

sfla

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Love



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

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Sofia Editor: Paul Overend, editor@sofn.uk
Arts Editor: Ross McCrory, arts@sofn.uk
Books Editor: David Lambourn, books@sofn.uk
Letters Editor: Stephen Mitchell, letters@sofn.uk

contributions

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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 both fiction and non-fiction books
- letters, normally fewer than 200 words, or please liaise in advance

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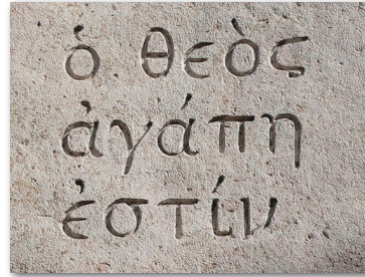
The statue of Anteros, cast in aluminium by Alfred Gilbert, is from the Shaftesbury Memorial Fountain in Piccadilly Circus. The greek God *Antérōs* (from *anti+éros*), who was Éros' brother, is sometimes called "The God of Selfless Love", though the statue was later renamed "The Angel of Christian Charity". It was erected 1892-93 to commemorate the philanthropic works of Anthony Ashley Cooper (1801–1885), the seventh Earl of Shaftesbury. The image is Public Domain - <https://pxhere.com/en/photo/927158>

Love

editor@sofn.uk

This edition of *Sofia* is inspired by the third of the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and love, which derive from the Pauline epistles (I Thess. 1. 3, 5. 8; I Cor. 13. 13). We take a fresh look at the theme of love, noting Don Cupitt's observation that,

God now functions in religious language principally as a symbol of the authority of religious values and claims. God is love. The power of God is the power of love, and moral commitment to God is moral commitment to the way of love.¹



God is love. I John 4. 8

St Francis of Assisi

This edition of *Sofia* coincides with the eight centenary of St Francis of Assisi's death, on 3 October 1226. Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardone (b.1181/2), nicknamed Francis (*Francesco*) by his father Pietro di Bernardone, is remembered for embodying the virtues of faith, hope, and love. Pope Francis' encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* describes Francis as the 'saint of fraternal love, simplicity, and joy'.²

For Francis, Jesus' life and teaching were the Gospel. Identification with Jesus, without compromise, shaped Francis' heart and life. However, early accounts of Francis, such as the primary and secondary *Vita Sancti Francisci* and a collection of miracle stories by Thomas of Celano, were written within a few years of Francis' death to inspire the new order (*The Ordo Fratrum Minorum*, or 'Order of Lesser Brothers') and to defend it against the ecclesiastical criticism that other reform movements had encountered. Such accounts view Francis through hagiographic lenses, using the chivalric romance language of the troubadours' era as a vehicle for piety.

This has made it difficult if not impossible to separate the historical man from hagiographical myth, but the intellectualising historicity of modernity might not be a fruitful approach to Francis anyway.

Liberation theologian Leonardo Boff commends Francis as an archetype, a humanistic ideal, who 'belongs not only to Christianity but to all human-kind'.³

Boff notes that Francis lived at a turning point in social history and was a corrective to the economic and ideological systems.

His was an age of early scholasticism (Lanfranc, Anselm, Peter Abelard, Peter Lombard) and of mercantile capitalism (his cloth-merchant father was one of the emerging bourgeoisie). Yet Francis challenged the prevailing emphases on *lógos* (reason) and *téchnē* (craft, trade), of scholastic learning and utilitarian economic rationality, with a humanised *érōs* (love) and *páthos* (feeling, affectivity), of loving-tenderness and compassion. He made the liberating choice of foolishness and a poverty rooted in the Gospel, identifying with Christ and with the oppressed 'poor of God' (Hebrew *anawim*), in fraternal equality, wonder and joy.

In our own age, marked by systemic change brought about by AI and the failures of extractive capitalism — ecological collapse, global economic inequality, and wars over resources — Francis' voluntary simplicity of life and confraternalisation with nature commend him again, as a model of sanity and environmentalism.

In a feature for Francis's anniversary, Anglican Franciscan priest Edward Owen TSSF writes for us about his experience of living the Franciscan charism in accordance with the vows of the Tertiary Franciscan Religious Order.

