doesn't. A living faith is a theological virtue in that our acts are infused with love and directed toward happiness, which is union with God, for Aquinas. The commitment to love (informed by scripture and tradition, but interpreted by reason) should challenge both rationalism and dead faith.

Learning from history, sociology, and dialogue, members of the 1901 Congress came to see religious traditions as a cultural phenomenon. They also came also to under-stand 'liberal religion' as prioritising mutual respect, ethical commitment and social responsibility, over belief. In Aquinas' light, this ought to be seen as a critical and evolving 'living faith', emerging from the fruits of interfaith dialogue, the social sciences, and the reflection of reason.

Such a living faith, centred on ethics, was later variously explored by Don Cupitt, Hans Kung ('Declaration Toward a Global Ethic' 1983), and Karen Armstrong ('Charter of Compassion' 2008) among others. It continues to be explored by the Sea of Faith today.

Faith in this Life - Contributions

In this edition Łukasz Liniewicz writes on the

work of The International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF), an evolution of the International Council of Unitarian and Other Liberal Religious Thinkers and Workers. Also, Sister Isabel Smyth shares her experience of working in Interfaith dialogue, and how this informed her own faith. John Billings also asks what contemporary responses to trans lives reveals about faith today.

Simon Cross — a minister, writer, and Chair of PCN — reflects on faith in his life. Formerly the 'Religion in my Life' column, this regular column is being restyled as 'Lived Religion', to more clearly link to the developing inter-disciplinary field of study of lived religion, which is introduced on p. 8.

Dave Francis and Denise Cush continue our theme of Faith in this Life with a special two part series navigating Religion and Worldviews Education. A new column, 'Network matters', will regularly reflect on the charitable work of the Network. This edition considers the role of the magazine and its purpose, in light of the charitable objectives of the network and changes that have been taking place in religious studies. Longer than the column will usually be, I outline the approach that as editor I will take, and share it in the hope that it will help shape our thinking and offers of future articles.

Finally, while we continue to look for an arts editor, I offer a brief reflection on Saint Sofia and her daughters, Saints Faith Hope and Love.

I thank my predecessor David Chapman for his highly-valued work on *Sofia*, and extend very warm thanks to all contributors to the magazine — from those within the network and those beyond — who support our educational work by writing articles for *Sofia*. Thank you!

Notes:

¹The Hymanist Manifest of 1933 was printed in *SoF* 21 (1995), pp. 7–8. Available at <<https://sofn.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/SOF21.pdf>>

The International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF)

Bringing together liberal religious individuals and communities by Łukasz Liniewicz.

The Council of Unitarian and Other Liberal Thinkers and Workers, which met for the first time 125 years ago in London, has survived to this day. We refer to that meeting as our first Congress. In 2023, we held our thirty-sixth. The organisation's name changed, in fact, more than once, and even its understanding of its mission has fluctuated somewhat, yet the core has remained.

It has been a long journey — we are the oldest international interfaith organisation. Yet it was a short one as well, from another point of view. It happened in the span of the very last sentence, maybe just the latest clause, of humanity's story. It shows how our horizons have broadened and how time has picked up its pace, such that so much could happen in so little time among so many people from so many distant parts of the world. Perhaps the best illustration for this journey is neither a line — straight, upward, downward, jagged or otherwise — nor, hopefully, a circle, but a spiral. A spiral illustrates, as well as any material metaphor can, that, despite many turbulences and changes of course, identity can be preserved while not fossilising. Even an identity based on commitment to fluidity, change, questioning and liberation from intellectual, spiritual and material constraints. And such is liberal or free religion, which those gathered in London in 1901 professed — a process, a method, an attitude rather than a set of statements about reality, with the exception of a small number of normative assumptions or tenets like the dignity, freedom and fundamental equality of human beings.

A spiral, though three-dimensional, conveys something about the flow of time, perhaps because it invokes in us the image of a flight of stairs and movement. From a certain point of view, on a certain plane — looking downwards — it may appear that the IARF has arrived at its point of departure. In 2025, following a period of intense reflection and vigorous action on the wave of enthusiasm and renewed commitment brought about by our thirty-sixth Congress, we adopted a Vision Statement. It starts with a brief identity affirmation — that we are an organisation

bringing together liberal religious individuals and communities.

You won't find there the exact same phrasing as that used by those gathered in 1901 — '*to open communication with those who, in all lands, are striving to unite*

pure Religion and perfect Liberty, and to increase fellowship and co-operation among them'. These words, uttered at a completely different time, a time of optimism and staunch faith in human progress, have an archaic and pompous ring to them, but their spirit has been reiterated with full conviction. It is significant because, though the IARF never completely abandoned this focus, it has been growing and changing, engaging in new endeavours and self-reflection. Now, it has been embraced again as our *raison d'être*.

For a period of its history, the IARF concentrated on advocacy for freedom of religion or belief and on facilitating broad interfaith dialogue, especially in the 80s, 90s and early 2000s. We value that part of our history very much and are proud of what we have accomplished since being granted official status with the United Nations (UN) in 1955. In fact, this year marks the forty-fifth anniversary of the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief¹ (a mouthful, indeed), adopted largely due to the efforts of IARF representatives collaborating closely with our members and partners, such as the Unitarian Universalist Association and Religions for Peace. Though only a declaration and not binding, it broke a decades-long impasse between the Western and Eastern blocs, and created the momentum needed to appoint a Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Religion or Belief (as the office is now called) and



the NGO Committee for “FoRB”, an acronym you will come across often. The first president of that Committee was an IARF member and served on behalf of the IARF — our longstanding representative to the UN in New York, Susan Nichols.

We grew in numbers, in terms of members, staff and budget, and turned into an established, well-structured body that scarcely resembled the spontaneous, somewhat chaotic movement from the beginning of the twentieth century (it was formed a day after the idea emerged among the attendees of the American Unitarian Association’s seventh-fifth anniversary, without arduous planning or orchestration). It had a president and a secretary, but no headquarters or staff on payroll to speak of. In fact, much could be said about the prominence of the IARF — an organisation significant enough to receive a special invitation to send observers to the Second Vatican Council, counting among its members the greatest liberal religious thinkers and workers of the twentieth century — among them Schweitzer, Tillich, Luther Adams, von Holk, and countless others. This period of growth was interrupted by two World Wars but continued, resulting in many accomplishments. The IARF obtained a position at the UN among the most important non-governmental organisation of the time, engaged in dialogue with the biggest and most influential religious movements, attracted countless prominent members of the highest intellectual and moral standing, expanding to include ever more traditions, cultures and countries, and even developed its own poverty relief programme, the Social Service Network, which operated for two decades under the leadership of Lucie Meijer and completed numerous projects, including building schools, orphanages and women’s centres in India, the Philippines and elsewhere.

Yet no story is really worth telling if it isn’t candid and excludes the less glorious of its pages. After this expansion and branching into new territories, a crisis emerged. Perhaps it was a crisis of identity and motivation, which manifested as a result of moving in a more generic advocacy direction, uprooted from the native liberal soil, perhaps purely circumstantial, but in the early 2000s the secretariat diminished to just one person, and when I started at the IARF, over a decade ago now, to just half a person working

from home. The budget allowed for making a couple of grants each year, but not much more. The new leadership, elected at the Birmingham Congress the year prior, had a daunting task awaiting them: thorough reform encompassing both the shell — the legal and administrative arrangements — and the spirit.

Personally, I was very lucky to work with such people as Wytse Dijkstra and Robert Ince. Ultimately, it turned out to be a very rewarding task that helped me learn and grow in many ways, but it has also been frustrating. I remember my late partner teasing me from time to time, saying that I worked for a glorified *Reisebüro*. It did feel like that sometimes. It’s often difficult to point to the exact cause or beginning of a significant change, a watershed moment, in the lives of people and communities alike. But, ultimately, the tide turned. After decades spent in a downward spiral, to use that metaphor again, there came a breath of new life. Speaking of breath feels right, because, in many of our traditions and also in my own experience, liberal religion is about the spirit, symbolised by air or flame, which moves where it wishes, unconstrained, free, escaping definition and ever surprising, gifting new beginnings.

The time following our last Congress was the busiest, most inspiring—and also most tiring — that I have ever experienced at the IARF. It has shown that neither the IARF nor liberal religion is dead.

The new energy focused on three areas: community, education and advocacy. Community building and education have an internal dimension of serving our members and helping them connect both as groups and individuals, now aided by countless new tools offered by our digitising world. Personal connection is irreplaceable, of course, and so are the Congresses, but the relationships and ideas born there can now be cultivated and grow so much more easily. We’ve started a social and collaborative space for our members and allies to support a growing number of volunteers to collaborate more effectively, for our members to easily connect on a grassroots level, and to provide tools for other projects. Perhaps the most important one is the Free Religion Institute, an (e)learning project that encompasses a digital library, webinars and courses focused on the inspiring and liberating potential of religion and

We want to help bring progressive Christians, Jews, Muslims, Unitarians, Buddhists and countless others closer together

reason. Then, we are investing a lot of resources into advocacy, at the UN and elsewhere, to help amplify the liberal religious voice and the plight of those who experience oppression, from small progressive faiths to indigenous people, and join the work for a more just world for all, regardless of belief, sex, ethnicity, gender identity or sexual orientation. We want to help bring progressive Christians, Jews, Muslims, Unitarians, Buddhists and countless others closer together to demonstrate that religion is not an inherently constraining, oppressive, backward force, but a source of inspiration and thirst for knowledge, liberation, justice and peace. This is the religious freedom we believe in, a personal and communal liberty to question, learn and grow as human beings — not merely freedom of religion, but freedom within it. Though what we believe, the words we use to describe it, and the rites we hold to help us experience it have definitely changed over the last 125 years, the how has not. The words spoken at the London Congress now sound a bit silly to our ears, certainly quite pompous and perhaps even naive — such as when pure Religion was invoked — but I believe the faith in the freedom and divine inspiration of the individual, manifested and strengthened through personal and communal relationships without coercion, has not disappeared or fossilised.

We welcome all to join us on this journey of learning, work and celebration. Please visit our website, sign up for the IARF Network to get to know our members from all around the world, access our course and resources, and perhaps even consider volunteering if this vision resonates with you.

