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Hope in This World

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

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The themes and deadlines for the next issues of *Sofia* are

> *Sofia* 161, Sept: 'On Love' - 23rd July copy deadline.
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The editors invite submissions to *Sofia* (5–600 words/page) exploring religions and worldviews as human creations, including, but not limited to

- articles, especially relating to the announced theme of the edition (2 or 3 pages length)
- short poems and short stories
- book, film and arts reviews (page length)
- paragraph long recommendations of fiction and non-fiction books
- letters, normally fewer than 200 words, or please liaise in advance

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

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

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arts editor

Ross McCrory has accepted a voluntary role of Arts Editor of *Sofia*. He teaches history at the University of Suffolk and is a doctoral student exploring theatre history. Ordained in the OCCA, he is connected to Sea of Faith style free-religious thinking through membership of the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF, see *Sofia*, 159 (2026)) and of a spiritual gathering (*Kiitsu Kyōkai*) inspired by the late free religion minister Imaoka Shin'ichirō.

Cover image: 'Oak seedling', 01/30/2017, Public Domain <https://pxhere.com/en/photo/571407>

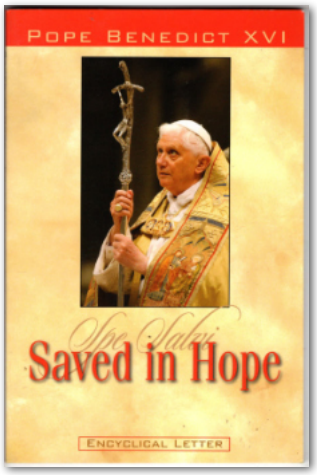
editorial

'Where Then is My Hope?'

editor@sofn.uk

Hope was the theme of Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical *Spe Salvi*, translated as '*Saved in Hope*'. The title cites Saint Paul, 'in hope we were saved' ('*Spe Salvi facti sumus*', Rom. 8.24). Benedict contrasted the hope of salvation based on faith in Christ (§10–15) favourably with hope in progress based on Enlightenment principles of reason and freedom, while also characterising Marxism as an ideology of progress (§18–23). In what might be taken as a rebuke of Cupitt's early work, Benedict claims,

> To protest against God in the name of justice is not helpful. A world without God is a world without hope (cf. Eph. 2.12). (§44)



Rarely has an encyclical had such an untimely birth: It was published on 30th November 2007, two months after the run on the British bank Northern Rock and the American global financial services firm Lehman Brothers filed for bankruptcy, and one month after the U.S. Congress approved a $700 billion bailout to stabilise the financial system, and the UK government was forced to inject £37 billion into RBS and Lloyds-HBOS to prevent their collapse. With the subsequent collapse of the stock market in 2008, these events led to political turmoil and electoral despair from which we have not yet recovered. When, in 2009, Vera Baird, the Solicitor General, said that she could see 'a few green shoots' of economic recovery — on the day that unemployment in the UK rose to 2,030,000 and Barclays announced further job cuts — she was widely accused of complacency and insensitivity.

In light of those events, the hope that Pope Benedict spoke of seemed almost immediately hollow. Over 30 years, our sense of hopelessness has been exacerbated by the powerlessness felt in the face of austerity budgets (in the UK from 2010), the COVID-19 lockdowns (2020-2021), the rise in aggressive diplomacy, militarism, religious nationalism, wars — and their global impacts on cost of living — political interference of vested interests, and advancing climate change. Many people experience either 'learned helplessness' or 'anger turned inwards' that are characteristic of depression. As Job complained, 'Where then is my hope?' (Job 17.15)

Reviewing this encyclical theologian Jürgen Moltmann contrasted *Spe Salvi* with the *Gaudium et Spes* ('*Joy and Hope*', known as *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, 1965), one of the four key constitution documents of Vatican II. Moltmann notes that Vatican II's *Gaudium et Spes,* 'begins with the church's deep solidarity with "the entire human family."' But Pope Benedict had explored hope in Christian doctrine for the committed faithful, set apart from others who 'have no hope' (I Thess. 4.13, cited §2), Also, Benedict's focus was on blessedness in eternal life, but this 'Christian hope then becomes hard to differentiate from a Gnostic religion of salvation', Moltmann observes:

> What is missing is the salvation of a groaning creation and the hope of a new earth where justice dwells.[1]

Unlike the conciliar constitution, and other social encyclicals, and documents of Catholic Social Thought over the last 135 years — since Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* (*On the Condition of Labour*, 1891) — Benedict failed to address broader social and environmental issues, or the problems of under-regulated speculative capitalism. Indeed, he offered a simplistic, dismissive critique of Marxism, which does analyse these things.

Contents

The omissions of Benedict's encyclical gives a material perspective from which we consider hope in this edition. The theme is introduced in this edition by Christiane van Duuren, who writes of her stay on a Palestinian farm to the southwest of Bethlehem, called The Tent of Nations, the tenacity and resilience or the Nassar family who own it, and the hope that sustains them.

'The Necessity of Hope' was a theme of the Sea of Faith conference in 2018, in the centenary year of WWI. Versions of the keynote papers can be

read in *Sofia* 129. Two of the keynote speakers were co-editors of and contributors to *Religion and Atheism: Beyond the Divide*, published the previous year.[2] The Rev'd Dr Tony Carroll, drew upon Kant and later Kantian thinkers.

> For Kant if we hope, we already assume the existence of God as a postulate of practical reason. […For] without belief in God there is no practical ground for hope in the face of the tragic nature of life. [3]

However, Prof Richard Norman remarked that

> For a humanist, a faith capable of sustaining-hope can only be a faith in human beings, real-human beings in whom we can place our trust.[4]

He drew upon Hegel, the progress of reason and growth of freedom, and the work of the young Hegelians who followed him. The presentations are worth revisiting.

Missing from this debate, however, was the work of Ernst Bloch, the atheist, theologian, and idiosyncratic Marxist philosopher, who I introduce in this edition. Bloch was an honorary professor at Tübingen in the 1960s, when the 39 year old professor Joseph Ratzinger joined the staff there, in 1966, after Vatican II. (He became Pope Benedict, in 2005, aged 78). Ratzinger's colleagues on the staff, Hans Küng and Jürgen Moltmann, were greatly influenced by Bloch's work on hope, but Ratzinger's later criticisms of Marxism and liberation theology often have Bloch's work in his sights.

Also in this edition, Andy Kemp considers the character Bartleby in Herman Melville's short story 'Bartleby the Scrivener' as expounded by the Slovenian-born philosopher and cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek. Another idiosyncratic Marxist, he describes himself as a 'Christian Atheist'.

Dave Francis and Denise Cush continue a series of articles explaining current developments in Religion and Worldviews Education (RE), considering the opportunities offered by the and Assessment Review of 2025.

2026 also marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Sea of Faith publication *Time and Tide*, and the thirtieth anniversary of a shorter booklet, *A Reasonable Faith*. Teresa Wallace, who was lead editor of the first, and David Boulton who wrote the second, reflect on their publications in this edition. 'Network Matters' reports on Sea of Faith Network publications, and on the progress of a new publication, due out in 2027, on the philosophy of Don Cupitt.

Sofia loves to receive readers articles, book reviews, letters, and can now consider artistic pieces — e.g. poetry, prose, reviews — as we have an arts editor (see inside front page). Please do write, and help us to explore religion and worldviews as human creations.

Credits and notes

The book cover shown is Benedict's *Spe Salvi; Saved in Hope* (The Word Among Us Press, 2007), a printed edition of the Vatican translation.

[1] Jürgen Moltmann, 'Horizons of hope: A critique of *Spe salvi*', translated by Sean Hayden & Gerald Liu, *The Christian Century* (May 2008) 125(10). Available at <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2008-05/horizons-hope> [accessed 24 Feb 2026]

[2] Anthony Caroll, *Religion and Atheism: Beyond the Divide* (Routledge, 2017).

[3] Tony Caroll, 'Hope Faith and Redemption 1', *Sofia*, 129 (2018), p. 5.

[4] Richard Norman, 'Hope Faith and Redemption 2', *Sofia*, 129 (2018), p. 9.

On Hope

Hope is a belief that what we do might matter, an understanding that the future is not yet written. It's informed, astute open-mindedness about what can happen and what role we may play in it. Hope looks forward, but it draws its energies from the past, from knowing histories, including our victories, and their complexities and imperfections. It means not being the perfect that is the enemy of the good, not snatching defeat from the jaws of victory, not assuming you know what will happen when the future is unwritten, and part of what happens is up to us.

Rebecca Solnit, Activist and Writer

From 'Protest and persist: why giving up hope is not an option', *The Guardian*, 13 Mar 2017
Her latest book is *The Beginning Comes After the End: Notes on a World of Change* (Haymarket Books. 2026)

Hope Against the Odds

Survival of a Palestinian Farm on the West Bank

by Christiane van Duuren

Graham, my husband, and I are having a day off from our volunteer work at the Tent of Nations. It is January 6th 2026, and we are in Bethlehem on the occupied West Bank. The western press has made much of the fact that Christmas has returned to the birthplace of Jesus. And yes, on the square outside the Church of the Nativity there is a Christmas tree with baubles and a nativity scene. The Jerusalem Patriarch arrives for his annual visit, and there is an endless parade of marching bands in pristine uniforms.

Does that mean normality has returned to this part of the world after more than two years of extreme violence inflicted on Palestine? Sadly, far from it.

The Tent of Nations is a hilltop farm to the southwest of Bethlehem, owned by the Nassar family, led by Daoud Nassar. Surrounded by settlers, they face threats in a variety of ways, and their peaceful struggle is a microcosm of the Palestinian struggle more broadly. Volunteers, amongst others, serve as a protective presence. We were here in summer 2024 and finally managed to return earlier this year.

In many ways, the farm is still the same. The stone at the entrance still announces that "We refuse to be enemies". The trees and vines still attest to the tender, loving, care bestowed on them over many years. This is not a farm as we know it in our western countries. For instance, apart from a very old tractor, you don't see any machinery, nor are herbicides or pesticides used. Everything just grows in a natural way.

What is also the same is the never-ending series of court cases the Nassar family have had to deal with. Courts offer a pretence of legality but they don't serve justice for the Palestinians. This is most obvious in the fact that, after 35 years, the family are still struggling to have their ownership of the land ratified, something that should have been a formality at the start. Since we were last here, more preposterous obstacles have been put in the family's way by various courts, all clearly intended to lead to a dead end for the family. Apparently, the authorities have not counted on the Nassars' dogged persistence in their fight for what is rightfully theirs.

Removing shrubbery

What is different from last time is the weather, which can be atrocious in January. When the rain lashes down and the wind rages, we sit huddled around a wood stove in our wet clothes, remembering that in Gaza, only 70 km away, very few walls and roofs remain, let alone wood stoves. More reassuringly, at least we hear fewer bombs exploding than last time we were here.

As before, the other volunteers offer a strong sense of camaraderie and a desire to get things done as a group effort. We have meals together, and when the weather does not allow us to work on the land, there is always plenty to talk about.

Daoud Nassar and a volunteer planting an olive tree.

With respect to the work, our task was mainly to remove old shrubbery and repair dry-stone walls. As we left the farm at the end of our stay, a large van arrived, full of young trees, and since then 600 trees have been planted.

Planting a tree is not a single symbolic act. It is the beginning of an ongoing process of careful nurturing, part of the respectful and loving attention to the land.

Moreover, it is a visible, positive statement that the farm is still working.


Israeli settlement, beyond the perimeter

This is in stark contrast to the outpost settlers have built right on the border of the Nassars' land. The soulless dwellings, surrounded by a bare expanse of sand and concrete, convey a very different relationship with the land. The border between the Tent of Nations and the outpost is marked by rolls of razor wire, and at night bright lights shine on part of our farm. Moreover, since we were there, a watchtower has been built not far away. Everything conveys that we are the criminals, whereas, of course, it is the settlers who are stealing land and destroying trees. The threats to the Tent of Nations are very real.