Contents

An opening article in this edition examines how three twentieth-century writers approached the theme of love, shaped by their distinct theological perspectives.

Our new Arts Editor, Ross McCrory, explores the film *Living* (2022). The film contains a theme of conversion, with a shift in life orientation from selfishness to service, from self-preservation to a public mission. He also curates creative artworks that support reflections on our theme.

Other pieces explore religion and worldviews. In the 'Lived Religion' column, Ben Wood explains how he navigates religion, with dual membership of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) and the neo-Druid organisation The Order of Bards,

Ovates, and Druids. Martin Spence reviews a conference hosted by the McDonald Centre for Theology, Ethics, and Public Life on various traditions of humanism. Dave Francis writes for our 'Network Matters' column on the network's work in religious education.

The edition also includes a selection of stimulating and tempting book reviews that have been submitted, with more to follow in future editions.

Photo Credits

p. 1 The Greek engraving, which translates *hó theós agápē éstin*, is from the rear of "The Book of Love among People" (*Il Libro delle Genti*), by the Italian sculptor Vincenzo Bianchi.

The text, which is carved in Greek, Latin, and Arabic, is from the epistle of John: 'Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.' (I John 4. 8 NRSV). On the front (shown right), the Latin inscription reads, '*Unus Deus Pater Omnium Super Omnes*', abbreviating Ephesians 4. 6 (Vulg.): 'one God and Father of all, [who is] above all [and through all and in all].' (NRSV).

The 5.5-meter-high stele is on Mount Nebo, near the



northern end of the Dead Sea in Jordan (formerly the land of Moab), which is believed to be the ridge from which Moses saw 'the land of Gilead' in Canaan, before he died (Deut. 34–4).

The monument, which commemorates the Jubilee 2000 and the visit of Pope John Paul II, celebrates the close spiritual affinity of the Jewish Torah, the Muslim Koran, and the Christian Gospel.

p. 2 Photo "Stone monument of the three monotheistic religions" by John Romano D'Orazio (27 June 2018). CC BY-SA 4.0 https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Stone_monument_of_the_three_monotheistic_religions.jpg

Notes

¹ Don Cupitt, *The World to Come* (SCM, 1982), p. 20.

² Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, 'All Brothers: on fraternity and social friendship', §2. Available at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html [accessed 20 June 2026]

³ Leonardo Boff, *Francis of Assisi: A Model for Human Liberation*, Translated by John W. Dierckxmeier (Orbis, 1982/2006), p. x.



Meet us by Zoom for a discussion on the third Wednesday of each month at 7 pm. Our discussions usually, but not invariably, begin with a presentation.

Previous presentations and some discussion are available to view on our website:

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

Meetings: September–November

- 16 September: A Philosophy of Love, with Jeremy Carrette.

Jeremy Carrette is Head of the School of Divinity at the University of Edinburgh, and Professor of Philosophy, Religion and Culture. In 2023-24, he was instrumental in organising conferences to celebrate the anniversaries of *Honest to God*, and of *Sea of Faith*.

- 21 October: Local and Other Small Sea of Faith Groups, with group convenors/facilitators and members of groups

Exploring the use of face-to-face and online groups for support and conversation.

- 18 November: On Jewish music, with Hannah Kieve
Hanna Kieve is Head of Music at Alyth Synagogue and a PhD candidate at the University of Cambridge, bringing together practical and academic work in Jewish music, focusing on liturgy, migration, and cultural memory in the diaspora.

For further details about the speakers and introductions, and for Zoom links to the meetings and to be included in future mailings please email: inconversation@sofn.uk.

Three Early Twentieth Century Theologies of Love

Nygren's *Agape and Eros*, Lewis's *The Four Loves*, and Fromm's *The Art of Loving*

by Paul Overend

The early twentieth century produced radically different theological engagements with love in response to a crisis of cultural change.

Among the most influential explorations of love were Anders T.S. Nygren's *Agape and Eros* (1930; 1936; English translation, 1953), Clive S. Lewis's *The Four Loves* (1960), and Erich S.P. Fromm's *The Art of Loving* (1956). They all insist that love confronts the deepest questions of human existence. Their answers differ because they arise from distinct theological, philosophical, and social assumptions about human nature, desire, transcendence, and God.