Łukasz Liniewicz is Executive Secretary of The International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF) www.iarf.net



The IARF has general consultative status with the Economic and Social Committee of the United Nations.

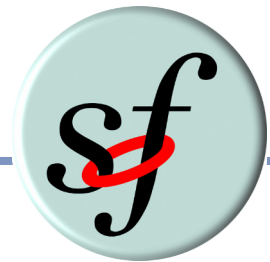
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p. 2 by Messrs Elliott & Fry, from the archives of IARF. Printed in W. Copeland Bowie (ed.), *Liberal Religious Thought at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century: Addresses and Papers of the International Council of Unitarian and Other Liberal Religious Thinkers and Workers, Held in London, May, 1901* (Elsom & Co, 1901). Available at <https://archive.org/details/bwb_KU-773-299/> accessed 22 January 2026

p. 3 Łukasz Liniewicz, reproduced by kind permission of the author

Notes

¹ Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, adopted 25 November 1981, by General Assembly resolution 36/55. Available at <<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/declaration-elimination-all-forms-intolerance-and-discrimination>> [accessed 29 Jan 2026]



Faith in *The Sea of Faith*

The word "Faith" in our title worries many humanists. They have a point. Faith is widely understood as referring to traditional religious systems: the Christian faith, the Jewish faith, and so on. Since, in Cupitt's graphic but self-evident phrase, these have become "killing machines", purveyors of hatred enmity, and division, why use so tainted a term? Because "faith" needs rescuing from religious bigots. Those who need certainties have no need of faith: God or Fate will run the show. It is those of us who deny the possibility of use certainties, who have learned to live without them, who must manage on what an older generations of humanists were happy to call faith.

David Boulton, "Sea of Faith" Humanism', in *New Humanist*, 112(3) November, 1997.

Learning from Interfaith Dialogue

by Sister Isabel Smyth SND

A large part of my spiritual pilgrimage has been the journey into the faith of others. It has been a sacred encounter and a journey which has truly enriched my soul.

It began when, as a young sister, I went to study at Lancaster University, living in the university halls of residence during the week. This was the first time I had lived in a secular environment, having been brought up in a committed Catholic home, becoming a Catholic teacher, and then entering a Catholic convent. Although it was disturbing at the time I now look upon it as the most graced moment of my life. It was a time when the scales fell from my eyes, and my vision was widened to see God's presence in other faiths. It was a moment that led me to reconsider my understanding of my own faith and to re-articulate it in terms meaningful to me. I was changed by the experience of Lancaster. The security of my one-sided perspective was disturbed. I came to recognise the great diversity in God and in the search for God, which is deep within all religions and indeed within all human hearts. I was able to recognise what was essential and what was peripheral in my faith as I reconsidered my understanding of God, religion, and truth.

Returning to Glasgow after Lancaster, I knew I did not want to retire again into a closed community but wanted to keep alive my contact with other faiths, and I was fortunate enough to meet an amazing woman, a Church of Scotland deaconess called Stella Reekie, who set up the first interfaith group in Scotland. Becoming a member of the Glasgow Sharing of Faiths provided me with opportunities for friendships with people of all faiths, and our long-standing friendships have meant supporting and encouraging one another in times of sadness as well as joy. It gave me the opportunity to visit and feel at home in different places of worship, to attend weddings and

celebrations in faiths other than my own, to travel and experience what it is like to be Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist in countries where these religions are the majority and Christianity the minority. I have lived in ashrams and monasteries, made retreats with Buddhists,



engaged in endless conversations, read the scriptures of others, taught world religions and conducted workshops on the faith of others, helped set up organisations like Interfaith Scotland, supported others like the Council of Christians and Jews, attended seminars and conferences, studied interfaith relations and continue to keep alive my interest and involvement in it, convinced that it's vital for peace in our troubled world.

Engaging in the work of interfaith relations has allowed me to live my life in what Rilke calls 'ever widening circles'. As Catholic theologian John S. Dunne wrote in a book called *The Way of all the Earth*, the spiritual adventure of our time was to pass over into the world of other faiths and to come back to our own to find ourselves changed. Just as we see our own home and our own country with different eyes when we visit others, so too with religion. Having passed over into the world of others, having tried to understand and teach their faith, having tried to stand in their shoes, I have come to believe that at the heart of religion and faith is a human search for meaning which unites us all. I have come to see that doctrines and expressions of faith are inadequate ways of expressing a Reality that is Mystery. For me, it is important to understand the historical and cultural context in which particular expressions of the faith grew up, to recognise that they are conditioned by those contexts and may need reformulation to incorporate later knowledge and understanding. For me it is not so much what religion says but what it means and where it takes me in my relationship to that Reality which some of us call God, the One in

whom we all live and move and have our very being.

I have benefited so much from the beauty and wisdom of the scriptures of other faiths. Reading some of the Upanishads has led me to a place of silent prayer and a sense of connectedness with the Ground of our Being. I have been moved by passages such as this one from chapter VIII of the *Chandogya Upanishad*:

As great as the infinite space beyond us is
The space within the lotus of the heart.
Both heaven and earth are contained in that
inner space
Both fire and air, sun and moon, lightning and
stars.
Whether we know it in this world or know it
not,
Everything is contained in that inner space.

I have heard the call of God in the stories of the Lord Krishna and marvelled at the beauty of the *Bhagavad Gita*. To pray with these texts has been as meaningful as my reflection and prayer with the Christian scriptures.

Perhaps it is my dialogue with Buddhism that has influenced me most, particularly the Christian–Buddhist encounters I organised with a nun from Samye Ling Tibetan Buddhist Monastery. The encounters began with a week on Iona, and continued for about fifteen years. We met annually at Samye Ling, Holy Isle, a Carmelite monastery, and other ‘secular’ places. The week on Iona that began the dialogue remains one of the most meaningful weeks I have experienced. Ani Lhamo and I spent the week talking, sharing our faith and preparing the sessions we were offering in the Abbey while enjoying the sun and beauty of the island. We became good friends, with a real sisterly connection, and I, for one, recognised the common attraction we had to spirituality, an attraction that had led both of us to a lifetime of commitment in a religious community. I could relate this attraction to God, but it did not seem to be so different from that of Ani Lhamo, who did not believe in a creator God but did believe in a Reality that we participate in and draws us to itself. We sometimes tried to find readings that would take the participants in the course from the head to the heart. My memory is that I suggested Francis Thompson’s poem ‘The Hound of Heaven,’ which speaks of God’s search for us and of finding us even if we try to run away from it. Ani Lhamo was very touched by this, and it occurred to me that she and I felt the same

attraction to spirituality and prayer, which demanded a lifetime commitment. Tibetan Buddhists do not believe in a Creator God and would not use God language to describe this attraction as I might have done. But the reality of the attraction was surely the same, and the Reality which is the source of all life, whether it be called God or a universal Buddha nature, was surely the same – just described differently.

I have been privileged and blessed to have made two retreats with the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, and to have visited his monastery in the Dordogne region of France, which was composed of several hamlets and called Plum Village. I shall never forget these retreats. Thich Nhat Hanh was an ikon of mindfulness and peace, so to see him walk into a room, sit quietly in the lotus position and teach with gentleness and kindness was a lesson in itself. I think he was a genius in that his teachings on Buddhism touched his listeners’ humanity and made perfect sense. This was religion at its best, and I wished I could do that for Christianity. Thay, as his disciples called him, had a great respect for Christianity, writing two books about their relationship, *Living Buddha, Living Christ* and *Going Home: Jesus and the Buddha as Brothers*. He felt that Buddhism would allow Christianity to discover the spirituality behind many of its teachings and Christianity help Buddhism discover its sense of justice, something he called engaged Buddhism.

For some people the engagement I have had with faiths other than my own has felt like a betrayal of Christianity. But not so for me. As I have sat in different places of worship, as I have sat in silent meditation with people of different faiths I have encountered something of the reality that is behind all our faiths and sensed my solidarity with them all. I have come to realise my interconnectedness with people of all faiths and none and indeed with the whole cosmos. And when I sit in silent meditation on my own or participate in Christian liturgies, I hold them all in my heart and give thanks for a deep and hidden communion that we all share.

Isabel Smyth is a Sister of Notre Dame. She was the founding director of Interfaith Scotland and the Scottish Catholic Bishops’ Interfaith Officer. She has been awarded the OBE and the *Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice* medal for her interfaith work.

Her blog is — www.interfaithjourneys.net

On Lived Religion

The study of religion in everyday life, as developed within the fields of sociology and practical theology, challenges us to reevaluate and redefine our understanding of religion.

In sociology, the French *la religion vécue* of the sociologist Gabriel Le Bras (1891–1970) referred to popular religion. American sociologists of religion¹ have extended this approach to study the lives and experiences of individuals and communities rather than of religious institutions and their representatives. According to Robert Orsi,

to study lived religion entails a fundamental rethinking of what religion is and of what it means to be “religious.” Religion is not only not *sui generis*, distinct from other dimensions of experience called “profane.” Religion comes into being in an ongoing, dynamic relationship with the realities of everyday life.²

In theology, the German *gelebte Religion* of Paul Drews (1858–1912) and Falk Wagner (1939–98) explored the interplay between faith, philosophy, and everyday life. Wilhelm Gräb (1948–2023) extends this approach in light of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), grounding theology in empirical study and interpretation of everyday experience. Gräb approaches lived religion from the perspective of individuals interpreting life experience and seeking meaning as they navigate life. In lived religion, Gräb explains,

Religion is no longer just what is objectively referred to as ‘religion’ or ‘church’. Religion is now also what the individual understands by the notion, so that the reference that the individual makes to what he or she understands by religion and communicates as religion is also part of the concept of religion. “Religion” has become synonymous with interpretations of life related to one’s own subjectivity.

“Religion” — the term used in the singular — means a human capacity that should be understood as a dimension of human life evoking the questions of where we come from and where we are going, and what makes our lives meaningful in a greater context.³

For Gräb, lived religion is a personal '*subjektive Religion*', shaped by a person's experience and biography, by which they seek *personal*

transcendence, rather than a mystical transcendence, shaped by metaphysical religious dogma. It involves processes of meaning formation in everyday life through the appropriation and use of art, cultural symbols, narratives, and rituals by which individuals shape personal narratives, explore identity, confront existential questions, and form their ethical commitments.