The Tent of Nations, like many other Palestinian settings, shows that the word "occupation" does not capture what is taking place. The occupier doesn't just occupy. It intrudes into all aspects of life, for instance by withholding water and electricity, the withholding of building permits and blocking access routes. The Israeli authorities don't pass up any opportunity to impinge on the daily running of the farm. These calculated intrusions into the work massively complicate the running of the farm. A great deal of time, effort and ingenuity goes into circumventing the restrictions.

The physical presence, the lights, the sounds, the physical threat, and the restrictions also aim to intrude into the Palestinian psyche. They aim to interfere with the internal freedom to be who they are. This is illustrated by an incident in which a volunteer was shouted at across the fence by a settler, who told him not to work too hard because the land would soon be theirs anyway. Palestinians are forced to accommodate the omnipresent aggressor, anticipating, pre-empting, and responding to whatever they will put in their path. They also need to free themselves from projections of violence and savagery. (see e.g. Mohammed al Kurd's *Perfect Victims*[1]). However, it is striking how much of an authentic identity Palestinians, including the Nassar family, have managed to maintain. By refusing to be enemies and refusing to be victims, they resist the roles allocated to them. Their resilience, their land, Christian faith, friends and family afford them as much self-expression as possible, and they actively choose these opportunities for life and dignity.

The thought of the farm being taken over by the Israeli authorities is unbearable. Will they destroy what is cherished, as they have elsewhere? Will they build hideous houses, as they have elsewhere? And what about the environmental impact of unsustainable farming practices? How can the settlers reconcile the fact that the land is, in their view, given by God, yet treat it with such disdain and approach it with so little respect, care and love?

Dispossession would be far more than a loss, far more than a great injustice. It will cut to the heart. It will be an indelible stain on all our futures.

So, is there reason for hope? Daoud and his fellow Palestinians know very well that hope is not about passively waiting for God or fate to put things right. Everything about their lives is about actively pursuing their goal of ensuring that justice will prevail.

This is, for instance, apparent in Daoud's tribute to his father, who died 50 years ago:

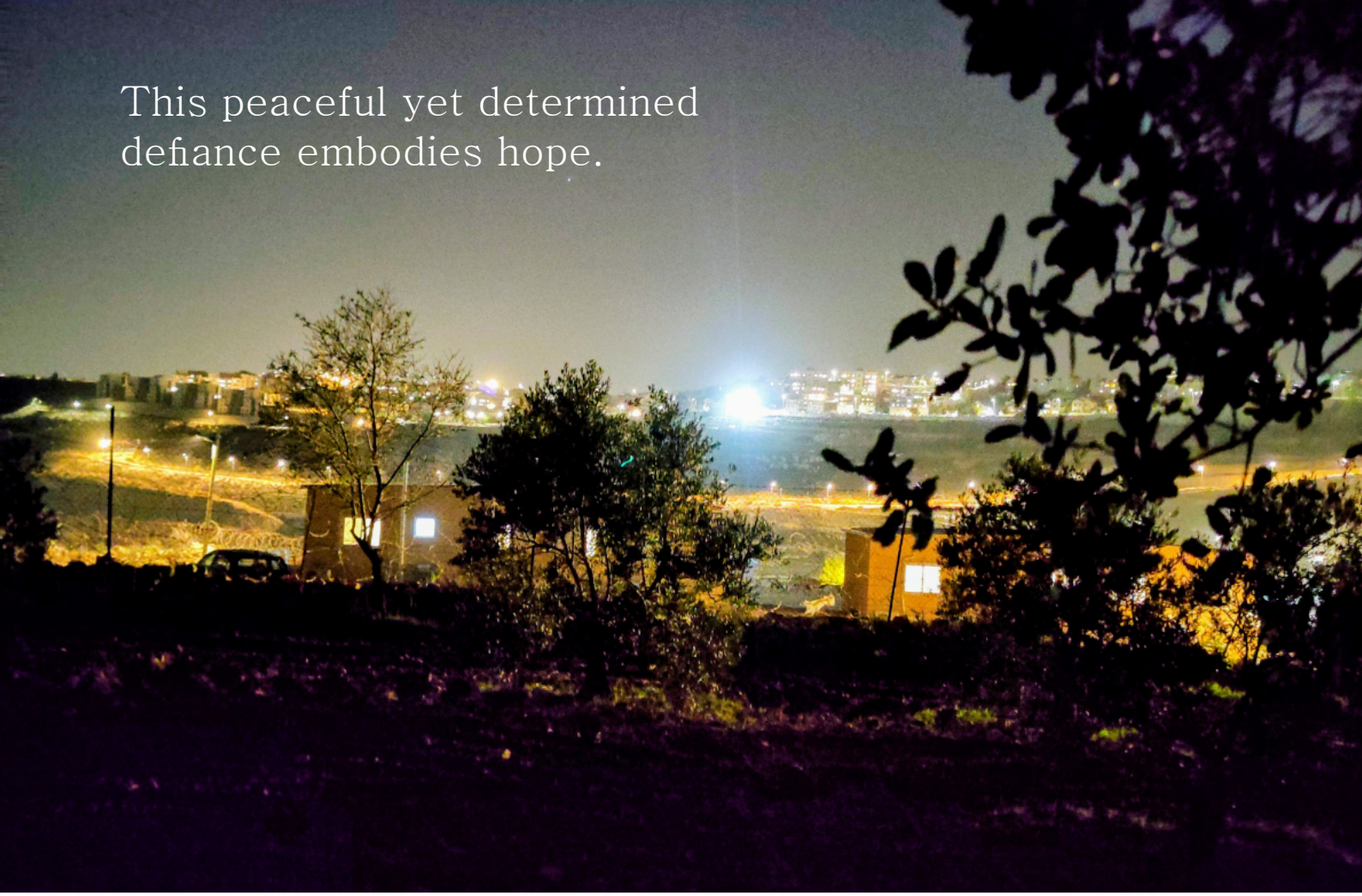

Planting to cover the sight of aggressive razor wire

> We will continue [his] journey, with deeper determination, stronger faith, and unwavering love. We will protect the land he nurtured until the day we pass it on to the next generation, just as it was entrusted to him.

This peaceful yet determined defiance embodies hope.

I will finish with extracts of Daoud's New Year's message for the start of this year. [*opposite*]

Christiane van Duuren is passionate about fighting for justice. Working on a farm on the West Bank is a way of making a small and practical contribution to everyday acts of solidarity and resilience.



Searchlights shining onto the Nassars' farmland

Daoud Nassar's New Year's message

As 2025 comes to an end, we look back on a year full of deep pain, heavy burdens on our hearts, destruction, and overwhelming challenges. It has been a year of darkness and despair, where is hope in the midst of all this?

At the Tent of Nations, hope didn't disappear; it took root. It lived in the soil we continued to cultivate, and it grew through the hands of volunteers who came to stand with us in solidarity. It was planted with every tree, shared in every harvest, and renewed through our unwavering commitment to nonviolence, justice and faith put into action.

Your active solidarity made this possible. Through your presence, prayers, advocacy, and generous support, you reminded us that we are not alone. Across borders, cultures, and differences, you stood with us and proclaimed, by your actions, that love is stronger than hate and fear, that resilience is stronger than despair, and that justice, even when it feels distant, will prevail.

Together, we lived active hope, a hope that refuses to surrender, a hope that walks, plants, and perseveres.

As we step into the new year 2026, we do so carrying heavy burdens and many unanswered questions. The road ahead is not clear, but we move forward with deep gratitude, grounded faith, and renewed determination to continue the struggle for justice through nonviolence, trusting that GOD is present in the journey, even when the answers are not.

May hope continue to grow wherever you are. May it take root in your hearts, your communities, and your daily lives. And may our shared journey toward justice and peace remain strong.

Happy New Year.

Credits and Notes

Photos: curtesy of Christiane van Duuren.

[1] Mohammed El-Kurd, *Perfect Victims; And the Politics of Appeal* (Haymarket Books, 2025).

How you can help:

Would you like to sponsor a tree; become a volunteer; donate? For further resources and ways to support the Tent of Nations, see the Friends of Tent of Nations Linktree page: linktr.ee/tonfriendsuk. Or contact Friends of Tent of Nations on tonfriendsuk@gmail.com

Ernst Bloch: Religion, Atheism, and Hope

by Paul Overend

I first encountered Ernst Simon Bloch (1885–1977) while studying Jürgen Moltmann, Johannes Metz, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and Gustavo Gutiérrez, as commentators linked these theologians' work to Bloch's philosophy of hope. Although the theologians were better known in church circles, Bloch's atheistic appreciation of religion was more radical and intriguing to me. Bloch finds in Judaism and Christianity an internal logic that points to atheism, yet he also seeks 'to inherit those features of religion which do not perish with the death of God', particularly hope.[1]

Bloch's philosophy developed over two World Wars, with the Great Crash of 1929 between them, which led to global economic policies that gave rise to fascism. This authoritarian movement was supported by the emotive power of myth and institutional religion (Nazi-pagan mythology and the *Deutsche Christen*). His political context bears some similarities to our own. Since the second great crash of 2007-8, economic policies (quantitative easing and austerity) have again contributed to high levels of inequality and have given rise to authoritarian leaders and nationalist movements, again supported by myth and religion ("Christo-fascism"). Indeed, as I write, we may even be on the verge of another World War.

Bloch and Subversive Religion

Bloch was from an assimilated German-Jewish family. As a secular Jew, Bloch confesses that he privately turned to atheism at his bar mitzvah. But he did not lose interest in religion. Indeed, according to Fredric Jameson, he should be lauded as Marxism's revolutionary theologian.[2]

His early work, *The Spirit of Utopia*, written between 1915–16, explores religion and theology alongside folk tales, music, and art as cultural creations and as sources of cultural disruption, with an important critical or subversive role that can offer the potential for social change.

Bloch is aware of traditions of scriptural interpretation, from Rabbinic commentary and Spinoza to contemporary German historical-critical scholarship. These traditions point to contested meanings within scriptural texts and their interpretations. A radical layer of liberation hope, exemplified by the Exodus narrative and prophetic traditions, can be found beneath later post-exilic editorial redactions, including the priestly theocracy and the religion of Law of the Ezrah-Nehemiah cultic reforms. The God of Exodus 3. 14 is not a tribal deity or a theistic political authority, but 'I will be what I will be',[3] the future possibility for a liberated people.

Bloch's reading of the Bible is political: he seeks to uncover 'an underground Bible'. Bloch contrasts this intention with the existentialist concern of Rudolf Bultmann. According to Bloch,

> the banner should cry not "Demythologize!" […] but "De-theocratize!" Only that can do justice to the Bible's still saveable text. The Bible only has a future inasmuch as it can, with this future, transcend without transcendence.[4]

Drawing on marginal figures, such as the messianism of the 17th-century mystic Shabbataï Tsevi, Bloch noted that Jewish mysticism had resisted cultural assimilation, and that Messianism was resisting political Zionism. He explored these movements of resistance, integrating them into his understanding of Marxism while becoming a (heterodox) Marxist.