Anders Nygren

The Swedish Lutheran theologian and bishop, Nygren, argues for an understanding of Christian love, *agápē*, that is set in opposition to the Greek notion of love, *éros*.



His book *Agape and Eros: a study of the Christian idea of love*, identifies *éros*, *nomos*, and *agápē* motifs as characteristic of Hellenism, Judaism, and Christianity, respectively. While all three are present in Christianity, he considers *agápē* to be the distinctive Christian conception of love, whereas the *nomos* (law) motif reflects Jewish influence on the Apostolic Fathers and Christian Apologists, and the *eros* motif reflects Greek influence on Patristic Christianity and later mysticism.

Éros, Nygren explains, is found in Greek mystery religions and philosophy, and is exemplified in the ascent of the soul in Plato's *Symposium*. In Nygren's account, this ascending *éros* is acquisitive: it seeks fulfilment, beauty, perfection, or union. It is motivated by the value of its object, desires what it lacks, and aims at the satisfaction or completion of the lover.

In contrast, *agápē* is spontaneous, selfless, and value-creating through love. It doesn't respond to value but creates it. *Agápē* reflects God's love for humanity, characterised by grace, a divine gift. God does not love us because we are worthy; we are justified because God loves us. Thus, *agapē* is a moral ideal, modelling self-giving, self-transcending, sacrificial love that arises from love itself, not desire or need.

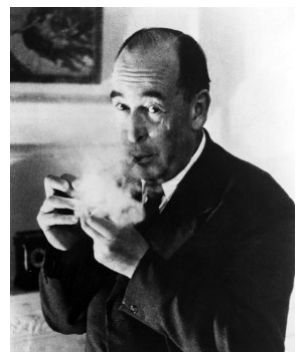
Nygren interprets Christianity as a revolution in the history of love. He rejects attempts to synthesise *éros* and *agápē* in spirituality, and so criticises Augustine of Hippo and later mysticism for importing Greek metaphysics and neoplatonic yearning into Christianity. In Nygren's view, the desire for completion, union, or joy is self-motivated, or even selfish. But human beings do not ascend towards God through striving, or by the longing love (as in *The Cloud of Unknowing*); rather, love is God's initiative, and is demonstrated by Jesus. This theological position reflects a Protestant emphasis on *sola gratia*: salvation originates entirely in God's goodness and initiative, a grace directed towards the unworthy sinner.

Nygren's work is shaped by his Lutheran background. It emphasises the distinction between law and grace, justification by divine grace alone, God's love independent of human worth, and the prioritisation of the New Testament over church history. His work reflects the Protestant discontinuity between divine holiness and fallen humanity.

Nygren's characterisation of Judaism as law (*nomos*) and his opposition of *agápē* and *éros* are problematic, however. Regarding Judaism, he overlooks covenant love and mercy in the Hebrew Bible. And in the Greek Septuagint translation of the Hebrew scriptures, *agápē* translates a variety of Hebrew words for love. *Agápē* is used, for instance, in the Song of Songs where it conveys the longing of *éros*: 'By night on my bed I sought him whom my soul loves: I sought him, but found him not; I called him, but he hearkened not to me' (Song of Songs, 3.1). In Christianity, divine love models and commands ethical self-giving, but when natural desire and delight, longing and passion are removed from love, this ethic is moralistic.

C.S. Lewis

In *The Four Loves*, author and Anglican theologian C.S. Lewis offers an integrated account of human and divine love. Lewis explores how human affection (*storgē*), friendship or "brotherly love" (*philia*), and romantic love (*éros*) can participate in and be transformed by divine love (*agápē*).



Lewis believes natural loves are good but can become dangerous when treated as ends in themselves or substitutes for God. Romantic love can become idolatrous; friendship elitist; affection possessive. These natural loves require transformation by *agápē*, the highest love. Human desire is therefore not inherently a sinful, selfish striving, for Lewis: *Éros* can become holy when ordered and perfected by *agápē*.