Today, lived religion designates a broad research trend that draws on these origins with varying emphases to explore religion as a lived practice of meaning-making. The approach extends beyond both theistic beliefs and organised religions traditions into alternative religious explorations of life and meaning.⁴

This regular column in *Sofia* aims to contribute to the exploration of religion, as we consider how individuals navigate belief and practice in personal and social experience, as they seek meaning in their lives.

Paul Overend

¹ E.g., Meredith McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford University Press, 2008); Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Studying Lived Religion: Context and Practices*, (New York University Press, 2021).

² Robert A. Orsi, “Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion.” In David Hall (ed.), *Lived Religion in America* (Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 4–21. (p. 7)

³ Wilhelm Gräb, 'Life Interpretation and Religion', in Birgit Weyel, Wilhelm Gräb, Emmanuel Lartey & Cas Wepener, *International Handbook of Practical Theology* (De Gruyter, 2022), pp. 169–82. (p. 170) [Open access] <<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110618150>>

⁴ See: R. Ruard Ganzevoort 'Cultural Hermeneutics of Religion' and Júlio C. Adam, 'Lived Religion and Religion', in Birgit Weyel, *et al.*, *International Handbook of Practical Theology* (pp. 633–45 and pp. 183–94)

Also: Philipp Öhlmann, Ignatius Swart, Birgit Weyel, Simangaliso Kumalo, Marie-Luise Frost (eds.), *Lived Religion and Lived Development in Contemporary Society: Essays in Honour of Wilhelm Gräs* (Vanden-hoeck & Ruprecht, 2025). [Open access] <<https://doi.org/10.13109/9783666500718>>

Simon Cross



Q: Simon, you've had quite a personal and professional journey over the past years, from journalism, writing on New Monasticism, doctoral research at Hull, and into urban ministry. You continue writing and are Chair of Trustees for the Progressive Christianity Network, in Britain (PCN). How has your understanding and practice of your faith changed through this time?

A: It can be hard, I think, to distinguish between 'what I think now' and 'what I used to think.' Sometimes I find myself using that awful phrase 'I've always thought...' which is, of course, an untruth. Every experience changes us; the way we see the world alters from moment to moment. So, of course, my 'understanding and practise of faith' has changed over time. I grew up in a low-key conservative evangelical Baptist church, where piety was important, as was social justice — but what it meant to 'have faith' had a lot to do with assent to traditional doctrines. I began to 'put away childish things' in my teens, but found it challenging to know what to replace them with.

One thing that has long been important to me is the issue of suffering. The human experience of suffering, the alleviation of suffering, the suffering of the world, and the suffering of the divine all jostle for space inside my mind. Partly, I think this has to do with my own experience of suffering, particularly the death, at birth, of our third child. It is this experience, beyond any other, which I would point to as my most profound spiritual or religious awakening. I believe it changed me more than anything else.

There's something about that sort of experience that exposes the poverty of the doctrines that are routinely expounded in many churches — and there's something about the near universality of that sort of experience that means we have to take seriously the challenge of leaving behind inherited and unquestioned assumptions.

I've moved, I suppose, from a place of apparently secure but ultimately very flimsy child-like certainty, through a comforting cloud of adolescent uncertainty, to some new place where I find things change with a certain amount

of fluidity. I have, somehow, become comfortable with discomfort.

As well as being a writer and chair of PCN (which is a very part-time, voluntary role), I am also a minister in the United Reformed Church. When I trained for ministry, I found my fellow ordinands were at times perplexed by my position. "This is Simon, he doesn't believe in God," one said when introducing me to a friend. "That's not quite right," I said, "I just think the phrase is pointless unless we share a clear understanding of what it means to 'believe' and what we mean by 'God'."

Faith, I think of as 'faithfulness' — I think that's a better translation of the Greek anyway, it's less to do with cognitive assent to an idea, more to do with loyalty. I think I can say that my loyalty has remained more or less the same, even if my idea of who, or what, I am loyal to, has changed substantially over time.

Q: *Have there been any particular transforming experiences or religious/theological insights that have affected you personally? If so, what are these, and how did they affect you?*

A: Yes, as I said, the death of my son was one such experience — it was, and is, a profound influence on me. It made me, I think, more compassionate, less judgmental, more inclined to love and forgive — when you stop to think about it, that was a profound gift he gave me. But there have been others too — and in some ways it's difficult to differentiate between the importance of different experiences. A (sometimes more regular than

others) practise of meditation has been hugely influential for me, and intentionally engaging with people who hold radically different views to me has also been very important. Friendship with people of other faith traditions — such as my dear, late friend Marcus — helped shape me at a deep level.

For my doctoral project, I had the opportunity to spend significant time working on and with process philosophy and theology — and this has really shaped my thinking. Understanding the world as a series of interlinked processes — recognising that everything is in constant change, or that change is itself the only true constant — is powerful.

One of the first writers I found who spoke to me where I was ‘at’ was Brian McLaren, I read some of his early work in my early twenties, and I remember saying to my wife; ‘other people think like us!’ McLaren was, perhaps, a gateway drug for me, and I went on to the hard stuff. But others were also important in those early days. Actually, I think the Baptist minister and social entrepreneur Steve Chalke could be said to have radicalised me as a teenager. His commitment to ‘faith-fuelled’ social change connected with me in an important way — I was pleased to have had the opportunity to spend several years working with Steve’s charity, The Oasis Trust, in my thirties and early forties.

It sounds pretentious, perhaps, especially from someone like me who has spent most of their life living on Northern council estates, but I think Alfred North Whitehead was right to say that all of Western philosophy is a ‘series of footnotes to Plato’ — I’ve spent more time reading the words of long-dead Greeks than is probably healthy. Oh — and Zen. That’s taught me a lot, or perhaps I should say continues to teach me a lot, or maybe it has taught me nothing, because Christianity is not the only place where paradox is to be found.

Q: Thinking about how you live your faith, can you say how your outlook influences or impacts your life today (your life with Kelly, your life in church, in the local community, and so on)? What meaning does it have for you in practice?

A: I can honestly say, I think, that my faith — my ongoing attempts to be faithful to the ways of Jesus, that paradoxical path of enemy love, repeated forgiveness and resilient hope in the face of enormously powerful forces — has a very clear and ongoing impact on my life. For better or for worse, we’ve chosen a path which differs from many of our contemporaries. As many of them now seem to be cruising towards early retirement, I find that my work feels as though it’s hardly started. Sometimes I sense in myself some level of regret for that — mostly though I think we’ve made good choices.

A deep, and I hope genuine, sense of solidarity with the ‘wretched of the earth’ as Frantz Fanon might have put it continues to motivate me at a deep level. A sense, too, that everything is interconnected, that nothing exists in a vacuum, but that life itself is a series of interconnected processes, means that I try to see the world through that lens. My sense is that everything and everyone is to be respected and treated as worthy of care and love. Do I manage to translate that into consistent decision-making? Honestly — no. But I continue to try.

Love continues to be my goal and my guide — although that sounds horribly pretentious, and saying it causes me to doubt myself somewhat. Perhaps I should say that ‘when I’m at my best, love continues to inspire me, and to lead me.’

At the end of last year, I was in a meeting with my local MP, listening to a lot of leaders from other religious and cultural traditions. They spoke, inevitably, about how intimidating they found the St George’s flags that had been hoisted around parts of our city. I understood what they meant, and it left me reflecting on the motivation for this apparent show of ‘patriotism’. “I think it’s a lack of hope,” I said. “People feel like they don’t have hope.” My sense, or perhaps my hope, is that Christianity has hope to offer to everyone, if only we can communicate it clearly.

Q: You’ve said that the way of Jesus is an intensely political path. Will you unpack what this political vision means to you, and perhaps, as you see it, for your church and for society?



A: From my perspective, Jesus only really makes sense through a political lens — a lens which understands the background of Jewish messianic expectation and the liberative struggle of his time. This is what I believe, this is what I teach — and this is what I write.

Now I know, of course, that we all seek to remake Jesus in 'our own image' and I dare say I'm as guilty of that as anyone. I simply can't see that any alternative vision of the life of Jesus is coherent, though, except by way of magical thinking. And I'm no great fan of magical thinking. Among the writers who articulate this political sense of who, and what, Jesus was most clearly, to my eyes, is John Dominic

Crossan. I would certainly say that what little we can say about the life of Jesus would have to take into account, or perhaps begin with, the political struggles of the time. When Jesus came down to the sea of Galilee, the nexus of Herod Antipas' taxation economy, he began to form communities of resistance — an alternative economy — an alternative 'kingdom' in the heart of the empire.

I think that Christianity, at its best, is still expressed through communities of resistance. Our rituals, our poetry, our prayers — these are all powerful tools to support and renew us in that resistance — but when stripped of their meaning, they can become meaningless, nice perhaps, but meaningless.

I think that Christianity, at its best, is still expressed through communities of resistance.

I think it's true to say that Christianity must always be a minority pursuit. It should always be a prophetic irritant. It is and will always remain vulnerable. Where the church has taken power, over the years, it has ably demonstrated why it should not.

In contemporary political terms, I would describe myself as an anarchist — but, like all labels, it's a bit too reductive and certainly isn't one I think could be appropriately applied to Jesus. I'm an anarchist primarily because I don't ultimately believe in the concept of the nation state — certainly not as the location of 'legitimate violence' as Weber defined it. I do believe, however, that we should act as Jesus did, which means we should

proactively develop communities of resistance where the upside-down values of enemy love and compassion can be nurtured. This, I think, is what we can, and should, call 'God's work.'

Image credit: by the kind permission of Simon Cross
Simon's Website — simonjcross.com

Progressive Christianity Network —
<http://www.pcnbritain.org.uk>

Nec tamen consumebatur: The Latin logo on the lectern means "yet it was not consumed," referring to the bush burned without being destroyed in Exodus 3.