Bloch recognises such currents of political resistance within Christianity too. Although the Church hierarchy can legitimise social order while offering a false, pacifying hope that defers justice to the afterlife, the prophets, including the apocalyptic Jesus, recognise injustice and offer an alternative vision to motivate change. Bloch points out that 'the Church and the Bible are not one and the same. The Bible has always been the Church's bad conscience'.[5]

The Bible has always been the Church's bad conscience

Bloch also finds resources for political resistance in later Christian theology — in mystical and apocalyptic traditions among heterodox figures such as Marcion, Eckhart von Hochheim, Jacob Böhme, Joachim of Fiore, and in rebellious social movements — Albigensians, Hussites, the Lollards and Anabaptists. Apocalyptic movements refused accommodation to existing power structures,

while mysticism dissolves a fixed external deity. By de-objectifying God, mysticism can also be seen as supporting a proto-atheistic tendency within Christianity, while opposing ecclesiastical authority

A Life in Exile

Bloch opposed a militaristic Germany and its entry into the First World War, and so lived in Swiss exile from 1917 to 1919. After returning to Germany, he wrote a philosophically engaged study, *Thomas Müntzer as Theologian of Revolution* (1921, not translated into English). The radical German theologian, preacher, and revolutionary Müntzer (1489–1525) lived through the political upheaval in early sixteenth-century Europe and was the subject of Friedrich Engels' *The Peasant War in Germany* (1850). But whereas Engels had extracted Müntzer's class struggle from religion, viewing his political and religious ideas as the result of material socio-economic conditions, for Bloch, Müntzer's millenarian theology was essential to his politics.

The rise of fascism forced Bloch to leave Germany again in 1933. He eventually relocated to America between 1938 and 1949, where he wrote most of his *The Principle of Hope*, which was published in three volumes during the 1950s. It is an encyclopaedia of myths, fantasies, artworks, daydreams, and religious themes — "revolutionary anticipations" that form anticipatory consciousness.

Bloch had a difficult time in America, where his limited proficiency in English and his late break with Stalinism isolated him, even from the Frankfurt School, then in exile at the Institute for Social Research. His third wife, Karola, a communist and occasional agent of the German Communist Party, gained citizenship before he did. After the war, he moved to Leipzig, where he worked into his mid-70s, but he was viewed with some suspicion in the GDR too. When the wall divided Germany in 1961 he was on holiday in the West, and he chose to remain there, where he completed several book projects there, including Atheism in Christianity, a readable collection of forty-four reflections on the revolutionary potential of the Bible, produced in his 83rd year, in 1968.

Utopian Hope

Hunger is a defining characteristic of human existence for Bloch (whereas '*Dasein* for Heidegger is never hungry', notes Lévinas[6]). Hunger and thirst orient us toward the future, anticipating the satisfaction of need. Hunger is an "anticipatory consciousness" that relates to hope and shows hope to be ontological (a part of our nature) rather than psychological (a perception of lack).

For Bloch, hope is not merely optimism but an educated or informed hope (*docta spes*) with a future-directed orientation towards not-yet-realised possibilities. Hope arises at the intersection of imagination and material possibilities — when history becomes open to transformation towards a possible "Not-Yet" (*Noch-Nicht*). This key idea of Bloch, the "Not-Yet", has both ideological and material aspects. These are the human "Not-Yet-Conscious" of hopes, dreams, and longings (that people may sense but cannot always articulate) and the social-historical "Not-Yet-Become" of history (that have not yet taken concrete form).

Exploring hope, Bloch reclaimed the concept of utopia (literally 'no-place') as an anticipatory consciousness (*Vor-Schein*, "pre-appearances") of the future, i.e., the "Not-Yet". Daydreams, art, literature, political movements, and religious symbols all express nascent or immature utopian consciousness. But he distinguishes between "abstract utopia", which imagines a totalising political vision or blueprint for a future abstracted from a given historical situation and provides an unrealistic model of a perfect ideal (such as heaven or a socialist state), and a "concrete utopia", which is a coming together (*concrescere*) of dreams and yearning (which he calls "warm streams" of hope) with social critique and analysis (the "cold streams" of hope) in historical processes.

Authentic hope must be realisable, or 'concrete', rather than abstract. Concrete utopias emerge from existing social contradictions—poverty, injustice, alienation—and anticipate their transformation. There is no historical inevitability in hope: the future is dependent on human choice and action and so hope carries an ethical and political demand: it calls for praxis, i.e., engaged theoretically-reflexive action.

Bloch's Atheism

Bloch frames religion as a site of meaning-making and ethical protest, giving rise to anticipatory images of a transformed world. For

example, he reclaims the motif of the serpent in Genesis 3. 4 who promises Eve, 'when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like gods, knowing good and evil'. He identifies this with the work of Moses and Jesus (cf. Numbers 21-9, John 14). Motifs such as Exodus, prophetic critique, and messianic expectation do not portray God as a transcendent Creator-God (or 'demiurge'[7]), but present narratives of liberation from oppression. These prophetic traditions resist the sacralisation of existing power structures and refuse to identify God with the present order. Religious symbols such as salvation, resurrection, and the Messiah should not be taken literally, but understood to encode humanity's longing for justice, reconciliation, and fulfilment. While the Kingdom of God portrays a classless, egalitarian society, it is not presented as an abstract utopia, but as an ideal or prophetic vision that invites social analysis and contemporary critique.

Taking the biblical theme of the Kingdom of God, for example, Bloch says that,

> …the kingdom, even in secularized form, and all the more so in its utopian-total form, remains as a messianic *Front-space* even without any theism, indeed it can only remain at all, as every 'anthropologization of heaven' from Prometheus to the belief in the Messiah has increasingly shown, without theism. Where the great world-ruler is, freedom has no space, not even the freedom - of the children of god and not the kingdom figure, the mystic-democratic figure to be found in chiliastic hope. … Atheism is therefore so far from being the enemy of religious utopia that it constitutes its precondition: without atheism messianism has no place.[8]

Comparing Bloch and Moltmann

Bloch's non-realist philosophy of hope differs markedly from Moltmann's theology of hope. Moltmann challenges certain metaphysical attributes of God (such as divine impassibility in *The Crucified God*), yet for Moltmann hope is grounded in divine promise rather than in human utopian imagination of historical possibility.

For Moltmann, Christian hope is grounded in the resurrection of Christ, understood not as a mythological symbol but as an historical event with eschatological meaning — an event that occurs within history yet opens history towards God's future. God shows his faithfulness in the resurrection, which is read as an anticipation, or "prolepsis", that marks the beginning of the realisation of the Kingdom of God. This prolepsis invites the church to respond with ethical discipleship and political responsibility. So the church is called to respond by being a community of anticipatory practice, embodying justice, reconciliation, liberation and new life — participating in the "economy" or work of the Trinity.

However, if one doubts that the resurrection of Christ is historical, Moltmann's theology of divine promise offers no hope. Indeed, it offers no hope to society beyond the church. By contrast, Bloch's rejection of theism still regards theology as a motivational resource and a contribution to concrete utopian hope. But liberated from theistic framework, religion is valued for its imaginative and moral power. Religion is valuable to Bloch precisely because it is human, historical, and future-oriented, motivating social analysis and concrete action.

Bloch's Hope Today

In a foreword to an English-language anthology of Bloch's writings on religion (selected by Jürgen Moltmann), the American theologian Harvey Cox writes:

> I have often speculated on how different theology would be today if Ernst Bloch, rather than Martin Heidegger, had been our conversation partner for the past twenty years. Would we be as miserably lacking as we are in a theologically grounded social ethic? Would we be as disastrously out of touch …? Would we have needed the catharsis of the death-of-God theology? Would we have allowed the ecclesiastical furniture shuffling of recent years to pose as a real renewal of the church? Might we have produced a theology that was truly radical in its impact on the world and not just in its rhetoric?[9]

These words have left me with much to think about. The Secular Enlightenment's emphasis on reason failed to resist fascism and dictatorship in both Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, and reason fails us in democracies today. But Bloch's aim was to find in art, in culture and in subversive strands of 'de-theocratised' religion 'warm streams' of utopian hope that keep alive a longing for change and support reason with a hopeful vision.

I find Bloch to be a deeply religious thinker, not in the sense that he seeks God, but in the sense that he seeks the utopian hopes and dreams in the deep wells of religious and cultural experience that have been expressed in religious and cultural life. Such cultural and political resources of hope are needed today.

Bartleby's Resistance

Žižek's reading of Bartleby's 'I prefer not to', by Andy Kemp

Until a few years ago, for me and I'm sure for many others, 'Bartleby' was just the name of old Joe Grundy's not entirely cooperative grey pony, in BBC Radio 4's long-running agri-soap, 'The Archers'. That is, until I encountered the various and prolific writings of Slavoj Žižek, the Slovenian Marxist philosopher and cultural theorist, who describes himself as a 'Christian Atheist'.

Žižek considers his book *The Parallax View*[1] to be his 'magnum opus'. A parallax can be defined as 'the apparent displacement of an object caused by a change in observational position'. In the book, Žižek makes two major political points. The first concerns a split between the economy and politics. He insists that although the economy is the real arena of struggle, and politics is simply a shadow of that struggle, the battle must nevertheless be fought in politics. The second concerns the nature and effectiveness of political resistance, and this is where 'Bartleby' comes in.

Žižek contends that politico-economic systems 'contain' – in both senses of the word (to encompass or include and to limit or constrict) – their own contradictions, and that most negations of capitalism and neo-liberalism are already 'factored in'. Reactive or 'knee-jerk' oppositional resistance plays into the hands of oppressive systems and reinforces their power over society. In other words, those who simply 'resist', who campaign against, who frame their opposition in the negative or 'just say no', 'stop', have already been 'gamed' by the system they oppose. Their drive and energy merely strengthen the all-encompassing, all-dominating forces of oppression and control.

This is how Žižek introduces his argument:

> 'The deadlock of "resistance" brings us back to the topic of parallax: all is needed is a slight shift in our perspective, and all the activity of "resistance," of bombarding those in power with impossible "subversive" (ecological, feminist, antiracist, anti-globalist. . .) demands, looks like an internal process of feeding the machine of power, providing the material to keep it in motion. . ." [2]

According to some critics, Žižek here advocates a withdrawal from resistance and, by extension, from charitable action; in fact, a withdrawal from the whole range of micro-political practices. However, one detects that his position is more subtle and more radical than mere quietism. The last section of the book implies that true or effective resistance involves radical non-engagement with the powers. This is not a straight refusal but a preference not to act in direct response; or rather, to act alternatively by creating a different structure, an alternative 'economy', working on a different alignment, using different

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Continued from previous page

Photo Credit: *Ernst Bloch auf Begegnung der Geistesschaffenden* by Hans-Günter Quaschinsky (1925) Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-27348-0008, CC-BY-SA 3.0 (Wikimedia Commons).

Notes

[1] Ernst Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity: The Religion of the Exodus and the Kingdom*, translated (abr.) by J.T. Swann (Verso, 2009) p. 266.

[2] Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century dialectical theories of literature.* (Princeton University Press, 1971) Ch 2.3.

[3] Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity*, p. 44. The Hebrew *'ehye 'ăšer 'ehye* is often translated 'I am that I am' — with a Greek focus on 'being', or a Christian interpolation of the Johannine 'I am' (John 8. 58) — but *ehye* is the first-person singular imperfect of the verb *hāyâ*, (to be, to become) and the imperfect in Hebrew often conveys incomplete or future action.

[4] Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity*, pp. 69–70.

[5] Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity*, p. 9.

[6] Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity. An essay on exteriority*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 134.

[7] Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity,* p. 20.

[8] Bloch, *The Principle of Hope,* translated by Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight (MIT Press, 1995), Vol. 3, p. 1200.

[9] Harvey Cox, 'Foreword', in Ernst Bloch, *Man on his Own: Essays in the Philosophy of Religion* edited by Jürgen Moltmann and Reiner Strunk. Translated by E. B. Ashton, (Herder and Herder, 1970) (pp. 7–18) p. 18.

parameters, with different values. True resistance, then, is not to meet the oppressor head-on, but to take a step sideways.

Žižek's model for this — explored in *The Parallax View* — is the character of Bartleby in Herman Melville's short story 'Bartleby the Scrivener: a story of Wall Street' (1853). Melville's two novels, *Moby Dick* (1851) and *Pierre: or The Ambiguities* (1852), had been poorly received when first published. Resorting to short story writing for magazine publications, his first successful attempt was 'Bartleby the Scrivener'.