Furthermore, human love can be the means through which divine love is mediated. In Lewis's Anglican theology, love fulfils joy and can make creaturely desire holy when ordered rightly. Earthly beauty awakens desire for something infinite that finite objects can't satisfy, so longing can be a sign of humanity's orientation towards God, pointing beyond itself towards transcendence. God is the fulfilment of creaturely joy. This sacramental and participatory theological vision is closer to Augustine and Thomas Aquinas than to Lutheran dialectics. Lewis's understanding of love preserves the emotional dimensions of religious life, with friendship, delight, beauty, and longing all becoming pathways to transcendence.

However, Lewis's fourfold taxonomy reifies fluid phenomena. And the Greek terms are not historically reconstructed but theologically interpreted to stress the primacy of *agápē*, while making it ethically prescriptive.

Erich Fromm

Social psychologist and psychoanalyst Erich Fromm explored the theme of love in his bestselling book *The Art of Loving* (1956), which has sold over 25 million copies. In it, he developed and integrated ideas he had explored earlier in *The Dogma of Christ* (1930) and *Psychoanalysis and Religion* (1950) on religion; in *Escape from Freedom* (1941) and *The Sane Society* (1955) on social psychology and Marxist social critique; and in *Man for Himself* (1947) on humanistic ethics.

The Art of Loving integrates and develops these themes. It considers love primarily as a relational practice, rather than through fixed conceptual distinctions, and gives attention to the social conditioning of love.

According to Fromm, love — specifically, the relatedness involved in loving well — is the answer to our existential situation, which is characterised by alienation, isolation, and narcissism. These are experienced not as the result of a sinful disordering of desire and instinctual drives, but as the outcome of market capitalism, which has a commodifying

influence on “social consciousness”. But where relationships are viewed as exchanges in a “personality market”, love is sought either in submission, with people focusing on becoming lovable (marketing themselves as likeable or desirable), or in escaping isolation (through the intoxicating experience of romance or sexual pleasure), rather than in learning how to love. The consequence has been further anxiety, shame, and loneliness, rather than overcoming isolation through genuine relationships. For Fromm, love is not a passive affect or consumable experience, but an art that needs to be learned.

Genuine love is characterised by reason, love, and freedom. It involves psychological integration and is an achievement of a mature personality. A psychologically mature person transcends ego-centred isolation without destroying individuality through the learned art of love.

In *Man For Himself*, Fromm explores love of others and self-love, characterising genuine love as “productive” (Latin *pro-ducere*, ‘bringing forth’), in that it demonstrates ‘care, responsibility, respect, and knowledge’ and enables others’ flourishing. *The Art of Loving* extends this productive orientation from brotherly love, which is ‘human solidarity’ directed towards every human being, to motherly love, which is unconditional; to erotic love, which is exclusive; to self-love, the affirmation of one’s own life; and to the love of God, though this needs unpacking.



Like Nygren and C.S. Lewis, Fromm's understanding of love is rooted in religion and theology. He trained in Talmud and Jewish mysticism with some of the leading Jewish thinkers in Germany before WWII, and even considered becoming a Talmud teacher, but he later abandoned theistic belief. However, he has been called a “religious atheist” because he remained a deeply religious thinker. His explorations in theology and religion include Spinoza's philosophy, Eckhart's mysticism, Zen Buddhism, and Daoism. He views religions, spiritualities, and worldviews as ‘frames of orientation and devotion’ that meet our existential need for meaning and purpose.¹

In contrast to Nygren, Fromm rejects a theology of the fall and of salvation by grace, rethinking religion humanistically in terms of reason, love, freedom, and productive existence. According to Fromm, the theological notion of “grace” perpetuates a matriarchal archetype of God as unconditional love, in which the human loved one is kept infantile, rather than responsible: ‘Motherly love is

love for the helpless.’² So where ‘God’s love is grace, the religious attitude is to have faith in this grace, to make oneself small and helpless’.³

Furthermore, a morality in which unconditional love becomes an obligation reflects a conditional patriarchal archetype that fosters not mature love but a desire to please God and earn divine approval. Authoritarian religion emphasises obedience, submission, fear, guilt, and dependence on external authority. God is seen as a projection of authoritarian power. This type of religion reinforces passivity, dependency, and alienation.