Sofia's New 'What is it?' Column

This new column will be included when space is available. Using arts and crafts as windows onto religion, it will consider faith, practice, and meaning in religious cultural life.

Consider the object shown and what meaning it might have for a religious tradition, particularly at this time.

Then check your answer!



what is it?

What is the religious significance of this lamp?

Exploring meaning in religious arts, crafts, and ritual objects.

Check your answer

on p. 14.

Faith, Trust, and the Courage to Live Truthfully

On faith as trust, exploring what contemporary responses to trans lives reveal about how faith is practised today, by John Billings

Faith reaches far beyond theology. We place faith in institutions, in traditions, in science, in community, and in ourselves. Faith shapes how we interpret the world and how we respond when that world unsettles us. Faith in oneself is often the least acknowledged, yet most demanding, form of trust: the courage to take one's own inner experience seriously, even when external voices insist it is mistaken, dangerous, or illegitimate. At its best, faith enables courage, humility, and compassion. At its worst, it hardens into fear, control, and exclusion. The way faith is exercised today in relation to trans lives reveals much about which of those paths we are choosing.

Religious faith, in particular, has always wrestled with uncertainty. Sacred texts emerge from communities trying to make meaning in complex, fragile worlds. They speak of order and chaos, belonging and exile, truth and transformation. Faith traditions are not manuals for certainty, but practices for living with mystery. When faith is reduced to rigid answers, it ceases to be faith at all and becomes an ideology. This distinction matters deeply in contemporary debates about gender and identity.

I do not speak *for* trans people. What I offer instead is a reflection on faith itself - faith in meaning, in the metaphysical, in humanity, and in the possibility that we might live together without demanding conformity as the price of belonging. Trans people are not asking to be revered or explained away. Again and again, their testimonies express something simpler: a desire to live truthfully, safely, and without being turned into symbols in someone else's struggle for power. To live truthfully in this sense is not an act of defiance for its own sake, but an expression of faith in oneself: a refusal to treat one's own existence as a problem to be solved or denied.

Many people assume that trans and non-binary identities are modern inventions, products of

cultural confusion or moral decline. History tells a different story. Across cultures and centuries, human societies have recognised that sex and gender do not always align neatly into binary categories. Spiritual traditions have often held space for this complexity, whether through recognised social roles, theological metaphors, or sacred narratives that resist simple classification. Gender diversity is not a rupture in human history but part of its ongoing reality.

In Jewish tradition, the concept of *b'tzelem Elohim* — being made in the image of God — affirms that every person carries inherent dignity. This idea is not merely metaphysical but ethical. It demands attentiveness to how power is exercised and how difference is treated. Rabbinic discussions in the Talmud go further, recognising multiple categories of sex and gender, with some scholars identifying seven genders and others as many as twelve. These discussions do not mirror modern concepts of gender identity, but they demonstrate an awareness that human bodies and lives resist simple categorisation. Complexity is not a modern problem forced upon tradition; it has always been there.

Christian theology, too, centres its faith on paradox. The creation narratives in Genesis describe a world brought into being through differentiation - light and dark, land and sea - and then filled with abundance and variation. The Gospels continue this pattern. In the incarnation, God is understood not as distant authority but as vulnerable presence. The Gospel stories consistently depict Jesus crossing boundaries, touching those deemed unclean, and restoring dignity to those pushed to the margins. Faith, in this sense, is not about guarding purity but about practising proximity.

Seen through this lens, faith becomes less about certainty and more about trust: trust that truth is



not fragile, that difference does not threaten holiness, and that listening is not the same as surrendering moral integrity. This kind of faith does not demand immediate understanding. Many traditions would recognise it as a spiritual posture grounded not in certainty about the self, but in honesty towards it, requiring attentiveness, restraint, and a willingness to be changed by encounter. That same dynamic of trust, expectation, and disappointment also shapes how we relate to the institutions we rely upon.

Politician Nigel Lawson once remarked that ‘the NHS is the closest thing the English people have now to a religion’. Seen in that light, faith in this particular institution has been severely tested for trans people. Waiting times for NHS gender services stretch into years. Legal recognition remains complex and contested. In April 2025, the Supreme Court ruled that the terms ‘woman’, ‘man’ and ‘sex’ in the Equality Act 2010 refer to biological sex, even where individuals hold gender recognition certificates. While framed as legal clarification, the ruling has intensified uncertainty about how trans people are protected under equality law and how exclusion may be justified in its name.

Institutional faith falters when systems fail to recognise the people they are meant to serve. For trans people, interactions with healthcare, media, and law are marked by suspicion rather than care. Faith in public institutions erodes through repeated experiences of neglect, delay, and hostility.

Media narratives play a powerful role in shaping where faith is placed. Sections of the press and prominent voices on social media frame trans people as threats to women’s safety, child welfare, or social stability. These narratives often present themselves as expressions of concern, yet they rely on distortion and selective attention. Trans women are hyper-visible as objects of fear, while trans men are rendered almost invisible, even when proposed policies would compel bearded, socially recognised men to use women’s toilets. Panic-driven narratives produce incoherent outcomes precisely because they are not grounded in lived reality.

At the heart of this lies a crisis of faith — not faith in God, but faith in one another. When fear

overrides trust, difference becomes danger and control masquerades as care. The result is a politics of suspicion that harms not only trans people, but anyone whose body or life fails to conform to narrow norms. Cis people are policed out of places they are “valid” in.



Against this backdrop, the voices of trans people themselves are often remarkably restrained. Their stories rarely speak of grand social transformation. Instead, they speak of ordinary hopes: to be known by their own names, to live without constant scrutiny, to exist without fear. One contributor

to TransActual UK put it simply: ‘I’m not trying to change the world. I’m just trying to exist.’ This is not a manifesto. It is a request for peace.

True faith is revealed in responses. When trans people speak their truth, do we listen, or do we react defensively? Do we trust that human dignity can expand without diminishing anyone else? These questions are not abstract. They are enacted in policy decisions, community practices, and everyday interactions.

For those engaged in religious traditions, or in reflective movements such as the Sea of Faith, this moment poses a particular challenge. Faith that cannot tolerate complexity has lost touch with its own sources. Faith that refuses proximity has forgotten its ethical core. To stand alongside trans people is not to abandon belief, but to practise it — to place trust in compassion over control, in presence over panic.

There is something profoundly human in the desire to live truthfully. To do so requires faith in oneself: the belief that one’s own life is worth inhabiting honestly, rather than performed for the comfort of others. Across cultures and faiths, authenticity is bound up with liberation. The Christian Gospel speaks of truth that sets people free, not as abstract doctrine but as lived reality. Many believers understand this freedom not as escape from the self, but as movement into deeper selfhood, honouring the fullness of human life as something sacred.

Faith, reimagined or not, asks more than tolerance. It asks for courage - the courage to resist dehumanisation, to question inherited fears, and to remain open to being changed. It asks for humility, recognising that certainty is not the same

as wisdom. And it asks for solidarity, not as sentiment, but as a commitment to stand with those whose lives have been made precarious by systems of power.

We may not all share the same beliefs about God, theology, or identity. But we all live by faith of some kind. The question is not whether we believe, but what we are willing to trust. If we can place our faith in compassion rather than panic, in listening rather than exclusion, we may unexpectedly find ourselves on sacred ground.

John Billings is a facilitator of the Sea of Faith Norfolk group, and an ally of trans people.

TransActual is a UK based, trans led and run, national advocacy and education organisation — <https://transactual.org.uk/>

(From p. 11) *What is it and why? answer:*

A Ramadan Fanous

The picture on page 11 is of a fanous.

Such a lantern is traditionally crafted with coloured glass in an octagon shape, is made of copper material, and at one time would have housed an oil lamp. Today, a lamp might equally be crafted at home or in school with coloured paper or translucent cellophane sheets and small battery-lit light bulb.

The name 'fanous' simply means lamp (from the Arabic *fanoos*, a light or lantern). But among Muslims the fanous has become associated with Ramadan celebrations, when colourful lamps are used to greet or announce the festival.

Muslims are observing the month of Ramadan as this edition of *Sofia* comes into print. In our Western calendar year, Ramadan is being kept this year [2026, Hijri 1447–1448] from the evening of 17 February–19 March, for twenty–nine or thirty days, from one sighting of the crescent moon to the next.

A verse from a celebrated chapter in the Qur'an that is known as the Sura of Light (*Surah an-Nur*), reads:

Allāh is the Light of the heavens and the earth. ... His light is like a niche within which is a lamp, the lamp is within glass, the glass as if it were a pearly star lit from [the oil of] a blessed olive tree' (Qur'an, Sura 24: 35.1-24)

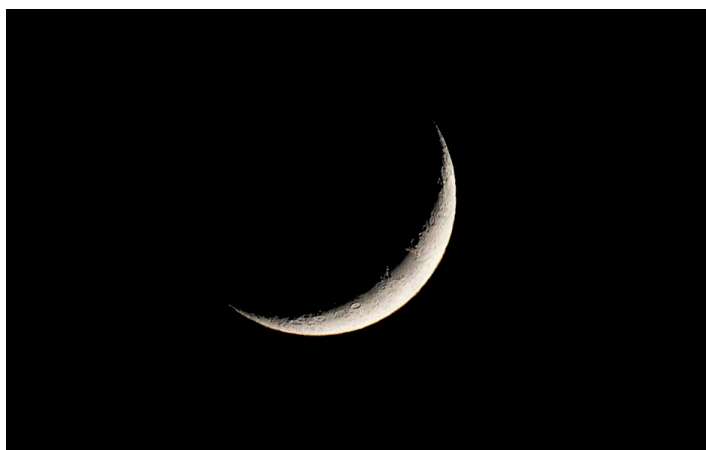
The final 10 days of Ramadan are thought to hold immense spiritual significance. It is a time

The Gender Dysphoria Bible documents the many ways that gender dysphoria can manifest — <https://genderdysphoria.fyi/>

TranzWiki is a comprehensive directory of groups supporting trans and gender diverse individuals — <https://www.gires.org.uk/tranzwiki/>

Images credits:

- p. 12 Photo by Patrick Perkins, 'Trans people are sacred', 2022, Unsplash, <<https://unsplash.com/photos/a-person-holding-a-sign-O5ifjQRrbFU>>
- p. 13 "Anglican Bishop Julio C. Martin Toronto Trans pride" by Julio César Martin Trejo, CCo 1.0. (Public Domain)



for the renewal of faith, during which Muslims seek God's mercy by prayer and supplication, the recitation of Quran, and giving alms and undertaking charitable deeds. These final days include celebrations (especially on the 21st, 23rd, 25th, & 27th nights of Ramadan) of the Night of Power (*Laylat al-Qadr*), the occasion that the first verses of the Qur'an are thought to have been revealed to the Prophet Muhammad.