The Story of Bartleby the Scrivener

Bartleby, a gaunt, expressionless young man, is engaged as a copyist by an accommodating employer in a legal practice on Wall Street, having previously worked in the Dead-letter Office of the postal service. He works hard at his copying, but whenever he is asked to do other work, to take on additional tasks or collaborate with his colleagues, he responds: 'I would prefer not to'. He doesn't refuse, he doesn't argue, he doesn't go on strike, he doesn't walk out, but he states his preference not to engage with the system beyond his immediate task. His remarkably tolerant employer and his exasperated colleagues are at a loss to know how to react or persuade him otherwise. His 'preferring' expression is unconsciously catching and is repeated by those around him.

should we view Bartleby as a kind of 'Christ' figure?

The story is pushed to ludicrous extremes. The more he is prevailed upon to co-operate, the more distant and disengaged Bartleby becomes. He stares at the walls and out of the viewless windows. As his position in the firm becomes threatened, he takes to sleeping in the office; he never leaves. The boss decides the only way to free himself of Bartleby is to move his business out of the office block, but then he is confronted by the other occupants of the building, as Bartleby has become their burden in turn. The boss even offers Bartleby a place in his own home. Bartleby, as ever, 'would prefer not to'. Eventually, Bartleby is arrested, imprisoned and hospitalised. The sad denouement arrives when the boss finds Bartleby dead in the prison exercise yard, as he 'preferred not to' eat.

Bartleby inspires Žižek to explain Melville's intention in the story thus:

> Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" is to be taken literally: it says "I would prefer not to," NOT "I don't prefer (or care) to" – so we are back at Kant's distinction between negative and infinite judgement. In his refusal of the Master's order, Bartleby does not negate the predicate; rather, he affirms a non-predicate: he does not say that he doesn't want to do it; he says that he prefers (wants) not to do it. This is how we pass from the politics of "resistance" or "protestation" which parasitises upon what it negates, to a politics which opens up a new space outside the hegemonic position AND its negation. [3]

Žižek goes on to argue that, unlike some other commentators, we should not see Bartleby's 'I would prefer not to' as just the first stage of resistance: a step that needs to be taken before launching a rebuilding of society that aims to replace what has gone before. It is the whole thing, its entire foundation: a shift that disengages us from the power system AND the shadow-play of confrontation that it fosters.

Bartleby as Jesus?

One is put in mind of other examples of non-violent resistance: of Gandhi, the Suffragettes, and hunger strikers for any number of causes. But is this the same thing? Is Bartleby a protestor, a man resisting the system, in this case, the rapidly expanding engine of Western capitalism that was 1850s Wall Street? Or, is Bartleby something else, a person refusing to rebel or even engage, refusing to resist on Wall Street's terms?

Indeed, should we view Bartleby as a kind of 'Christ' figure? It is possible to detect in the gospel accounts the impression that Jesus, within the parameters of his own time, was engaged in both kinds of resistance. The cleansing of the temple certainly feels like direct action, aimed at the temple-cult central to first-century Judaism. Jesus resists: 'just stop this; it's oppressing you, it's killing the poor…' The arc of the passion narrative in the synoptic gospels implies this incident is the catalyst of the case the priests took to Pilate, alongside any Messianic claims made about Jesus. In other words, the authorities had already factored in this direct resistance; crucifixion was inevitable and final.

If we follow the line of the synoptic writers, Jesus' words and actions appear to unveil or hint at the Kingdom of Heaven. This 'Kingdom' – present, emerging and to come – is depicted as an 'alternative economy', set up in parallel to Imperial Rome rather than defeating or eclipsing it: 'render unto Caesar…' etc. The Kingdom of

Heaven is not a political manifesto in a worldly sense. Rather, the 'heavenly realm on earth is like this…' and Jesus would either follow up with a parable, in which the hearer found themselves judged by their own conventional reactions, or, with an expression of extreme counter-intuitiveness if one's main motive is self-preservation or self-promotion. Mostly, Jesus is not taking on the might of Rome, but presenting a way for people to support each other in having as little to do with imperial power as possible. Many parables and direct teachings appear to urge responses that break the cycle of violence and oppression: 'turn the other cheek', 'go the extra mile', even 'love your enemies'. Rather, they aim at creating a context for liberation in which different rules apply. The religious response appears to be one of 'preferring not to' engage, rather than one of zealous resistance.

It is a very hard line to hold to. One senses this in the earlier writings of St Paul, a Roman citizen as well as a religious Jew, dealing with the practicalities of early churches straddling the worlds of 'Kingdom' and Empire. Three centuries later, Constantine collapsed the church into the Empire; the world became the church, and the church became the world. The church's various incarnations and denominations down the centuries have struggled to escape the world's clutches; its opposition often collapsing into complicity.

Selling Spirituality

In our own times, so much of organised religion – and not just Christianity – has been captured by neoliberal, capitalist methodology. There is a strong sense that the church is 'selling spirituality', competing with all the alternative 'spiritualities' now aimed at the wellness- or wholeness-seeking individual, many of which are also heavily monetised and market-driven. The leadership of several denominations in the UK, as in the US and elsewhere, has succumbed to 'vision and strategy' speak and to finance-led growth targets; fresh church plants are run like commercial start-up enterprises. Unfortunately, neoliberal capitalism has anticipated this; it negates the negation implied or claimed by this kind of market-compliant approach. It does not represent competition for 'the system', as it reinforces the system's tendency towards choice, consumption, and gaining advantage, and the exploitation of both workers and natural resources.

Churches and other groupings could do things differently. They might create settings where people who 'would prefer not to' be part of all that could gather to do things very differently, where alternative 'economies' based on simplicity, minimal consumption, revaluing, reducing, reusing, and recycling are given spiritual recognition. The 'freedoms' sold to us by neoliberal capitalism are so often just new layers of insecurity and anxiety for us all to bear. To be freed from these heavy burdens in exchange for much lighter ones (*c.f.*, Jesus) would be a true liberation. Neither Bartleby nor the church-as-kingdom are about establishing a new 'symbolic order'. Rather, they are about drastically changing lives by decoupling them from systemic control and oppression. What would happen if we all 'would prefer not to' at the same time?

Žižek's last line on the subject is this: 'Bartleby couldn't even hurt a fly – that's what makes his presence so unbearable'.

Photo Credit: 'Slavoj Zizek in Liverpool', by Andy Miah, Flickr, CC BY-SA 2.0. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/25272992@N00/2340905187>

Notes:

[1] Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (MIT Press, 2006).

[2] Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*, p. 334.

[3] Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*, pp. 381–82.

Part 2: 'Hope for the Future of Religion and Worldviews Education'

by Dave Francis and Denise Cush

In Part 1 of these reflections, we looked at the many challenges standing in the way of high-quality religious education. These included the neglect of the subject by central and some local government, contested and sometimes confused subject aims and a shortage of qualified teachers, resulting in huge variations in the quality of provision. We also argued that our faith in the subject remains, due to the vital contribution it makes to children's understanding of the complex world in which they are growing up and to its potential for helping them successfully to navigate that world and, what's more, to encourage and enable them to make their own contributions to making it all a little better. We have, in addition, been sustained by the very positive experiences that we have had in meeting with adherents of a whole variety of faith and belief traditions here in the UK and around the world.

In this article, 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.[1]

Background

Over the last decade, there has been a gradual move towards the inclusion of RE within the National Curriculum for England. Back in 2015, as part of the Westminster Faith Debates, Charles Clarke and Linda Woodhead proposed 'A New Settlement' for RE, including a change to the responsibility for determining the RE syllabus from local to national. At the same time, the Religious Education Council of England and Wales (REC) set up a Commission on Religious Education (CoRE) under the chairmanship of the Dean of Westminster, John Hall. The Commission's final report[2] recommended establishing a statutory 'National Entitlement to the study of Religion and Worldviews' in all publicly funded schools.

Following the report, the REC set up the 'Religion and Worldviews Project', leading to several important publications. These resulted in a proposal for a 'National Content Standard' including a 'National Statement of Entitlement', 2023. This was central to the REC's definitive explication of the 'religion and worldviews approach' and advice on how to use if for teaching, published in 2024.

Meanwhile, the philosophy behind the 'Big Ideas for RE' project, for the most part sponsored by the Sea of Faith Network, was influencing the direction of travel. For example, the principle that the RE curriculum should be organised around understanding the ideas that are crucial to children's learning, rather than specifying factual information about particular religions/worldviews, is central to both the REC 'worldviews approach' and the Big Ideas project.

Current situation

When the new government decided in 2024 to review the whole school curriculum in England, the REC's proposals were well-placed to contribute to consultations and the resulting recommendations regarding RE. The Chair of the RE component of the Review, Dr Vanessa Ogden, was keen to work alongside the 'RE community', particularly as represented by the members of the REC. This provided opportunities for the Sea of Faith Network's representatives to be involved at every stage of the review process.

The final report of the Review, recommended that RE be included as a subject in the National Curriculum, rather than being locally organised. Responsibility for producing the RE programme of study was handed over to a 'task-and-finish' group led by Dr Ogden, with the understanding that if consensus could be reached, the DFE would move to a formal consultation on a National Curriculum for RE and accompanying legislative change.

At the time of writing, the task group has completed its work, and our understanding is that the proposed programme of study is achieving a wide consensus. It is likely to specify content but not any particular pedagogy and thus be compatible with the 'Religion and Worldviews' / 'Big Ideas for RE' approach.

Further support for the importance of RE has been provided by the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG), which has published a policy paper[3] promising to strengthen the roles of RE and faith and belief communities as part of its strategy for supporting community cohesion and social resilience.

Advantages and disadvantages of National Curriculum RE

The main potential advantages are that the subject should benefit from a higher profile and clearer guidance for schools, parents and pupils; that there are equal expectations regarding RE throughout the country; and that RE will receive central government support in line with all other National Curriculum subjects.

Possible disadvantages include that RE will be more susceptible to political interference and will lose its unique status as a 'basic compulsory subject' of the curriculum, along with the impetus and enthusiasm provided by local religion and belief communities, local teachers, and expert advisers.

Hope for the future

On the whole, along with a large majority of the RE community, we think that being part of the National Curriculum would be a positive development for the subject. At least the subject's profile and status would be raised, and the usual drivers of improvement, such as Ofsted inspection, would be clarified for all concerned. People would know what was expected from a National Curriculum subject that would be the same in every school. Ideally, it would be one that was welcomed and adopted by all schools, including those with a religious character.

When the national programme of study is finalised, we hope to see that it can be delivered through a 'religion and worldviews approach' as exemplified by the units already published on the Big Ideas for RE website.

Any new arrangement should be accompanied by central government funding for curriculum development and teacher training, as well as support for strong university departments of Theology and Religious Studies.

Alongside potential gains in national recognition and funding, it is important to build on the current strengths of regional and local expertise and enthusiasm. This could be done through a new role for local SACREs as suggested by the RE Commission and the recent MHCLG policy document, as well as through the recently developed regional 'RE Hubs'. Such new structures offer opportunities for pupils to take their learning beyond an improved 'religious literacy' to a depth of understanding of their own and other people's deepest beliefs and commitments. This, in turn, may help transform individual lives and communities for the better.

When the national programme of study is finalised, we hope to see that it can be delivered through a 'religion and worldviews approach' as exemplified by the units already published on the Big Ideas for RE website.

In Part 3, we will update readers on the progress and significance of the proposal to include RE in the National Curriculum.

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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.