By contrast, mature love is characterised by authenticity, which liberates us from both narcissism and idolatry. Commenting on Genesis 3. 5b, ‘you will be like God, knowing good and evil’, Fromm interprets Eve’s “disobedience” as an act of self-liberation, the first realisation of the human capacity to become God. This recognition of awareness and choice points to a messianic orientation in prophetic striving and human self-realisation.⁴ This humanistic religion is a mature stage in the evolution of religion,

where God ceases to be an outside power, where man[kind] has incorporated the principles of love and justice into himself, where he has become one with God, and eventually [...] speaks of God only in a poetic, symbolic sense.⁵

For Fromm, God symbolises our deepest spiritual orientation, ultimate concern, and the highest possibilities of reason and love. God is not a Being, but symbolises a way of humane love and authentic life. We are not, therefore, estranged from God by sin, but estranged from our productive potential by our contemporary political economy. ‘To love God ... then, [is] to long for the attainment of the full capacity to love, for the realisation of that which “God” stands for in oneself.’⁶

Fromm’s humanistic spirituality thus reframes salvation as love. Love overcomes alienation: it involves psychological integration and self-realisation, and contributes to productive social transformation. Such religious and theological thinking anticipates later radical theology, religious existentialism, religious humanism, and post-theistic spirituality and, today, still compliments others’ work.

Conclusion

All three writers view modern civilisation as spiritually or psychologically distorted and understand love to require a self-transformation that involves transcendence. Their disagreements ultimately arise from their differing theological conceptualisations of love, desire, care and salvation.

Nygren’s Protestant dialectical theology posits a discontinuity between God and humanity. He

believes love must be free from self-seeking and locates ultimate love in God’s sovereign grace towards sinners, giving a Christian ethical ideal, that models an demanding moral requirement.

Lewis’ Christian humanism entails a sacramental participation in divine life, treating nature and grace as continuous. He believes that desire can be purified and elevated by grace, for divine love fulfils and transforms natural desire without destroying it, making human longing a pathway towards God.

Fromm’s humanism focuses on the integration of mature individuals and authentic loving relationships that overcome narcissistic isolation. Love is the art of relationship, the highest expression of mature human existence, and God is a symbol of genuine love and authentic integration.

These varied conceptualisations of love are theologically incompatible. Nygren’s and Lewis’ works have so shaped understandings of Christian love that they are taken uncritically as truisms, perpetuating their underlying theologies. However, Fromm’s work on love, religion, and mature spirituality addresses well our existential and spiritual situation today.

The renewed interest in Fromm’s work this century, reflected in biographies and publications on critical theory and psychotherapy, is a promising recognition of his contribution through his multidisciplinary writings to contemporary considerations of market capitalism, authoritarianism, nationalism, and socialism. His theological contribution to these issues merits similar recognition.

Photo Credits and Notes

Anders Nygren (c. 1950s), https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Anders_Nygren.jpg [accessed 1 July 2026]

C.S. Lewis smoking by John S. Murry (c. 1957) https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:CS_Lewis_photo_on_dust_jacket.jpg [accessed 1 July 2026]

Erich Fromm (1974) by Müller-May (CC BY-SA 3.0 DE) https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Erich_Fromm_1974.jpg [accessed 1 July 2026]

¹ Erich Fromm, *Man for Himself*, ch. 3.1.b; *Psychoanalysis and Religion* (Yale, 1950), pp. 21–22; *Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1973), pp. 230–2.

² Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (Harper Colophon, 1956), p. 52.

³ Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, p. 66.

⁴ Erich Fromm, *You Shall Be as Gods: A Radical Interpretation of the Jewish Tradition* (Open Road Media, 1966), ch. VI.3.

⁵ Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, p. 81.

⁶ Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* p. 71.



Committed to Love

Living Franciscan vows in the world

by Edward Owen TSSF

What is the value of taking vows from a human perspective? Do they matter? Have we, as human beings, simply grown beyond being bound by promises? These are important questions I'd like to consider. Put simply, a vow is a commitment to a promise or belief, meant to be taken seriously and to be life-changing. In my case, the vows I wish to focus on are those I have taken as a member of the Third Order of the Society of St Francis.

This October marks the 800th anniversary of the death of St Francis of Assisi. The Third Order of St Francis is an Anglican Religious Order comprising people who are married and single, young and old, all committed to living in the spirit of St Francis today. We commit ourselves to living in accordance with a Rule of Life¹ whilst living in our own homes, working in the community and caring for our families.