While Muslims have no official religious symbols, the use of lanterns at Ramadan is a widespread cultural tradition that has gained religious significance. Symbolising the shining light of divine revelation, fanous are seen to be a light of faith and a sign of hope.

Images credits:

- p. 17, 'Photo Of Ramadan Light On Top Of Table', Ahmed Aqtai 2019, pexels.com [PD] <<https://www.pexels.com/photo/photo-of-ramadan-light-on-top-of-table-2233416/>> [Accessed 26 Jan 2026]
- p. 18. 'Crescent moon over Sarıçam, Adana - Turkey.' Zeynel Cebeci, 2016. [CC BY-SA 4.0] <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Crescent_moon_-_Hilal.jpg> [26 Jan 2026]

Book Editor, David Lambourn

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Book Reviews, 'Notices' and Conversation

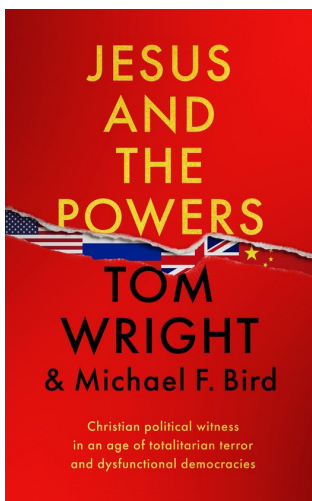
The many changes happening around us call for some change in our 'Books' section.

I hope to include more short 'notices' of books that members have found useful. These will give sufficient detail to enable easy access to additional information, both via traditional routes and also via AI - for those bold enough! I welcome your suggestions.

I would also like to see a change of emphasis in our reviews. In addition to information and critique we would welcome the questions that arise for reviewers. Our hope is that reviews come to be understood as one member's perceptions and, as such, are available for 'kickstarting' conversations. These conversations could promptly be continued in the forum on the *Sofia* website - to do so, an initial response would first be posted to:

books@sofn.uk

David Lambourn



Book Review, by Dominic Kirkham

Tom Wright and Michael Bird, *Jesus and the Powers* (SPCK, 2024).

Our world is 'dangerously combustible, due to financial crises,

pandemics, increasing injustices and inequalities, democratic chaos, geopolitical upheaval, wars and rumours of more wars to come.' So begins this book by two distinguished New Testament scholars, Tom Wright and Michael Bird (W&B). The talk now is all about the end of Western civilisation, or at best, how to save what's left of it. W&B are plunging into this debate to establish what political witness the church can contribute that will enable a positive engagement.

Notices

Nicholas Spencer, *Magisteria: the Entangled Histories of Science and Religion* (One World, 2023).

Lamorna Ash, *Don't Forget We're Here Forever: a New Generation's Search for Religion* (Bloomsbury, 2025).

George van Kooten, *Reverberations of Good News: the Gospels in Context Then and Now* (SCM, 2026).

Alice Roberts, *Domination: the Fall of the Roman Empire and the Rise of Christianity* (Simon & Schuster, 2025)

Luke Kemp, *Goliath's Curse: the History and Future of Societal Collapse* (Penguin, 2025).

J. Brian Tucker & Aaron Kuecker, *Social Identity Commentary on the New Testament* (T&T Clark, 2025).

Fara Dabhoiwala, *What is Free Speech?: the History of a Dangerous Idea* (Allen Lane, 2025).

Georgios Varouxakis, *The West: the History of an Idea* (Princeton, 2025).

The book is wide-ranging, well-informed and up to date. But I must confess I found it difficult to get to grips with. Not just because of the scale of the issues, but also because of their complexity. The authors imply as much in their postscript on Gaza, of which they say, 'It is almost impossible to say anything about this subject without inflaming someone somewhere' (p. xi). If this is true of one very specific regional event, how much more true is it of the last two thousand years of European history?

It seems to me that a significant element of the cultural controversy is the increasingly incendiary use of words: racist, fascist, terrorist, genocidal.... Invective is hurled back and forth as an emotive attack rather than promoting understanding and dialogue. Words are used as cyphers referring to vague hinterlands of contention. At the outset of this work, the authors present their thesis that 'Jesus is King, and Jesus' kingdom remains the

object of the Church's witness and work' (p. vii). But what do these words mean?

Take 'king', no doubt we have a pretty clear idea of what this word means, but is it really appropriate for a man whose career begins (in Luke's Gospel) with the announcement that the mighty will be cast from their thrones and the humble exalted; who denounced those who seek privilege to lord it over others (Luke 14. 7-11), and who defined himself as one who stands in our midst as a servant: the ascription of Pilate was the attribution of a pagan! Clearly words like 'king' or 'kingdom' are being used in a very unconventional way.

Of this matrix, the distinguished exegete J.D. Crossan, following Josephus, notes that the ministry of Jesus relates 'to the *invention* of a non-violent resistance against his homeland's Romanisation'. Though this way of life accepted the possibility of martyrdom, its novelty and focus lay in the empathetic compassion of communities of support. This kind of humanitarian era has been inspiringly described as a new kind of 'kindom'. In all of this, we begin to see what was so radical, even revolutionary, about the movement that grew from it, known simply as The Way: concepts like Christianity or The Church would take centuries to crystallise out.

All this was very different both in its organisation and beliefs from the movement that by the fourth century became known as Christianity. In contrast, W&B give the impression of a fully formed Christianity encountering and transforming imperial Rome, so that, 'Beginning with Constantine's legislation and empowerment of clergy, Christianity began a social, legal and moral revolution that still echoes today. 'This is the contrived perspective we see emerging in Eusebius' *History of the Church*, which, retrospectively, attributes a threefold male ministry as implicit from the outset, completely discounting women, in which empowerment lay in the imposition of newly coined credal beliefs, such as those of Nicaea, as the touchstone of orthodoxy. It is worth noting that historians have concluded that this council unleashed the worst violence in the entire history of the Roman Empire, in which an estimated 30,000 Christians were killed by other Christians in defence of 'orthodoxy', of which the Emperor Julian famously commented, 'even wild beasts are less savage to men than Christians are to each other.' The die had been cast for a nascent European Christendom.

Needless to say, we are given no clear indication of how such a radical transformation of The Way

came about in the new alliance with Caesar. Instead, the authors prefer to see what happened from at least the third century as part of 'God's purposes through God's people in a political world' (p. 65). At best 'the sins of the past' are to be excused because of 'the achievements of Christendom and for Western civilisation' (p. 34).

But again, what does this mean? In a secular age, what are we to understand of the word God or 'His' purposes? As with 'king' the Greek neo-Platonic concepts of the divine, such as 'logos', do not necessarily convey the distinctive nature of faith (*Emunah*) as understood by a Jewish Aramean – as Martin Buber noted in his study of *Two kinds of Faith*. Even apart from this, the idea of 'God's purpose' has been fatally compromised by events such as the Holocaust, at least according to the Holocaust theologian Rabbi Dan Cohn-Sherbok who writes, 'In the past Jews believed in a providential God who guides and protects his chosen people.... But in a post-Holocaust world, for most Jews, the prayers have lost their meaning. The Jewish religion, Judaism – with the Lord of history at its centre – has been eclipsed by belief [in] the state of Israel. Has Zionism replaced God?'

This transformation mirrors what also happened to Christianity during the Enlightenment. W&B acknowledge this process of secularisation that has so changed the West, but are keen to affirm that the Christian moral structure that emphasises the importance of the individual still provides the foundation for the secular narrative of human rights and liberal democracy: 'Whether we are conservatives who believe that voiceless and vulnerable babies should not have their lives ripped apart *in utero*, or progressives who contend that women have the right to have control over their own bodies, we are all arguing in Christian language, and we are still trading in Christian currency' (p. 28).

At this point one begins to see that the thesis of this work is beginning to sound more like a work of apologetics with the reaffirmation of certain assumed themes. To the authors 'it is fiercely ironic then that the secular *Kulturkampf* is really a critique of Christian ideas with other Christian ideas.' (p. 143) This may be true but for me, as I indicated at the outset, the whole thesis becomes bogged down in a morass of words and assumptions that are not clearly articulated or even acknowledged. It is this that makes the book so difficult to get to grips with. For this, or any book, perhaps what we need most is a better methodology of writing, and of reading.

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I congratulate the departing editor, David, on the *Sofia* series on Resistance. The last edition was a courageous and challenging finale.

What truly struck me was Syed Mustafa Ali's article, "The Violence of (White) Nonviolence." I am thinking hard about using the concept of 'whiteness' in place of 'white supremacy' or 'colonialism', though we should accept the challenge of understanding what whiteness is and how it came about. My article in the *Sofia* 148 (2023) was my attempt to do that.

The distinction between violence and counter-violence is critical. Well-meaning white liberals of the "why can't we all get along and be nice to each other" sort are aiding, and not just complicit in, the violence of oppression! That's true in two crude ways. Firstly, they deflect attention from the cause of the violence; the inherent violence of the Zionist state is the clearest current example. Secondly, they deny the justice of counterviolence.

White liberal violence, couched as non-violence, appears in two ways. First, in the arrogance of telling oppressed people how they can and can't resist as illustrated a couple of years ago by those claiming to support justice in Palestine, while condemning the counterviolence of resistance by Hamas and its allies. Second, and a result of white 'nonviolence', is the moral equivalence drawn between the oppressed and the oppressor, viewing the violence of oppression by the Zionist regime as equivalent to the counterviolence of resistance by Palestinians. If you take this view, it becomes almost inevitable that you will succumb to the bullying of the powerful and the oppressors – don't mention the BBC!