Notes

[1] Department for Education, 'Curriculum and Assessment Review Final Report: Building a world-class curriculum for all' (November 2025). https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/690b96b-bc22e4ed8b051854d/Curriculum_and_Assessment_Review_final_report_-_Building_a_world-class_curriculum_for_all.pdf [accessed April 2026]

[2] CoRE 'Religion and Worldviews: the way forward. ' (2018). https://religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/rec/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Final-Report-of-the-Commission-on-RE.pdf [accessed April 2026]

[3] MHCLG, Protecting What Matters: Towards a more confident, cohesive, and resilient United Kingdom' (March 2026). https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/protecting-what-matters-towards-a-more-confident-cohesive-and-resilient-united-kingdom/protecting-what-matters-towards-a-more-confident-cohesive-and-resilient-united-kingdom [accessed April 2026]

lived religion

Katy Jennison

Pagan Sea of Faith Member

Q. You kindly shared in Sofia *121 that you were a Wiccan, Katy. How does your faith tradition and your personal practice shape your outlook and influence the pattern of your daily life?*

A decade or so ago, when I was the Secretary of the Oxford Council of Faiths, we had several meetings which we called 'speed-dating': the idea is that each person pairs with someone of a different faith, and each of you gets five minutes to describe to the other what your faith means to you. Not what your faith teaches, or what you believe, but what it means for you personally and for how you live your life. And the lovely thing about this format is how quickly you discover how much common ground you share with people of different faiths.

I think my answer to the same question today would be that my Paganism gives me the tools to make sense of my life, of the world around me, and of my relationships to the different parts of that world. Seeing everything on this Earth as, in its own way, sacred has propelled me into activism with the Green Party. The components of the Wiccan rituals that I use (see below) help me find a way through the problems and challenges of everyday life. And the discussions which I have with my fellow Pagans (mostly on Zoom, since my stroke) perpetually introduce me to new concepts, frequently raise questions I hadn't thought of, and keep my thinking sharp. My sense of myself as a spiritual creature feels at home here; it keeps my feet on the ground while allowing my imagination to soar above the clouds.

Q. Are there particular practices in your religious tradition that are particularly important to you?

My regular ritual practice at each full moon is what keeps me especially grounded. (The full moon is traditional, but the ritual could be done at any time.) As I'm what's called a 'solitary practitioner', I generally perform this alone. What I do would be immediately recognisable to other Wiccans and to most non-Wiccan Pagans, but every solitary Pagan will do things their own way, with a form of words, or simply an emphasis or an

interpretation, which is uniquely our own.

There are several parts to the ritual, and the preparation for it involves setting up the ritual space, a process that also serves to prepare me psychologically (attuning me, or getting me in an 'appropriate mood'). Depending on where I'm doing the ritual, this may entail moving some furniture and setting out any equipment (candles, incense, etc.). It will probably also mean putting on different clothes or at least accessories. Often I work indoors, but if the weather and the season are encouraging, I'll be outside - but I'm too old now to feel a ritual is enhanced by getting soaked or frozen. And when I was in a hospital ward, I did it entirely by visualisation. (You'll notice I use the term 'work': you will see why as I proceed.)

I work within a circle, which serves both to exclude and to include: it makes an imagined (magical) boundary between my working space and the mundane world, and it creates an enclosure for magical work, the work of transformation. The ritual proper begins in stillness, consciously centring myself in time and space, upon the earth, beneath the sun and the moon, between my past and my future. This is followed by the blessing of materials representing the four elements: salted water for earth and water, incense for fire and air. These are used to consec-

rate the space. I draw the circle, and facing the four directions in turn, I welcome into my circle the powers of Air in the East, Fire in the South, Water in the West and Earth in the North.

Q. You've enabled us to imagine that ritual space. Can you unpack the significance or meaning of these elements?

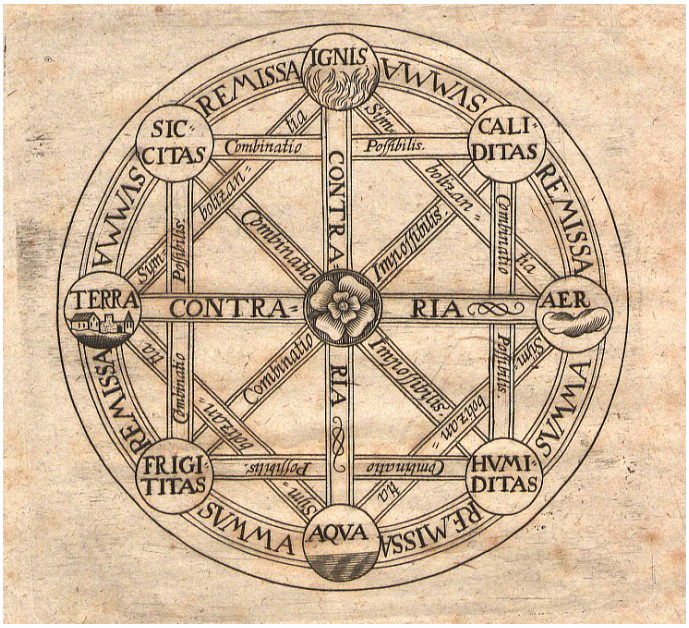
What these powers mean is crucial to understanding the purpose of this part of the ritual. Each of the four elements and its associated compass direction represents several more linked aspects of human experience, including the seasons, particular human attributes or faculties, and particular stages of life.

When I'm calling in and welcoming the power of the East and the element of Air, I'm deliberately awakening my power of thought, of reasoning and analysis. Visualising the air, the wind, blows my drowsy mind awake; the season is Spring, the springtime of ideas, and the dawn, the early morning of my life, for the stage of life is childhood, the energy and excitement of early youth, and the memories and lessons of my own childhood.

The element of Fire in the South impels me to call up and activate my intuition and imagination, the ability to create and to make connections (synthesis, the counterpart to Air's analysis). The element of Fire is the crucible or the furnace powering my creativity; the season is summer, with the power of the midday Sun at its height; the stage of life is young adulthood, with its ambition and its desire to forge its own path, and also its need for the fire of romantic and sexual connection; and I remember my own youth and early adulthood.

The element of Water in the West brings me to focus on the emotions: love, empathy, and compassion, but also anger, pain, and grief. The lesson of Water is to allow the emotions to flow and to find their proper levels; neither to suppress any of them nor let any one of them exclude the rest. The season is autumn, the winding-down of the year; and the stage of life is the mature adult, appraising what has been achieved and what remains to do, what must now be left behind and what might take its place.

Finally, the element of Earth, in the North: we come to stability and stillness, and to physical sensation, my affinity with the ground beneath my feet and the material world around me, and my own body with all its wonder and delight, aches and incapacities. My attention is



Leibniz representation of universe, involving the four elements of Empedocles and Aristotle.

now on tuning in to whatever my body is telling me, and appreciating it as my current home and my instrument. The season is Winter, and (as you will have worked out by now) the time of old age: accepting the need to draw oneself in, to retreat, but also (at any age) to be aware of the need for rest and silence, to acknowledge that one is ageing, and to know that death is a part of the wheel of life.

The ritual up to this point has brought all my faculties into play and honed them to a high level of alertness. I haven't yet got onto any Deities or any other ritual constituents: I've only scratched the surface, here, of the innumerable interlocking factors which correspond to the four elements.

Q. Thank you. Please continue with the rest of this ritual and its meaning for you.

The next stage is to call upon and to welcome the Divine, the Deities with whom I'm working: these may vary depending on the circumstances, but will usually, though not always, be one female and one male. My position on Deities (and on any other supernatural beings) will be familiar to *Sofia* readers, and can be summed up as 'a Deity can be true and real without being literally factual'. So I will call them in, and then I will school myself simply to listen, with all my senses awake. Listening: that is the heart of this stage.

a Deity can be true and real without being literally factual

After that, there might be a magical work of some kind, which entails consciously and deliberately bending my mind and will towards a partic-

books

Books Editor, David Lambourn

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Some recommendations of recent publications from the editors.

Biblical Study

Nadeem Nassar, *The Middle Eastern Jesus: the Christ of the Gospels and the Culture of God*, (Canterbury Press, 2026).

Buddhism

Stephen Batchelor, *Buddah, Socrates, and us: Ethical Living in Uncertain Times* (Yale University Press, 2025).

Stephen Batchelor, Martine Batchelor and Bernat Font, *Living Life on Life's Terms: turning the wheel of secular dharma* (Tuwhiri, 2026).

Christianity

Joshua Hordern and Graham Tomlin (eds), *A Voice in the Wilderness: Why should we listen to the Church of England* (SCM, 2026).

John Fugelsang, *Separation of Church and Hate: A Sane Person's Guide to Taking Back the Bible from Fundamentalists, Fascists and Flock-Fleecing Frauds* (Simon & Schuster, 2026).

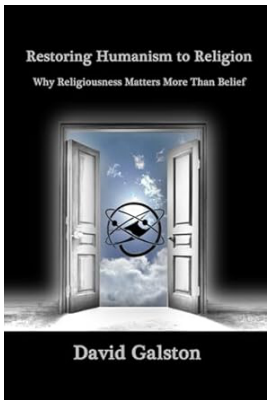
Judaism

Molly Crabapple, *Here Where We Live is Our Country: The Story of the Jewish Bund* (One World: Random House, 2026).

Politics

Rowan Williams, *Solidarity: the Work of Recognition* (Bloomsbury, 2026).

Review by David Boulton



David Galston, *Restoring Humanism to Religion: Why Religiousness Matters More Than Belief* (Westar Press 2025), ISBN 9781598150711

I first met David Galston when, some twenty-five years ago, I was invited to speak at a conference in Canada organised by the SnowStar Institute of Religion, of which David was co-founder and president. The conference venue was a hotel with unforgettable views of Niagara Falls. I remember sensing an association of David's explosive energy with that of the Niagara waters.

SnowStar is no more, having merged with Westar Institute in California, home of the Jesus

Continued from p. 15

ular end, while at the same time letting go of any personal attachment to the outcome. That might lead me to an understanding of what real-life action I might take, on the principle that we ourselves are the agents of the Divine, the only way the Divine can act in the world. And this, of course, is why my ritual rarely includes anything resembling petitionary prayer, other than occasionally "Help!"

Sometimes, magical work is accompanied by chanting, singing, and/or dancing to concentrate further and empower the purpose for which the magic is performed. And I'm intentionally not avoiding the M-word: it covers what most of us have experienced in ritual, although different faiths use different words: a crescendo of mental energy directed towards achieving a transformation.

The rest of the ritual includes consecrating and consuming food and wine (or equivalent), as we toast our spiritual ancestors, our teachers, and our community, spread over time and space. Eating and drinking also, importantly, brings me back down to a normal state of mind, down from the rarefied atmosphere and out of the heightened psychological state I have been working in.

It merely remains for me to tidy everything away, and to write down what I did and what words I used, and to record any insights or revelations before I forget them. These are grist to the mill of personal transformation: a person's magical work is what gradually brings this about.

Q. Thank you for sharing yourself, your experience, and understanding with our readers, Katy.

Image: The frontplate of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's *Dissertatio de Arte Combinatoria* (1690), by *Deutsche Totothek*. PD. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fotothek_df_tg_0005486_Mathematik_%5E_Kombinatorik.jpg>

Seminar which opened a new and revolutionary quest for the historical Jesus in the 1990s. David Galston is now executive director of Westar, where he has become one of the most progressive voices calling for a new reformation in religion. In his new book he argues that, strange as it seems, religion must evolve by rediscovering its humanist roots and embracing what he calls religiousness. By 'religiousness' he does not mean the quality or practice of religion, or religious belief, but 'a spiritual sense or an awareness of connection to the earth and others.' It is humanism, not religion, that expresses human religiousness. Indeed, Galston's religiousness is the opposite of religion.

This is an irony that invites some deconstruction. 'In relation to religion,' Galston writes, 'religiousness is an ironic term, for it names a value for religion that is lacking. Without the sense of religiousness in its heart, religion lacks humanism even though humanism defines the spiritual relationship in which all humans have a share. Without humanist compassion, religion undermines its own value and continues on its slow trajectory toward irrelevance.'