The Three Aims

The initial draw to the order, for me, was its Three Aims:

- To make our Lord Jesus Christ known and loved everywhere
- To spread the spirit of love and harmony
- To live simply

These three radical aims are deeply intertwined, and I would argue that St Francis is truly a saint for the radicals. Through these aims, the Order encourages me to undertake the difficult work of embracing my full humanity and the humanity of others. Francis is truly a saint for our times, as we consider the work of peacemaking, interfaith work and a more radical understanding of simple living.

Living out these aims has brought about some simple yet profound changes in my life. I was drawn to the order as a university student, seeking something to ground me as I discerned a vocation to ordained ministry. I had been a vegetarian since the age of seven, but when I was drawn into discernment for formation as a tertiary, I was led towards veganism as I considered the notes and ideals of the order. This was, for me, an example of the two aims of spreading the spirit of love and

harmony and of living simply. The evolution of my vocation led me to become a secondary school teacher of Religious Studies in my twenties, and it was here that many of the order's practical ideas were put to the test. Foremost among these were compassion and understanding. I taught in a post-industrial valley community where people were worn down by pain and loss, so spreading the gift of love and harmony was important.

The Three Ways of Service

Alongside the Three Aims of the order come the Three Ways of Service. As someone on the more radical liberal wing of the Church, one of the fundamental questions I often ask is what difference any of this makes. The Three Aims are where this is put into practice. The Three Ways of Service are prayer, study and work. For me, the vow to pray is about self-recollection, drawing on the rich seams of spiritual tradition to be more effective in my humanity. The way of study has drawn me into deeper knowledge of self, especially through the study of other religious traditions, which has helped me understand that the whole of humanity asks the same fundamental questions. Encapsulated within this are questions of justice and peace and of the use and distribution of wealth. The third way of service is work, and this vow prompts careful reflection on the work undertaken. After much discernment, I

pursued a vocation as an Anglican Priest, working in a variety of contexts and focusing on enabling, team-building and growth in spiritual depth and deepening religious practice.

St Francis is
truly a saint
for the radicals

The Three Notes

The Three Notes of the order, namely humility, love and joy, frame fruitfulness and human flourishing. Humility teaches that if we are grounded and rooted, we are truly able to flourish and grow. It also helps us to contemplate the difficult aspects of ourselves, including the tendency to remove the speck from another's eye without considering the log in our own. Joy helps us appreciate the simple things in life. The cultivation of joy in nature, so loved by St Francis and transmitted throughout the history of the order, is truly life-giving. Joy teaches me that we can find cheerful courage when we face heartbreak and disappointment, and calm and a

resolute spirit when things are not going quite as well as we might hope.

One of the key characteristics of the Third Order is positivity — towards the world, the work of reconciliation, and the joy of human life. Part of the order's objects is to live in the spirit of poverty, chastity and obedience. The practical working out of these is, for me, predominantly about the ethical standards to which I see myself as being held. Yes, it might look very different from those of a Brother or Sister in the First or Second Order, but these are nonetheless standards to which, as tertiaries, we are accountable. Our aim as tertiaries is to spread the spirit of love and harmony throughout the world. This is a direct call to fight against prejudice and to work for a world where there is equity for all. In practical terms, this has meant my working for equality for women in ordained ministry and championing equal marriage.

The Primacy of Love

All of the things mentioned so far are about the primacy of love. It is this primacy of love that inspired St Francis. The initial misunderstanding of “Go, rebuild my church” gives way to a life-giving call concerned with the liberation of humanity from anger, war, hatred and selfishness, and with a way of reconciliation, love and selflessness. Brother Ramon SSF writes in *Franciscan Spirituality* about Ecology and Reconciliation in a way that promotes the dignity of creation and warns us very carefully about the desecration of the world.² In the words of Wendell Berry, ‘In such desecration, we condemn ourselves to spiritual and moral loneliness and others to want.’³



The vowed life is, in essence, about moving ourselves away from spiritual and moral loneliness and finding greater purpose. St Francis renunciation preceded his being joined by the company of others. That company has evolved through the many dramatic changes the world has undergone, but the calling itself remains as radical. The call is one of renouncing the false self and embracing a greater hope. That greater hope calls for living to a better ethical standard. For me, the calling is one of paradox, not contradiction; it is the call to love, to love myself, to love other human beings in all their diversity, and to love the created world. The benefit of that calling, lived out in the community of tertiaries, is that it is not an isolated or lonely calling; it is the calling of mutual accountability and understanding.