Notably, Ali acknowledges the place of nonviolence in the struggle for justice and the contribution that groups advocating non-violence can make. The Quakers stand out. And groups such as Christian CND have played a significant role in Palestine solidarity, being visible at marches. We need these groups at the same time as we need to understand how nonviolence and whiteness are linked.

David Rhodes

Readers may be interested in an update on the Defend our Juries Lift the Ban campaign (*Sofia* 158, 2025, p. 18).

The campaign is based on mass action, and there have so far been around 2,700 arrests for displaying signs saying "I oppose genocide. I support Palestine Action". Of the 540 of us arrested on 9 August 2025, about 240 have been charged under Section 13 of the Terrorism Act so far, though The Crown Prosecution Service have six months from the date of arrest to charge people. Not many of the more than 800 who were arrested on 6 September have been charged yet, whereas quite a few of the 480 arrested on 4 October have been charged.

I was charged, I have entered my not-guilty plea, and submitted a defence statement, and look forward to my case being heard at Stratford Magistrates Court in London on 1 July.

However, the Judicial Review of the proscription of Palestine Action (PA) is about to reach a conclusion as to whether the proscription is declared unlawful, is reversed, or is upheld, although the losing side will almost certainly appeal. If the proscription is reversed rather than declared unlawful, then PA would have been legally proscribed at the time of our arrest, so prosecution would remain a possibility. The Judicial Review was due to be heard by Mr Justice Chamberlain who had previously indicated that he accepted that PA is not a terror organisation in the 'colloquial' meaning of the term, but just before the Review was about to start, he was replaced by a panel of three judges suspected to be less sympathetic to PA.

Meanwhile, despite the ceasefire, Palestinians in Gaza are still being killed and the attacks on Palestinian communities in the occupied territories of the West Bank are, if anything, ramping up. The outlook for Palestinians is grim.

David Chapman

I was "released under investigation" for September's demo and arrested again in November outside the courts of justice. I'm supposed to appear at Plumstead police station on 23 February to be charged. Perhaps by then the courts will have decided to have the ban lifted or I may well get another RUI letter from the Met. who knows.

Meanwhile, I missed the Channel 4 programme *Palestine Action: The Truth Behind the Ban*. I can't help feeling very suspicious and more than a little annoyed!

Caroline Pickard

Part 1: Keeping Faith in Religion and Worldviews Education (RE)

by Dave Francis and Denise Cush

We have both dedicated our working lives, and even quite a bit of our retirement to date, to the cause of learning and teaching about religions and worldviews. This has involved a wide range of settings, teaching and researching in schools and universities, acting as consultants and producers of resources, and working with students in primary and secondary schools, in undergraduate and postgraduate Study of Religions, and in initial teacher training and continuing professional development.

Many, including friends, family, casual acquaintances and careers teachers, have considered this a very odd way to spend our time. Indeed, there have been moments when we have questioned our sanity ourselves, given the complexities involved. We've both thought at times that the job would be lot easier if it wasn't for a) religious people and b) non-religious people. RE has rarely been a priority of those in power, and has been characterised as a 'Cinderella subject' since the 1960s.

RE has an image problem, and is misunderstood. Even though the subject in state-funded schools without a religious character (and in many with) has been non-confessional and multi-faith in England and Wales since the 1970s, people often presume that the aim is to promote religious faith, especially Christianity. The name doesn't help. Also, the fact that in some schools promoting religious faith is indeed an aim of RE. Over a third of primary and about a sixth of secondary state-funded schools are schools with a religious character, mostly C of E or RC.

RE is much neglected. Although statutory, many schools do not provide RE at all key stages. Others offer a token gesture. This was made worse by 'academisation', where the majority of schools can design their own curriculum, and often choose to minimise RE. Half of those teaching RE in secondary schools are not subject specialists. Recruitment targets for training are not being met, not helped by the fact that other subjects

offer bursaries of up to £29,000 (eg Maths) and RE has none, in spite of the shortage of specialists. PGCE courses are being closed, as are degree course in Religious Studies and Theology. The subject was damaged by the introduction of the 'EBacc' in 2010, interpreted as a list of subjects considered important, excluding RE as well as the creative arts.

RE is not organised like other subjects. It was not included in the National Curriculum established in 1988, but remains (as before 1988) organised by Local Authorities, or Anglican and Catholic dioceses and other religious bodies, and increasing by Multi-Academy Trusts and individual schools. This has led to a massive inequality of provision for pupils who may experience excellent RE, poor quality RE or even none. This also affects the funding of RE. While the National Curriculum subjects are supported by national funding for things like curriculum development, teaching resources and professional development, RE has rarely had this help. Local Authority funding has gradually dwindled, in some cases to nothing, and much RE work is reliant on volunteers and charities (including religious bodies, and the Sea of Faith Network). Local Authority Standing Advisory Councils have been in the past important settings for grassroots subject development and inter-worldview cooperation, but increasingly have little or no funding and fewer schools to which their work applies.

In spite of (and sometimes because of) these difficulties we have retained the faith in the importance of Religion and Worldviews Education. In today's interconnected world, with its swirl of information and disinformation, it would seem more important than ever to have accurate knowledge and understanding of the religious and other worldviews that inform the beliefs, values, actions and identities of everyone from world leaders to your next-door neighbour. Students (and adults) need an education in religions and other worldviews which is (as far as humanly possible) objective, critical and pluralist, in order to be able to discuss and evaluate matters relating to religion, religions and worldviews, the

‘religious literacy’ referred to in the ‘Network Matters’ article (*Sofia*, 159, pp. 20ff.). In addition to this, we consider that this is truly educational, in that the study of religion and worldviews is not just learning about what ‘other people’ think and do, but can be personally transformative, offering students a wealth of possible resources on which to draw in developing their own worldview and plans for life, and a space – perhaps for some the only one on offer - in which to reflect on this.

It is important to grasp that a person’s worldview is not just about their beliefs or opinions, but underpins their values, behaviour, customs and daily life, and can be central to, or at least an important part of, their sense of identity. It is important to get the ‘Big Ideas’ of the subject such as diversity within and across traditions (see: <https://bigideasforre.org>).

Among the joys that working in this subject have given us have been the opportunity to meet and work with wonderful colleagues from a wide range of religious, non-religious and non-binary backgrounds, to have been made to feel at home in temples, mosques, gurdwaras, synagogues, churches, stone circles

... the study of religion and worldviews is not just learning about what ‘other people’ think and do, but can be personally transformative ...

and in a wide range of other places of meeting, organisations and networks, to have shared in festivals from Divali to that of a Zulu ‘new religious movement’, here in the UK and around the world. Most importantly, we have tried to promote an education in religion and worldviews which can be personally transformative in helping people work out what is most important in their lives, as well as understanding what is most important in the lives of others, and resources to imagine and contribute towards a better way of living and working together on this planet.

Dave Francis is an educational consultant and former Chair of the Association of RE Inspectors, Advisers and Consultants.

Denise Cush is Professor Emerita in Religion and Education at Bath Spa University, and former Chair of the Association of University Lecturers in Religion and Education.

In Part 2, we will summarise and examine recent and current developments in the subject, in particular the opportunities offered by the Curriculum and Assessment Review of 2025.



Meet us by Zoom for a discussion on the third Wednesday of each month at 7pm. Our discussion usually begins with a presentation. Previous sessions are on our website:

<https://sofn.uk/in-conversation>

For further detail about the speakers and introductions, and for a Zoom link to the meetings and to be included in future mailings please email:

inconversation@sofn.uk

In Conversation Meetings March - May

- 18 March: The Changing Relationship between Science and Religion, with Robert Boucnik, FE Teacher, SoF member, and *Sofia* contributor.

The initial premise for this discussion is that the binary choice between evolution and creationism is an out-dated, false dichotomy.

- 15 April: It’s all about the *Metanoia*, with Fergus McGinley, author and founder of *Anti-Theology Project* – antitheologia.com

The introduction will focus on prospects of transformation for us and for the human race, at the same time as being a window into her recent book, *The God Who Doesn’t Exist* (2025).

- 20 May: Life and church – a personal journey, with Iain McDonald, retired URC minister, founder of the URC Caucus of the then Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement, and SoF member.

Iain will consider his inclusive ministry, which emphasises justice, resilience, hope and the church’s transformative potential.

SOF Network Matters

Sofia



These pages will consider an aspect of the Network's work in each edition. This edition considers the *Sofia* and its aim.

The Charity

The Sea of Faith Network is an educational charity that exists 'to advance the education of the public in religious studies with particular reference to religious faith seen as a human creation'. (Charity N^o [1113177](#)) Its website explains its desire to:

- *Explore* the idea of religion and religious faith as human creations.
- *Promote* the validity of creative, human-centred religion.
- *Affirm* the continuing importance of religious thought and practice as expressions of awe, wonder, and celebrations of spiritual and social values.¹

The reference to *promoting* is essential, for while the Charity Act (2006, rev. 2011) gives a broad 'wide meaning' to education, it nevertheless stresses that:

To be a charitable aim for the public benefit, education must be capable of being 'advanced'. This means to promote, sustain and increase individual and collective knowledge and understanding of specific areas of study, skills and expertise.²

Sofia Magazine

Sofia aims to be an engaging and stimulating read that effectively fulfils the Network's purpose of 'exploring and promoting religion and worldviews as human creations for this life' (Sea of Faith AGM, 2024). There are three intended audiences that the magazine and its contributors need to bear in mind:

- i. Network members, who support and participate in the work of the charity.
- ii. Non-member *Sofia* subscribers and friends, who receive a copy.
- iii. Online readers, and others to whom it is sent to promote the charity's work.

The Charity Commission's guidance on charity legislation explains that for an educational

charity, 'the concept of public benefit is integral to a charitable purpose'. This public benefit should be for 'the public in general, or a sufficient section of the public'.⁶

Sofia's appeal to subscribers, friends, and online readers is central to The Sea of Faith Network's public benefit as an educational charity. Subscribers and readers might well include individuals who became aware of the SoF Network through its other charitable work, including Big Ideas (<https://bigideasforre.org>) and Solarity (<https://www.solarity.org.uk>).