So, if religion (meaning, mainly, the Abrahamic three) is to survive, it needs to shift its emphasis from divinity to humanity, from the supernatural to the natural, from over there to over here, from life everlasting to life now, from theism to a compassionate humanism. That's a big ask! So big, that many of us have simply given up on religion and embraced humanism.

But Galston references Cantwell Smith who, in The Meaning and End of Religion (1991), insisted the word 'religion' never existed in any modern sense prior to the Enlightenment. 'When we return to antiquity, 'says Galston, 'there is no division, as we now assume, between the secular and the religious. Ancient gods were at the same time culture shapers, identity holders and state forces. The Roman gods were celebrated in everyday life whether in the household at the family hearth or nationally as the identity of the emperor or the inspiration of an army. Agriculture had its gods as did the weather and the trades. Gods were not part of a religion, they were the everyday activity of the people… Augustus Caesar represented the religiousness of the Roman imperial culture.' Thus, what Galston calls religiousness and most of us call humanism preceded religion as we understand it today – hence the title of his book.

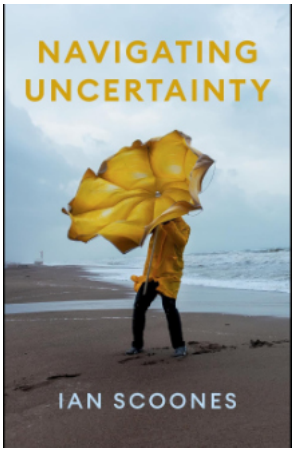
If we are to replace religion with religiousness, he says, 'the challenge involves finding new forms of language that do not betray our human integrity, but these words must come slowly over time, and they must be the organic words of a new myth… There are signs that a new language is emerging, but religious traditions are fearful of adopting it or, in some cases, are simply unaware of it. Emerging spiritual language is understandably non-God language because, as it turns out, honesty about human spirituality is something that the traditional God cannot fathom.' Thus, the language of religion 'continues to carry the ancient luggage of an overseer in the sky.' In a new (or newly discovered) religiousness, the word 'God' must fade away.

But it's not just the word 'God' that carries all that baggage. Religion in all shapes and sizes has its own 'ancient luggage', which is why we need those 'new forms of language'. And there's the rub! It seems to me, the problem with the word 'religiousness' is that it fails to escape from the taint of religion. However hard Galston insists that in his usage the word has nothing to do with the quality of being religious, it will only be understood as something quite different, a synonym of humanism, if every time we use it we qualify it with Galston's erudite explanations.

Once we have come to understand that religion is an entirely human creation, not a divine revelation, we are well on the way to finding the new language that fits our human condition. Galston calls it humanism in his title, but it seems that for him 'humanism' itself needs qualifying. He is not advocating the fundamentalist humanism of Richard Dawkins and the 'New Atheists' because it lacks human spirituality and, like organised religion, fails to 'open the human spirit to joyful wonder, inclusive living, and shared vision'. But for me, that is precisely what a rich, inclusive humanism is all about. If it needs a qualifier, I am not persuaded that 'religiousness' is the right one (or, for that matter, 'religious humanism', which I have used in the past but now avoid).

For all that, *Restoring Humanism to Religion* is a wonderfully accessible read, calling as it does for a shift from outmoded beliefs to practices that foster solidarity, creativity, joy, and all that the wholly human spirit offers. It is a valuable contribution to the on-going exploration of religion as a human creation, available in the UK from Amazon and other on-line booksellers.

David Galston wrote three previous books: *Archives and the Event of God* (McGill-Queens Press, 2010); *Embracing the Human Jesus: a wisdom path for contemporary Christianity* (Polebridge Press, 2012); *God's Human Future: The Struggle to Define Theology Today* (Polebridge Press, 2016)



Review by Digby Hartridge

Ian Scoones, *Navigating Uncertainty: radical rethinking for a turbulent world* (Polity, 2024).

I was strangely cheered by Ian Scoones's book. Oversimplifying, he argues that marginal farmers and small-scale entrepreneurs in Third World countries might cope better than us sophisticates in a major catastrophe — chaos theory predicts it! In countries without effective administration, he says, people on the ground are suspicious of the generalised prescriptions of government and of international organisations (sold as "development plans" but originally evolved for advanced economies) and make use of their advice and extension services with extreme discretion, alongside many tried-and-tested traditional sources and networks. Can we learn from Zimbabwean peasant farmers, Kenyan petty merchants and Eritrean cattle herders, who have always faced uncertainty, dealt with unexpected setbacks, wars, epidemics, droughts and other natural disasters, and gained resilience and flexibility? Can we learn, we who rely on insurance schemes, risk management and predictive models that break down immediately in the face of any real reckoning? The 2008 monetary crisis, the Covid pandemic, and the manifestations of global warming provide examples.

Scoones cited studies showing that, for instance, western firefighters in California found all contingency plans useless and resorted to old stratagems remembered by the older hands. How do you understand complex, non-linear systems? What skills and systems remain appropriate in conditions of great uncertainty? In Britain, we're at particular risk because we're reliant on badly conceived programmes, rigid algorithms, untested mystical AI, and, above all, we're wedded to top-down control. And our excessive short-termism leads us to knee-jerk reactions and inconsistent thinking. Scoones analyses our broken financial structure and technology (what's safe and for whom?) and advocates building responses from below. He decries solutionism, box-ticking, conscience-salving – and snowballing corruption. He's at his best with exhaustive case studies from Africa and Asia, where he reflects on local empowerment, long-established links and loyalties, flexibility of planning, diversification, and, crucially, the role of women. He acknowledges that the necessary changes in mindset will be difficult.

And in the coming apocalypse? Here, Scoones begins to generalise and tends to resort to vague sloganeering and jargon, "polyphonic narration", "the logic of care", resistance to the "cheerleaders of despair", "transformations within spaces of change". He's right, but you need to see for yourself what it can tell us about our own plight.

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

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

As we have a break over summer, **there is no meeting in August.**

In Conversation Meetings June–July:

June 17th - with Rev Dr Andrea Russell, the Warden of Gladstone's Library.

- This will introduce the work of Gladstone Library in education and the encouragement of theological conversation.

July 15th - 'Don Cupitt, Jacques Derrida, and Prayer', with Dr Philip Knight, a retired teacher of Religious Studies. .

- Derrida said he prayed "all the time", while Cupitt thought that, although he sometimes did pray, he "shouldn't do it". By contrasting these, the session aims to throw light on a key difference between Cupitt and Derrida.

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

inconversation@sofn.uk

Anniversaries of Publications by the Sea of Faith Network

by Teresa Wallace and David Boulton

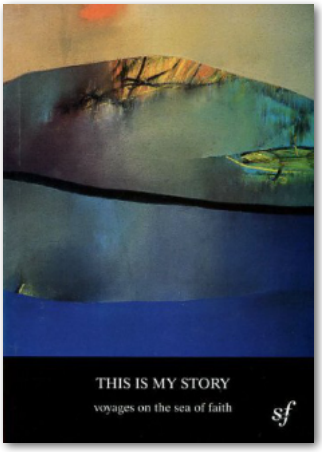
Looking Back - Teresa Wallace

Time and Tide *was published 25 years ago, in 2001. The editor, Teresa Wallace, reflects on her contribution to SoFN publications.*

I am the daughter of a clergyman, and have a (retired) Archdeacon brother - both of whom were much more concerned with the welfare of their flocks than forcing certainties down our throats. As a child, my dear Dad used to read me the odd bible story. Being at the end of a family of seven (I was a bit of an afterthought), the one that resonated most was the tale of Zacchaeus, that man of small stature who, like me, was a tree-climber. His reason was perhaps a little more serious - he wanted to get a good look at Jesus.

As an adult, I attended church for quite a few years, so when The Sea of Faith Network came to my notice via a friend of mine - a psychiatrist - I thought, 'This is really interesting'. 'Exploring and Promoting Religious Faith as a Human Creation' sounded just up my street. For some time, I had become a little limp about the weekly ritual at my local church. Undertaking tasks such as reading the odd lesson, overseeing the annual jumble sale, and editing the church magazine had become a bit pedestrian. So when I approached the rector one day - he was a good friend - suggesting that we might get a group together to discuss what we meant by the word 'God', he looked a bit startled and said he couldn't think of anyone else in the congregation who would be interested. So I decided it was time to look elsewhere. At the first SoF conference I attended, some 30+ years ago, I was transfixed by how many ordained folk were there - and all looking so relaxed. It was great not to feel guilty about all my doubts, and to hear so many differing views on what religion can mean.

Back in 1988, when I had been a SoF member for some years, David Boulton suggested that I get together a group of Sofers who might be interested in writing about their experiences of the network. I gulped a bit, but thought that my work, many moons ago now, in magazine editing/proof-reading, would stand me in good stead.



The proposed book's title was *This is My Story*, and eventually, fourteen members put their hats in the ring. The result was a glorious mix of views/experiences, all collected on floppy disks. Remember them? These subsequently had to be transferred to my brand-new computer, which my husband, Ian, had recently dumped on my desk, always at the cutting edge of new technologies. I groaned a bit and said what on earth was wrong with our electric typewriter?

Well, it was growing-up stuff that I had to embrace: getting to know the writers, asking them to put their oeuvres on disks, and then posting them back to me. Doesn't this sound archaic, compared with the myriad ways we are now able to communicate with each other?

They were all beautifully written pieces, so there was little editing needed, and I had a real thrill when I saw the finished product, with a lovely cover design found by David.

Three years later, it was decided to launch another book, *Time and Tide: Sea of Faith beyond the Millenium*, this time spreading the net a bit wider, with hugely interesting contributions from people from an interesting range of backgrounds: a former Catholic nun, a rabbi, the Deputy Secretary-General of Amnesty International, an Anglican Quaker, the Director of the British Humanists, a Bishop, a couple of poets, and a sprinkling of academics and ordained people - with an introduction by Don Cupitt. It was rather a different experience from *This is My Story*, in that I only knew a few of the participants, though I was particularly glad to include Richard Holloway, the Bishop of Edinburgh, whose views on religion are

wonderfully open-minded. And David found another delightful design for the cover.

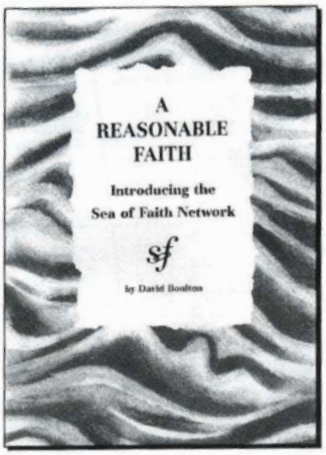
I was supported by my good friend Helen Fisher and her husband, Peter (both of whom sadly died recently), plus the Education and Development worker for the Sea of Faith, and a senior lecturer in Religious Studies at the University of Derby. In truth, it was a more challenging task to be at the helm of this second book, with a fair amount of disagreements to wrestle with. Our team was divided over the inclusion of one article; in despair, I sent a note to Don. He wrote a typically brief reply: 'Well, you're the Editor, Teresa', which gave me the confidence to put my foot down and reject the article. All good character-building stuff, I remember saying to myself…

Re-reading these books, I am struck by the variety of views the writers offer and entranced by their generosity in sharing their thoughts. Published in 1998 and 2001, they still feel remarkably fresh as they sit happily amongst all my books on religion, and looking back, I feel very blessed that I was responsible, to some degree, in getting them published.

Teresa Wallace

My Word! - David Boulton

A Reasonable Faith *was published in 1996, 30 years ago. David Boulton reflects on his role as a writer and work on Network publications.*



Our esteemed editor has asked me to write about the books and booklets I've written on religion understood as a human creation, both those specifically for SoF and those intended for a wider readership, including the Quakers. Since I've been banging on about non-realist, nontheist or humanist views of religion since the 1960s, there's a lot of ground to cover. Therefore, be thankful, dear reader, that I am limited to the stuff I've written on religion, leaving my books on jazz, nuclear disarmament, socialism, Ian Paisley, Patty Hearst, the Lockheed bribery scandal and the future of broadcasting to rest in peace.