This eight hundredth anniversary of the death of St Francis will be celebrated by those in the order and by many beyond its boundaries. It is fitting that his example of simplicity, love and reconciliation continues to inspire so many people today to strive for a better world.

Edward Owen TSSF is Vicar in the Garth Ministry Area in the Diocese of Llandaff and Diocesan Spirituality Office. He is a member of the Cardiff and Gwent group of Franciscan Tertiaries, and a member of the Sea of Faith.

Photo Credit

p.7 St Francis of Assisi, by Joey Whisperz, CC BY-SA 4.0. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Life_of_Francis_of_Assisi.jpg. Whisperz's painting depicts the account of Francis' mystical encounter with the seraphs at mount La Verna (from accounts by Thomas of Celano, Brother Leo, and St Bonaventure), in which Francis was marked with the wounds of Christ's love, the stigmata. The account points to Francis' complete identification with Christ.

Notes

¹Third Order (European Province) Society of St Francis, *The Manual* (2001)

See: 'The Principles of the Third Order'. <https://tssf.org.uk/tssf-downloads/about-the-third-order/the-principles-of-the-third-order/> [accessed 23 July 2021]

²Brother Ramon SSF, *Franciscan Spirituality: Following St Francis Today*, 2nd edition (SPCK, 2008).

³Wendell Berry, *The Gift of Good Land: Further Essays Cultural and Agricultural* (New York: North Point Press, 1981), p.281.

Living: A Reminder to Love (in) this World

A film exhorting us to serve one's community with love

Review by Ross McCrory, Arts Editor

Living is a 2022 film, directed by Oliver Hermanus and written by Nobel Prize-winning author Kazuo Ishiguro. It was inspired by Akira Kurosawa's 1952 film *Ikiru*, which was, itself, a retelling of Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*.

When Ishiguro won the Nobel Prize for literature in 2017, it was for a body of work which 'uncovered the abyss beneath our illusory sense of connection with the world.'¹ Given the theme of this issue of *Sofia*, an exploration of efforts towards true connection- or 'love', both in and for the world- will be the core of my analysis of *Living*. In what follows, I shall draw out a few relevant ideas, as a way of encouraging you to seek out and watch the film yourself, if you can. Unavoidably, I will cover much of the plot in what follows, so I warn you of that now. Fortunately, I do not believe that existing knowledge of the story will spoil your appreciation of the piece, artistically or philosophically.

The setting of the film provides an important context for the action and some explanation for the relationships that form the crux of the narrative. We find ourselves in 1950s London, and tropes about suburbia and the rituals of its commuters abound in the opening scenes. The popular memory of postwar ennui is intentionally foregrounded. This is the stifling, repressed world of hierarchy and social expectation, of people seen as anonymous cogs in a larger machine; as automatons ruled by the clock and governed by strict customs and mores.

This atmosphere being established, we meet Bill Nighy's middle-management bureaucrat, Mr Williams, of the Public Works Department in London's County Hall. As you might imagine, the Council's processes are presented not just as labyrinthine but deliberately circuitous and purpose-built for inertia. Mr Williams' own attitude is the apogee of this approach. Whenever new proposals cross his desk, he responds 'we can keep it here for now, it won't do any harm.' As a colleague of my own recently recalled, from their time in a similar institution, the feeling amongst the workers is that stalling decision-making offers one an easy life: 'the longest way round is the

quickest way home.'

As the film progresses, we discover more about the emptiness and rigidity of Mr Williams' life, at home as much as in the office, and some events in his past are alluded to, by way of explanation for his yearning for order and a lack of excitement. Nevertheless, in a particularly moving interaction with his son and daughter-in-law, we also realise that, in truth, he has a need to be needed and a desire to be in community. Sadly, a combination of personal and social circumstances have left him not knowing how to articulate or act upon these feelings. As E.M. Forster has it, would that he could 'only connect.' That is, connect more deeply with the world around him but also connect his head and his heart; his intellect and his emotions.²

how do I live? ...
how can I really live
and feel the worth
of experiencing the
world?.