To 'advance the education of the public in religious studies', *Sofia* takes an interdisciplinary approach to religion familiar in educational circles, exploring religion through theology, philosophy, science, social sciences, and humanities. However, the subject of religious studies evolves through disciplinary self-reflection, and *Sofia* must take stock of this to achieve its educational aim.

World Religions Paradigm

Auguste Comte indirectly influenced the study of world religions. His Positivism took a sociological approach to religion, reframing it as social phenomena, which he viewed through a developmental framework. His work influenced Victorian taxonomies of religion in the fields of anthropology (E.B. Taylor, J.G. Frazer), sociology (H. Spencer), philology (Max Müller) and theology (C.P. Tiele).

A key figure in the development of comparative religion is Max Weber, who, alongside Protestant Christianity, studied Confucianism and Taoism (1915, tr. *The Religion of China*, 1951); Hinduism and Buddhism (1916, tr. *The Religion of India*, 1958); and Ancient Judaism (1917–1920 tr. 1952).

In the 1960s, Ninian Smart promoted the exploration of religion through a variety of phenomena (rituals, texts and narratives, beliefs, experiences, ethics, and institutions).³

Smart's work helped replace the emphasis in schools on 'religious instruction'⁴ understood to be Christian moral formation, with critical inquiry. It broadened the study of religion beyond

Christianity to include other religious traditions in schools and universities. However, it led to a World Religions Paradigm (WRP) in which religions were viewed as distinct and mutually exclusive, and were viewed through a lens of Christian assumptions and categories that was implicated in geo-political power imbalances.⁵ For example, such a study was

- Text-centred: A Western emphasis on language and text had been formed by the philological emphasis of Renaissance Humanism, by biblical translations and studies in Protestantism, and Latin and Greek classics in elite education in Britain. A textual focus was extended to Sanskrit, Pali, Classical Arabic, etc., privileging literate and philosophical religious traditions. But this overemphasises texts, such as the place of the Vedas, in Hinduism.
- Belief-centred: The historical importance of Christian doctrine and systematic theology, led world religions to be identified and distinguished by their beliefs. This unified traditions by minimising diversity and change. Traditions could also be viewed through Christian theology, as where Brahma, Siva and Vishnu were taken as a 'trinity' of sorts.
- Institutionally-focused: As Anglo-catholics had popularised a denominational "branch theory" (of Charles Daubeny) to advance an understanding of the catholicity of the church, so non-Christian religions were approached through the lens of ecclesiology, ignoring traditions with greater fluidity that did not fit a denominational model.
- Experientially-focussed: Because of the emphasis on religious experience in Christianity, with writers such as Friedrich Schleiermacher, Rudolf Otto, and William James, religions were considered as sharing an essential experience of the holy or numinous (Otto). Such essentialism found theological articulation in John Hick's multi-faith monotheism with religions taken as cultural interpretive frames of 'experiencing as'.⁶
- Interpreted by Comte's developmental theory and Western constructs of civilisation: Max Weber believed that 'rationalisation' would eliminate the magical and mystical elements of



religion of 'primitive' societies as societies became more organised (reflecting his understanding of Protestantism), so religions were viewed through a similar frame of Western rationality. The idea of religion was separated from culture, law, and politics, and viewed through a secularisation thesis, born of the European experience of religious conflict, political secularisation, and religious institutional decline.

This world religions paradigm overlooked or dismissed the following aspects of religion:

- Insider self-understanding (an emic perspective in anthropology), by assuming a neutral "outsider" (etic) perspective of critical inquiry. The effect was to conceive and examine religions in a Western analytical framework derived from Protestant cultural perspectives.
- Diversity of beliefs and practices among various Christian, Buddhist, or Hindu traditions. Ignoring intra-religious differences (e.g., between established traditions, and in diaspora communities) oversimplifies and stereotypes traditions. This stereotyping makes it difficult to understand the varied religious responses to moral and political questions, within traditions, and risks supporting cultural, political, and racial stereotypes.
- Minor, new, or syncretic religions (such as Jainism, Shinto, Unitarian Universalism, Rastafari, Wicca, Druidry, and Cao Dai.⁷), and spiritual practices (such as the ethical divination of the *I Ching* [*Yijing*]). This privileges some traditions, marginalising others. Such exclusion also applied to philosophical worldviews that influence spirituality and ethical ways of life, such as Deep Ecology, panpsychism, or contemporary Stoicism.
- The mixing of traditions, both in the syncretism of traditional non-exclusionary religions (such as the mixing of Buddhist and Confucian traditions in a Japanese home) and in contemporary hybridity (Buddhist Christianity, Jewish Paganism). Static categories fail to grasp the complexity and fluidity of religious influences and changing patterns of practice.
- The beliefs and practices of newer and emerging forms of faith and holistic

spirituality as explored by sociologists of religion such as Paul Hellas and Linda Woodhead in the Kendal Project.⁸

Studies have coined many terms for changed patterns of religion and religious practice:

- spiritualities of life (Paul Heelas)
- religion in everyday life (Tim Jenkins)
- invisible religion (Thomas Luckmann)
- patchwork religion (Robert Wuthnow)
- vernacular religion (Leonard Primiano)
- implicit religion (Edward Bailey)
- new religious movements (George Chryssides)

These all challenge the normative category of religion established by the World Religions Paradigm, but have not yet overcome and may even sustain dichotomies between formal and informal religiosity, religion and spirituality, and the religious and the secular.

The World Religions Paradigm has also meant that the study of worldviews, beliefs, and spiritual practices as negotiated by individuals and communities has been, at best, secondary. This fails to help people as they seek to negotiate questions of faith and belief in everyday life. A new approach in both sociology and practical theology to the study of "lived religion" seeks to address this, exploring 'religious as expressed and experienced in the particular of individuals', rather than the general categories of religion.⁹

Alternative approaches to the study of religion have been developing. One of these extended the idea of literacy to religious literacy. While it is contested and can be politicised, religious literacy is still worth explaining.

Religious Literacy

In an early of religious literacy of 1993, educator Andrew Wright used the phrase religious literacy to refer respectively to 'the ability ... to reflect communicate and act in an informed intelligent and sensitive manner towards the phenomena of religion'. He explained that religious literacy involves knowledge, interpretation, and the evaluation of 'various claims to truth' that enable pupils to think, speak, and act intelligently regarding religious issues.¹⁰

This definition of literacy might suggest that it is a *functional* skill, described as 'the ability to read, decode and comprehend written texts',¹¹ rather than a *critical* academic discipline. This was not Wright's intention, as the inclusion of evaluation of religious truth claims and his later work attest.

An influential definition by Diane L. Moore emphasises the intersection of religion with social systems and culture. She adds,

Religious Literacy

as defined by Diane L Moore

Religious literacy entails the ability to discern and analyse the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses. Specifically, a religiously literate person will possess:

1. A basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices, and contemporary manifestations of several of the world's religious traditions as they arose out of and continue to be shaped by particular social, historical, and cultural contexts.
2. The ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and place.

'Religion has always been and continues to be woven into the fabric of cultures and civilisations in ways that are inextricable.'¹²

Moore understands religious literacy to be a necessary competency for citizenship:

religious literacy will enhance democratic discourse by cultivating discernment, understanding, and respect as they relate to religion in [...] public life.¹³

However, this is not merely a functional definition of literacy, equipping people to operate in the public sphere, for Moore situates religious literacy in the broader cultural literacy of the humanities disciplines. She is clear that religious literacy is a critical discipline of inquiry,

A religiously literate person will be equipped not only to recognise religious references, whether to texts, ideas, or practices, but also to critically interrogate how religion manifests in cultural and historical contexts¹⁴.

In the UK, the concept of religious literacy has been used in reports by All-Party Parliamentary Groups (APPGs),¹⁵ where it is understood as a civic skill essential to an inclusive approach to public life, and considered to be important in the media, the police service, and other workplaces

Comparison of Approaches to Religious Studies

	World Religions Paradigm	Critical Religious Literacy / Religion & Worldviews
Aim	To identify distinguishing characteristics of religions for comparison	To understanding beliefs and practices of lived religion and cultural context
Observer standpoint	Assumes an objective 'outsider' perspective, lacking observer context	Recognises one's own cultural and religious vantage point ('situatedness')
Focus	Prioritises texts, doctrines, and authorised rites and rituals	Prioritises embodied and negotiated experience of 'lived religion'
Complexity	Tends to oversimplify, ignoring diversity, influences, and evolution	Emphasises diversity and nuance, noting fluidity, hybridity, syncretism
Inclusivity	Often marginalises smaller, local, or non-institutional religions	Includes minority, indigenous and non-institutional religion
Practical relevance	Focusses on observation, theory and critique	Promotes respectful interaction in diverse societies
Flexibility	Views religions in stable categories of beliefs and practices	Views religion as dynamic, evolving, and socially embedded
Ideological bias	Can reinforce stereotypes and fixed ideas, and therefore political agendas	Encourages recognition, dialogue, critical thinking, and reflection

where knowledge and appreciation of diversity are necessary. The APPG on Religious Education refer to four levels of ability - from a basic level of knowledge, to more sophisticated, nuanced and critical levels of understanding, interpretation, and engagement. To use a distinction made elsewhere, this moves from 'functional literacy' to 'critical literacy', involving higher evaluative and critical skills.

Religion and Worldviews¹⁶

Although religious literacy explores and reinterprets the concept of religion, as with 'lived religion', it can still privilege religion over non-religious and personal worldviews. But as the Commission on Religious Education (CoRE) notes,

the distinction between religious and non-religious worldviews is not as clear-cut as one might think. Individuals may draw on aspects of both religious and non-religious worldviews in their own personal worldviews.¹⁷

In Britain, Religious Education is understood to involve nurturing active questioning by pupils to

explore how beliefs function and how identities are formed and negotiated. It is also seen to involve reflective and reflexive learning that equips pupils with the skills of self-understanding and self-awareness. This is ideally not merely a formative engagement, but what might be called 'emancipatory',⁸ enabling pupils to question inherited assumptions and form their own worldviews, to navigate social complexities in a world of conflicting beliefs.