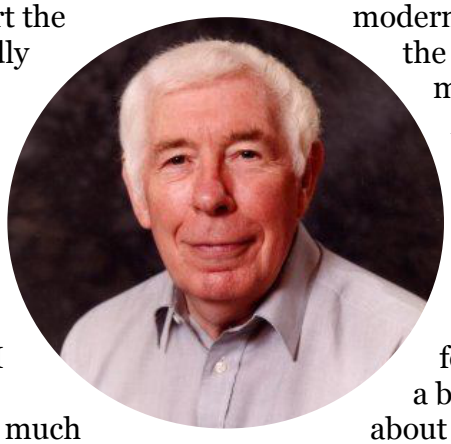
It began in 1963 (famous as the year, according to Philip Larkin, when 'sexual intercourse began … between the end of the Lady Chatterley ban and the Beatles' first LP'). In the immediate wake of Bishop John Robinson's famous/infamous *Honest to God* SCM Press published *The Honest to God Debate*, a collection of essays including one by me. Reading *Honest to God*, I wrote, 'was for me a moving experience because it described a path I have walked myself', a path which brought me to the point where 'I began to wonder whether it was useful or honest so to stretch the meaning of words as to change their nature altogether and finally render them unserviceable. "God" once meant something clear and definite. So did "heaven" and "prayer" and "worship". Was there any point in my continuing to use the same words but giving each of them a special, private meaning?'. A question which would be at the heart of the Sea of Faith enterprise more than two decades later.

I wrote a lot over those two decades, but little about religion until the 1980s when I discovered Quakers, including nontheist ones, and the 1990s when I caught up with Don Cupitt, joined the Network and found myself editor of *Sea of Faith Magazine*. In 1996 the steering committee commissioned me to write a booklet explaining the Network's aims and I produced *A Reasonable Faith*, emphasising that 'our faith, our philosophy, our world view, must be reasonable and rational if it is to have any value. The alternative – an unreasonable, irrational faith – is not only pointless but immeasurably dangerous'. It sold well (at £2) and was reprinted in 1997 and again in 2000.

In 1997 I wrote a pamphlet for the Quaker Universalist Group, *The Faith of a Quaker Humanist*, envisaging a 'new radical Quakerism and visionary humanism that will value the rational over the irrational and the imagination over the literal. It will employ both head and heart. It will be suspicious of a lazy reliance on an unreflective intuition and will recognise that the mind must be exercised if we would understand ourselves and our world. Its preoccupation will be the demands of our own century, in the language of our own times, not the demands or thought-forms of the seventeenth or first centuries. Its adventure will be the creation and re-creation of human value, the application of mercy, pity, peace and love to the complexities of social and personal life'. I understand this pamphlet is still available.

1998 saw the publication of *In Fox's Footsteps: A Journey through Three Centuries*, written with my wife Anthea. Although based on George Fox's missionary journey through north-west England

in 1652, it asked: 'After 350 years of scientific, political, religious, philosophical and psychological revolutions, what, if anything, remains relevant of the vision and insight which Fox and his revolutionary band broadcast far and wide in their provocative attempt to subvert the old order?' The birth of a 'profoundly religious humanism' was our answer.



'Religious humanism' was the core idea in *The Trouble with God*, first published by John Hunt Books in 2002 and re-issued in an enlarged edition in 2005. I explained in an Introduction that 'I am writing for those who, in poet Stevie Smith's words, cannot "bear much longer the dishonesty / Of clinging for comfort to beliefs we do not believe in", who will not "allow good to be hitched to a lie", for those who sense that there are other worlds, but know they are all this one. For those who understand that we each live one life, and that it is many lives. For those who believe in God as they believe in Hamlet and Mr Pickwick and Mozart's Countess Almaviva, but are as sceptical of divine providence or intervention as they are of the influence of fairy godmothers and things that go bump in the night.' Don Cupitt described the book as 'entertaining, funny and serious'. Richard Holloway found it 'affectionate, learned and extremely funny'. Were they laughing at or with me?

More books followed: *Real Like the Daisies or Real Like I Love You? Essays in Radical Quakerism* (2002), a collection of essays and reviews; *Gerrard Winstanley and the Republic of Heaven* (1999), a comprehensive study of the 20 books and pamphlets by the seventeenth century leader of the True Levellers, whose radical liberation theology fed into Quakerism, socialism and modern religious humanism; and in 2008 the book I would most like to survive me, *Who on Earth was Jesus? The Modern Quest for the Jesus of History*

No-one who has spent so much time sounding off with his own opinions can complain if some readers fight back. In 2015 a fellow Friend, Derek Guiton, wrote a book asking 'How can one write about these matters [religious humanism] without mentioning David Boulton? It would be like trying to write the history of ancient Egypt without reference to the pyramids.' Alas, this wasn't flattery. Guiton argued that the Society of Friends was 'poised at the edge of the abyss', and a principal cause of the crisis was my subversive advocacy of religion as a wholly human creation. I replied in 2016 with *Through a Glass Darkly: a Defence of Quaker Nontheism* (2016), admitting that 'I sometimes found myself wondering why I was spending my diminishing energies arguing the toss about divine transcendence when the task of building the republic of heaven on earth was never more urgent.' I have continued to wonder ever since.

David Boulton

letters

Letters Editor, Stephen Mitchell
letters@sofn.uk

David Rhodes wrote in to the previous edition (*Sofia* 159) to draw attention to the article 'The Violence of (White) Nonviolence' by Syed Mustafa Ali (*Sofia*, 158). I was very unhappy with that article, which decried non-violent responses and concluded that resistance should be 'by any means necessary'. In his letter, David Rhodes gave full support to 'the counter-violence of resistance by Hamas and its allies'.

We are called to be peace-makers. Within SOFN there will be differences of opinion as to how peace-making is best done (and some people may think that armed resistance has a role), but to unequivocally promote the right of one side to commit any form of violence they choose represents a loss of faith and an acceptance of evil. An atrocity is an atrocity, whoever carries it out, whoever it is done to.

James Priestman

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Network Matters

SoF Publications, by Paul Overend

These 'Network Matters' pages explore various aspects of the charitable work of the Sea of Faith (SoF) Network. In this edition, we focus on the Network's publications.

Publishing was at the heart of Don Cupitt's life's work, alongside the media appearances that brought him to public attention and established his reputation as a public intellectual. His engagement with philosophical questions of religion was formative for the SoF Network from its inception at its first conference in July 1988, onwards. But he wasn't alone in engaging with those questions: many network members have been, or still are, published authors and poets — such as Anne Ashworth, David Boulton, Hugh Dawes, Michael Elliott, Anthony Freeman, David Hart, Dinah Livingstone, Stephen Mitchell, Steve Regis, Graham Shaw, John McDonald Smith, Frank Walker, and Tony Windross (alphabetically listed) — with publications for a wide range of ecclesiastical, Quaker, and general readers. And, of course, academic members of the SoF Network have also published, including David Chapman, Denise Cush, Andrew Edgar, Dave Francis, and Trevor Greenfield.

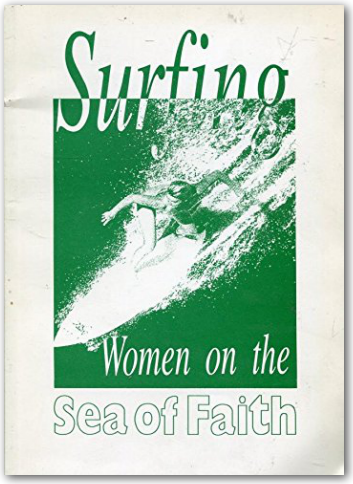
Several members of the Network contributed to *God and Reality: Essays on Non-Realism,* edited and introduced by Colin Crowder.[1] The rear cover explains that it was designed to 'bring together leading non-realist writers and some of their most influential critics' and to be 'a significant contribution to future development as a constructive theological dialogue'. The contributors were Jeff Astley, Don Cupitt, Anthony Freeman, Daphne Hampson, David Hart, Fergus Kerr, Stephen Mitchell, George Pattison, Peter Selby, Graham Shaw, Denys Turner and Graham Ward, with a guarded foreword by Rowan Williams.

Although Tony Windross' *Thoughtful Guide to Faith*[2] was not published by the Network, it was based on leaflets he produced for the Network. These were published as 'Why Bother', in a format suitable for leaving at the back of churches.

Network publications

As a charitable organisation, the network has also been active as a publisher, producing books, pamphlets, promotional leaflets, and website content.

In this edition of Sofia we consider books produced by the SoF Network. On another occasion, we shall consider the Network's development of the website, Big Ideas, and Solarity materials, but here we consider the books it initiated and sponsored.

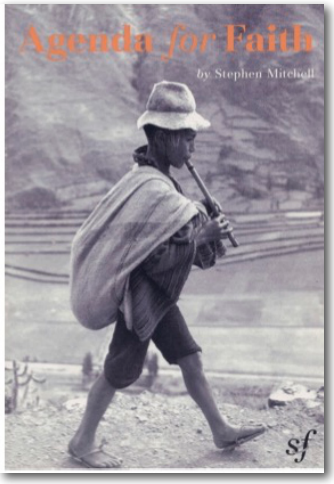


1995, *Surfing:* *Women on the Sea of Faith,* was edited by Maxine Green and Trudi Newton. In this collection of essays and poems, the book explained that 'women from the Sea of Faith Network describe their experiences of "exploring religious faith as a human creation"'. The contributors were Anne Ashworth, Anthea Boulton, Valerie Clarke, Jane Cole, Mel Crossleu, Maxine Green, Anne Horner, Aileen La Tourette, Penny Mawdsley, Trudy Newton, Barbara Ratcliffe, Ruth Robinson, and Wendy Worham. Ruth Robinson was the widow of Bishop John Robinson, of *Honest to God* fame.

1996, *A Reasonable Faith* by David Boulton (*Sofia*, 160, p. 20–21).[3] This year, 2026, marks the thirtieth anniversary of this booklet, produced by the Network, which remains available on the Sea of Faith website. As many readers will know, David was the editor of *SOF*, the magazine of the Sea of Faith (issues 11–21, 28–51), and a well published author. David lists some of his books on religion in an article in this edition, a couple of which were reviewed in the magazine.[4] He also edited *Godless for God's Sake: Nontheism in Contemporary Quakerism* (2006), which was also reviewed in *Sofia*.[5]

1997, *Agenda for Faith* by Stephen Mitchell.[6] This production ran to a second edition (2011) with an added preface, when it was made available on the Network's website. Written not long after Anthony Freeman's book *God in Us: A Case for Christian Humanism* (1993) and in light

of the furore that cost Freeman his job, Stephen considered whether the Church of England could adapt to changes in theology.



The book was reviewed twice in *Sea of Faith* by Mike Jenkins[7] and Elizabeth Wilkinson,[8] and more information about the book and their responses to it can be found there.

Stephen Mitchell's other publications include *God in the Bath* (2006)[9] and *Past Perfect* (2018).[10]

1998, *This is My Story*: *voyages on the sea of faith*, edited by Teresa Wallace (*Sofia*, 160, p. 19–20). This collection of articles was produced when Teresa was Convenor of the Sea of Faith's Publications Sub-Committee. It comprises personal stories by fourteen members of the Sea of Faith network about how and why they found themselves in the Sea of Faith and their understanding of religion.

The contributors were Helen Alexander, Anne Ashworth, David Boulton, Jude Bullock, Derek Chorley, Alec Davison, John McDonald Smith, Penny Mawdsley, Duncan Park, David Patterson, John Pearson, Clive Richards, Janet Taylor, and Patti Whaley — from Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, Brethren, Salvation Army, and Congregationalist churches, and from Quaker and humanist backgrounds. Their work bears witness to the warmth wit and wisdom found in the network.