Educational circles in the UK have accepted critiques of the World Religions paradigm over the last 50 years, while also acknowledging critiques of the literacy framework. In England and Wales, the Commission on Religious Education (CoRE) and subsequent work by the Religious Education Council have adopted a 'Religion and Worldviews' approach as 'the way forward' for the subject in schools.

Looking Forward

Since 1988, the Network has explored religion as a human creation by considering the changing nature of religion and its intersection with culture,

society and politics in conferences, local groups, and in 35 years of magazines.

Don Cupitt addressed the theme of 'world religions' at the 1997 SOF conference and elsewhere considered the issue of Jewish Christian dialogue.¹⁸ The 2016 SOF conference took the theme, 'Religion – Where Next?', which was followed by some superb content in a themed edition of *Sofia*, No 121, in 2016.

The magazines have explored religion in literature, poetry, film, the visual arts and mythic imagination in both popular and high culture, and have also drawn on the humanities and social sciences disciplines for critical engagements with culture. Having edited *SoF*, 52-67, I'm delighted to be able to return to edit *Sofia*.

Both critical religious literacy and the Religion and Worldviews approaches provide a rationale

Both critical religious literacy and the Religion and Worldviews approaches provide a rationale for the 'public benefit' of the SOF Network as an educational charity

for the 'public benefit' of the SOF Network as an educational charity, as it contributes to an understanding of religion as embedded in and shaped by cultural life. At the same time, religious literacy offers a framework of how individuals and communities might navigate the 'symbolic universes'¹⁹ of religious and other worldviews, for existential, experiential, and ethical meaning and purpose.

As a part of the public benefit of the Network's educational work, *Sofia* will therefore aim to foster critical religious literacy; *exploring and promoting religion and worldviews as valuable human creations*. At the same time, I trust, it will continue to be a stimulating, provocative, and enjoyable read.

Paul Overend
Editor

Image credit:

p. 22: Detail of cover illustration by Derry Dillon from Brian Doyle, *World Religions* (Poolbeg Press, 2018).

Notes:

¹ The Sea of Faith, 'Education' (n.d.) <<https://sofn.uk/education/>> [accessed Oct. 2025], from *Sea of Faith* 15 (1993), p. 2.

² The Charity Commission for England and Wales, 'Guidance: Charitable Purposes' (16 Sept. 2013). <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/charitable-purposes/charitable-purposes#the-advancement-of-education>> [accessed Oct. 2025]

³ Ninian Smart, *Secular Education and the Logic of Religion: Heslington Lectures, University of York, 1966* (Faber and Faber, 1968).

⁴ *The 1944 Education Act*, Section 25.2.

⁵ David Robertson & Christopher Cotter (eds), *After World Religions: Reconstructing Religious Studies* (Routledge, 2016) pp. 1-20.

⁶ John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (Oneworld Pub. Ltd., 1973); *God Has Many Names* (Westminster Press, 1980)

⁷ Caodaism is a syncretistic religion that was constituted in Vietnam on 7 October 1926 and established on 18 November 1926.

⁸ Paul Heelas & Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Blackwell, 2005). Cf. Linda Woodhead, 'Spirituality', *Sofia* 153 (2024) pp. 12-14.

⁹ Meredith McGuire, 2008, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford University Press, 2008) p. 3. See 'Lived Religion', *Sofia* 159 (2026), p. 8.

¹⁰ Andrew Wright, *Religious Education in the Secondary School: Prospects for Religious literacy* (David Fulton Publishers, 1993) p. 47, p. 79 <<https://archive.org/details/religiouseducation00owrig/page/n1/mode/1up>> [accessed Dec. 2025]

¹¹ Patricia Hannam, Gert Biesta, Sean Whittle, & David Aldridge, 'Religious literacy: A way forward for religious education?', *Journal of Beliefs & Values*, 41.2 (2020) pp. 214–226.

¹² Diane L Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Religion in Secondary Education*. (Palgrave, 2007) pp. 56-57. See also <<https://rpl.hds.harvard.edu/what-we-do/our-approach/what-religious-literacy>> [accessed Nov. 2025]

¹³ Diane L Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy*, p. 28.

¹⁴ Diane L. Moore, 'Methodological Assumptions and

Analytical Frameworks Regarding Religion: White Paper' (Harvard Divinity School, 2024) p. 6.

¹⁵The APPG on R.E., *RE and good community relations* (Religious Education Council of England and Wales, 2014).

The APPG on R.E., *Improving religious literacy: A contribution to the debate* (Religious Education Council of England and Wales, 2015).

The APPG on Religion and the Media, *Learning to Listen: Final report of the APPG on Religion in the Media's Inquiry into Religious Literacy in Print and Broadcast Media* (2021).

¹⁶For a helpful overview of the use of 'worldview', please see Céline Benoit, Timonthy Hutchings, & Rachael Shillitoe, *Worldview: A Multidisciplinary Report* (Religious Education Council of England

and Wales, 2020). Available at <https://religionseducationcouncil.org.uk/rec/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/REC-Worldview-Report-A4-v2.pdf> [Open Access]

¹⁷Commission on Religious Education, *Final Report: Religion and Worldviews - The Way Forward* (Religious Education Council of England and Wales, 2018) p. 6.

¹⁸Don Cupitt, 'World Religions', *SOF* 27 (1996), pp. 7-11. See also Cupitt's 'Learning to Live with "Identity"' [1997] on Jewish-Christian dialogue, in *Radical Theology* (Polebridge, 2006) Ch. 5.

¹⁹A concept from Peter L Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* [1966] (Penguin 1991) II.2b-c. pp. 122-46.

STOP PRESS:

SoF Network Conference 2026

Creativity, Curiosity, Celebration

Thursday 10th to Friday 11th September at the Coram Centre in London.

The conference will broadly focus on the arts and creativity from a SoF point of view as they relate to our notion of religion and worldviews.

Details to follow by email

membership of SOF NETWORK

Sofia is free to SOF Network members. Members support the work of the charity and have a key role its governance. Current membership rates are given on the website: <https://sofn.uk/members/>

Please apply online, or by email to the SOF Secretary: Edward Nickell, Flat 51 Park Central, Bow Quarter, 60 Fairfield Road. London E3 2US. secretary@sofn.uk The secretary can answer questions regarding membership, and can update change of addresses.

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Saint Sophia and her daughters, Saints Faith, Hope, and Love

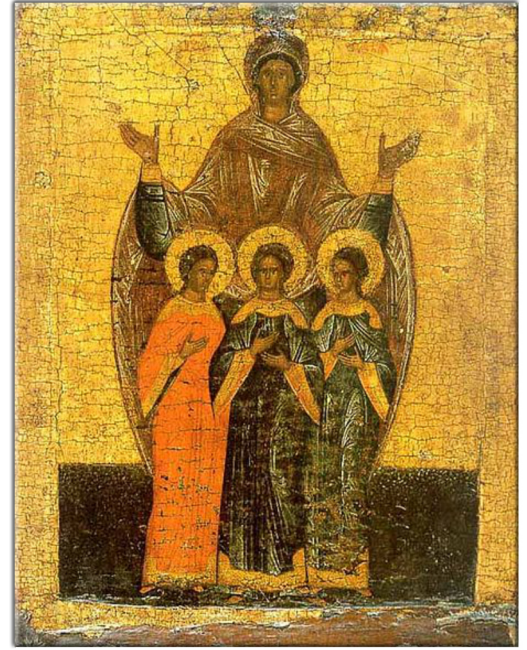


'Sculpture of St Sophia with three daughters' (1470), St Trophime Church of Eschau, Alsace, Lower Rhine.

CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Eschau_StTrophime_75.jpg>

St Sophia and her daughters, 16th century Russian Icon of the Novgorod school, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

PD, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:StSophia_the_Martyr.jpg>



The widow Sophia and her daughters, Faith Hope, and Love, are said to have lived in the first or second century and to have been martyred in Rome in one of the Christian persecutions, perhaps in the time of emperor Hadrian, 117–138 CE.

They were venerated from the sixth century and the number of statues and icons show the popularity of their cult. Their feast day is widely observed among Orthodox Churches, where it is celebrated on 17 September.

An Orthodox Kontakion (a liturgical hymn on the theme of the day), acclaiming these daughters, alludes to I Corinthians 1. 20–27. The Pauline verse refers to the Greeks seeking wisdom (sophistry), but God choosing the weak to confound the mighty. It reads:

The holy branches of noble Sofia,
Faith, Hope, and Love,
confounded Greek sophistry through Grace.
They struggled and won the victory
and have been granted an incorruptible crown by
Christ the Master of all.

The *Roman Martyrology* once commemorated Faith, Hope and Love on 1 August and their mother Sophia on 30 September. However, the Catholic Church has since removed these saints as there is no historical evidence for their existence, although in Germany *Sophientag* is still celebrated, on 15 May.

But what are we to make of such a devotional cult today, given the lack of historical evidence for the existence of these saints? The French professor of hagiography, Victor Saxer,¹ suggested that these saints are likely to have been personifications of the theological virtues of I Corinthians 13. 13. This reflects Don Cupitt's view that 'Gods personify religious values'.²

In the 'wisdom literature' of the Hebrew Bible — Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job — God is identified with wisdom (*Khokmah* in Hebrew or *Sophia* in Greek). Churches dedicated to God as Wisdom include Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, and the church in the Capital City of Sofia in Bulgaria, after which the city was named. To hold Faith Hope and Love as St Sophia's daughters, depicts these virtues as coming from God. And like the 'Son of God', these martyred daughters of Wisdom were seen to have given their lives in witnessing to the character of God.

The hagiographic legend of Sofia, Faith, Hope, and Love give us personifications of spiritual ideals — with faith, hope, and love portrayed as the offspring of wisdom.

Paul Overend

¹ Victor Saxer, 'Sophia v. Rom', *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* (vol. 9) Edited by Michael Buchberger (Verlag Herder, 2000) p. 717. <<https://books.google.com/books?id=3n7YAA AAMAAJ&pg=PA733>> [Accessed 17 Dec. 2025]

² Don Cupitt, *Reforming Christianity* (Polebridge Press, 2001) p. 117.