While the *Sea of Faith* magazine didn't carry a review of this, it invited others to reflect on their story and share it with readers, as Anne Horner did,[11] for example.

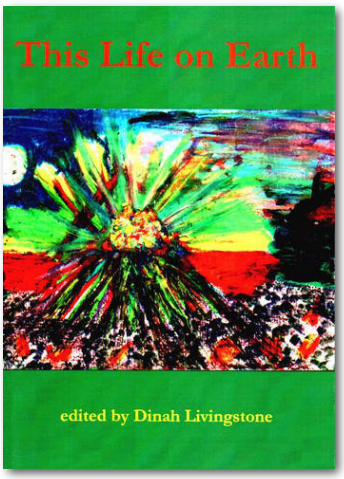
2000, *Will The Real Jesus Please Stand Up:* *A Quest, Inquest, Conquest, Request for the Historical Jesus in the Words of Scholars, Would-be Scholars, Poets, Essayists, Journalists and Even Theologians,* was edited by David Boulton. As the subtitle suggests, it was a miscellany of lightly edited extracts, from writings about Jesus.

SoF published it to coincide with the visit to Britain by Robert Funk, founder of the Jesus Seminar in the USA. This led to closer links between the Network and the Seminar, with Don Cupitt and David Boulton making several visits to the States.

2001, *Time and Tide*, edited by Teresa Wallace, with Peter Fisher, Helen Fisher, Michael Elliott, and David Hart (*Sofia* 160, pp. 19–20). This year, 2026, marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of this Sea of Faith publication. It was a collection of commissioned essays and thought-provoking poems produced at the turn of the 21st century by Don Cupitt, Karen Armstrong, Paul Davies, Richard Holloway, Lloyd Geering, Dan Cohn-Sherbok, Robert Ashby, and Sea of Faith members, Anne Ashworth, Pamela Donohue, Michael Elliott , Philip Knight, Stephen Mitchell, Graham Shaw, and Patti Whaley. At the time, Michael Elliott was the Education and Development Worker for the Sea of Faith Network.

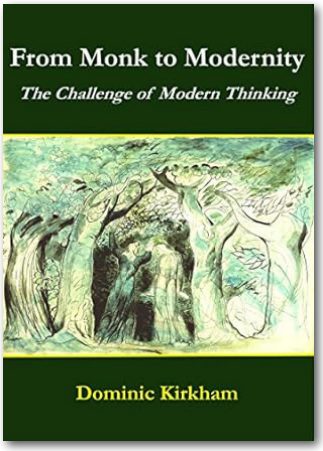
Where contributors to the earlier *This is My Story* were 'asked not to talk about how we "found Don"',[12] this publication engaged, to some greater or lesser extent, with Don Cupitt's and similar theological and philosophical work. That the book had an impact can be seen in the range of reviews, summarised in the *SoF* magazine.[13] We have an article in this publication by Teresa Wallace reflecting on that work on its silver anniversary of publication.

2009, *This Life on Earth*, edited by Dinah Livingstone. This is an anthology of 16 poems and 23 prose pieces on the theme 'This Life on Earth'. There are 38 contributors to this book, 19 women and 19 men, who offer a variety of responses to the theme — from personal stories to more general ecological, reverential, and other reflections on life on our vulnerable planet. Anthony Freeman offered a personal response in the form of reflections on the book and on the theme of the environment, published by way of a review in *Sofia*.[14]



The volume editor, Dinah, was also editor of *Sofia* (issues 68–154) at the time of publication. She is a renowned poet and translator, with numerous publications including ten poetry collections.[15]

2015, *From Monk to Modernity*: *The Challenge of Modern Thinking,* by Dominic Kirkham. This was a 'personal odyssey' reflecting on how he met the challenge of modern thinking and journeyed from the religious life. A second edition of the same title was published by Wipf &



Stock in 2018 (with a different cover). Dave Francis wrote a review of the book in *Sofia*.[16]

Dominic also published *Our Shadowed World: Reflections on Civilization, Conflict and Belief* (2019) and *Horror and Hope: The Conflicted Legacy of Christianity* (2021).[17]

2027, *A Philosophy of Life*

Over the past 16 months, Paul Overend and Stephen Mitchell have commissioned and edited articles for a new book, now in production under the Iff label of Collective Ink, the publishers. The book is titled *A Philosophy of Life: The Spirituality of Don Cupitt*. The process has been both a steep learning experience and deeply rewarding.

The publication was planned from the time of Cupitt's death in 2025 to celebrate Don's contribution to the network and to encourage further engagement with his work. It aims to serve as a bridge between the general readership Cupitt sought to reach and teach and academic readers, thereby stimulating discussion to advance the study of Cupitt's philosophy. The purpose of the book is set out in the preface, which is reprinted on the next page.

The book explores Cupitt's philosophy in terms of ethics, spirituality, and religion. Cupitt's approach to philosophy developed from an ancient Greek and Roman tradition, in which philosophy was concerned with a way of life and ethics sought to imagine and articulate the "good life". Cupitt's work advances this philosophical wisdom tradition, but does so within a contemporary understanding of language and culture.

Cupitt's approach dissolves the divide between "philosophy" and "religion" within a democratic theological-philosophy of "Life". He develops both personal and social ethics of the good life in terms of expressive solar ethics and critical humanitarian ethics. The book traces Cupitt's spirituality through themes of asceticism, critical thinking, mysticism, and self-fashioning.

Contributions to the book were invited from those who knew Don Cupitt personally, knew his work well, or both. We have been delighted to bring together a range of contributors who together reflect the breadth of Cupitt's work. Those who have contributed chapters include the bestselling Secular Buddhist pioneer Stephen Batchelor[18] (whose work reflects Cupitt's in several ways), a number of academics — David Biernot, Christo Lombaard, Linda Woodhead, and Don Cupitt's Chinese translators, Zhicheng Wang and Caihong Zhu — and some Sea of Faith Network members — Andy Kemp, Philip Knight, and the editors, Stephen Mitchell, and me. There is also a moving personal reflection by David Boulton, reprinted with the permission of the editor of *Fourth R,* the Westar magazine, which serves as a perfect foreword.

We have received encouraging endorsements that will be printed in the book and on the book's webpages, which will be on the sofn.uk website nearer to the time of publication.

While contributors and editors have generously donated their time and expertise, the publication has been made possible by a generous anonymous donation. The profits from sales are therefore available to the Sea of Faith Network to advance its charitable educational work. We thank all supporters of the network for their financial support, which enables its charitable work to continue. We hope this publication will lead to future books and other educational materials, continuing to advance our educational work for both formal learning in schools and universities, and informal learning among people of all ages.

Paul Overend

A Philosophy of Life *is due out in June 2027, and will be available in shops and as an ebook. More information on the book — the contributors, contents, cover, and cost, and conference book launch — will follow in Sofia.*

Notes:

SOF and *Sofia* magazines listed below are all available at <https://sofn.uk/sofia/>

[1] Colin Crowder (ed.) *God and Reality: Essays on Christian Non-realism* (Mowbray 1997). Reviewed by Ronald Pearse, 'The Famous Five bat for 'Non-Realists'", *SOF*, 28 (1996), p. 15.

[2] Tony Windross, *Thoughtful Guide to Faith* (Christian Alternative Books, 2004). Reviewed by Ronald Pearse, *SOF,* 67 (2004), p. 15.

[3] David Boulton, *A Reasonable Faith: Introducing the Sea of Faith Network* (Sea of Faith Network, 1996) Available at < https://sofn.uk/library/introductory-articles/introductory-books/a-reasonable-faith/> Reviewed by Ronald Pearse, *SOF*, 28 (1997), p. 14.

[4] David Boulton & Anthea Boulton's *In Fox's Footsteps*, was reviewed by Alec Davison, 'Twentieth Century Fox', SOF, 33 (1998), pp. 18–19.

The Preface ~ from *A Philosophy of Life: The Everyday Spirituality of Don Cupitt* (due 2027)

Don Cupitt was a prolific philosopher and spiritual writer who developed a distinctive and remarkably coherent body of work. Over more than four decades, from the early 1970s to the mid-2010s, he wrote 52 sole-authored books (one of which appeared only in Chinese, some of which were reissued in English, or translated), along with many essays in journals and other multi-authored publications. His death in January 2025 invites a reconsideration and reappraisal of his project. What might we learn from his philosophy and his enthusiasm for life?

This collection of essays brings together scholars, spiritual writers, and leading members of the Sea of Faith Network to begin this reconsideration and reappraisal. Our aim has been to bridge the gap between academic engagement with Cupitt's work and the general readers for whom Cupitt wrote, for Cupitt offers an academic critique of religion, theology, and philosophy, while also promoting a life-enhancing religious philosophy and spiritual worldview as a secular religious writer. The contributors bring to the fore themes not widely appreciated in the critical reception of his work hitherto, as the doctrinal and ecclesiological agendas of Cupitt's early critics and the commercial agendas of the sensationalising press shaped the later reception.

As editors, we have been delighted to work with contributors, some of whom knew Cupitt personally, and all of whom know his writings well. The chapters and the willingness to collaborate on them have been life-enhancing for us and have enabled us to engage with Cupitt's ideas and see his life-project in a new light.

We hope the collection will stimulate further engagement with Cupitt's work, advance critical engagement in scholarly circles, and encourage personal engagement, so that general readers might find encouragement and inspiration in this volume. We hope the contributions in this book will lead you back to the primary works to engage with Cupitt's writings yourself, to discover and share his enthusiasm, passion, and zest for life.

Paul Overend
Stephen Mitchell

David Boulton's *Gerrard Winstanley and the Republic of Heaven* (1999) was reviewed by Dinah Livingstone, 'Enabling Dreams' SOF, 44 (2000), pp. 19–20.

[5] David Perman reviewed David Boulton's *The Trouble with God*, and his edited *Godless for God's Sake — Nontheism in Contemporary Quakerism by 27 Quaker Nontheists* in *Sofia,* 78 (2006), pp. 22–3.

[6] Stephen Mitchell, *Agenda for Faith* (Sea of Faith Network, 1997) Available at <https://sofn.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/agendaforfaith.pdf>

[7] Reviewed by Mike Jenkins, 'All Worked Out, *Sea of Faith*, 31 (2023), pp. 9–10.

[8] Reviewed by Elizabeth Wilkinson, 'God, Self, History, Book', *Sea of Faith*, 32, pp. 13–14. This first appeared in *Quaker Monthly*, Jan 1998.

[9] Reviewed by Alison McRobb, *Sofia*, 82 (2007), p. 18.

[10] Reviewed by David Lambourn, 'Stephen Mitchell's *Past Perfect*', *Sofia,* 130 (2018), p. 24.

[11] Anne Horner, 'This is My Story', *Sea of Faith*, 19 (1994), p. 13.

[12] John Pearson, in Teresa Wallace (ed) *This is my Story* (Sea of Faith, 1998) p. 11.

[13] 'What the Papers Say', *SOF*, 51 (2002), p. 18.

[14] Reviewed by Anthony Freeman, 'This Life on Earth', *Sofia*, 96 (2010), p. 25.

[15] See <https://www.katabasis.co.uk/dinah.html>

[16] Reviewed by Dave Francis, 'From Monk to Modernity: The Challenge of Modern Thinking', *Sofia*, 118 (2015), p. 22.

[17] Reviewed by David Lambourn 'Dominic Kirkham's *Horror and Hope*, *Sofia*, 142 (2021), p. 25.

[18] Stephen Batchelor was a keynote speaker at a SoF Conference in 2013, notes of his address printed as 'A Secular Buddhist', *Sofia*, 110 (2013), 8-10. See <https://www.stephenbatchelor.org> for a list of key books, and for his latest, *Sofia,* 160, p. 16.

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