The film's first turning point away from this presentation of a safe, staid existence comes when Mr Williams receives some news which jolts him into asking the question: how do I live? By which he means, how can I really live and feel the worth of experiencing the world? He finds the first impetus for that new way of being, perhaps echoing classics of English literature, in an unexpected place. Somewhere deliberately away from London and the subtle oppression of his neighbours, his colleagues and the very landscape.³ He goes to the seaside. Here, in what seems to be a world built only on frippery and frivolity, he finds emotional truth and the freedom to express himself. In apparently seedy bars, he finds real life growing in the forgotten cracks of 1950s society, like wildflowers breaking through a pavement. The implication is that there is vitality to be found in the margins, even though there is hardship, because there is a kind of liberation from expectations. Notwithstanding, the hardship itself breeds a necessarily reciprocal community lifestyle. Mr Williams realises that breaking some of the rules imposed on him by the system he inhabits need not be considered 'wicked.' In the right circumstances, subverting boundaries is the healthy thing to do. It can be an expression of love.

After this 'pilgrimage' to the sea, Mr Williams is further awakened to the benefits inherent in the

formation of real connections. He begins to understand more of what it means to live truly in and amongst the world. This education comes at the hands of his colleague, Miss Harris. They eschew the gossip and assumptions about the nature of their association and form a fruitful plutonic friendship. She reveals to him the value of depth, honesty and generosity in one's relationships and helps him to gain a real 'appetite for life.' She reaffirms that it is possible to find wonder and joy, even in seemingly quotidian things. Essentially, Mr Williams might be said to have experienced a dark night of the soul, after which he realises, to borrow from Dylan Thomas, that he does not want to 'go gentle' towards his end.⁴ He will not be a passive 'zombie' any more, as Miss Harris had been wont to call him. He will really live. In fact, eventually, it is Mr Williams who realises that there is 'heaven in [the] ordinary' more readily than his younger colleague.⁵

Upon returning from these adventures and coming back to his desk, Mr Williams has a plan for embodying his desire to live and love more fully, by using his knowledge and power to help those on the margins. His old, internal barriers have been torn down, and nor will he allow the barriers placed in his way by his institution to hamper his progress. He uses his skills, connections and status to greater and more positive effect than perhaps he has ever done before. He works with passionate alacrity towards his new goal: to build a children's playground in an abandoned bomb site.

This mission fills him with purpose, energy and urgency. He even uproots his colleagues, all of whom are as stuck and suffocated as he once was, by forcing them out of the office to view the site itself. This literal change of scene is also a symbolic moment of transition. The men have to walk

through rubble, rain and dirty water to reach their target. They have to cross a threshold, and this is not easy. It takes time and effort. Nevertheless, Mr Williams sees the potential for new life on the other

side of this threshold. In the course of working on his new project, he does, indeed, form real relationships with those he meets and generates a sense of camaraderie amongst all involved. Perhaps unlike even the reformed Ebenezer Scrooge, Mr Williams' actions are not simply pater-

nalistic and nor do they idolise certain presentations of hardship. They are dialogic. He has the bravery to discard social norms and, instead, he acts from a place of equanimity and love. In fact, given the portrait of Mr Williams we are shown in the first third of the film, it might be just as significant that he acts at all. It is telling that simply doing 'no harm' is no longer good enough for him. He wants to stoop down from his position of apparent authority, get amongst the messiness of life and do something worthwhile.

During these scenes of high activity, Ishiguro appears to preempt some typical criticism of those who do good works to 'brighten the corner where [they] are', to quote the popular American hymn.⁶ Mr Williams himself recognises that one playground is just that: one playground. He knows that his work will always be incomplete, and he leaves room for it to fall into disrepair or be superseded. Nevertheless, he doesn't allow that to deter him from his efforts or detract

from the value that the playground can have, in the moment. He can envisage the impact of his project for the personal-social development of the local children. The playground will not stand for all eternity but, whilst it serves those it is built to serve, it will be a place of joy, creativity and real community. Therefore, whatever comes next, it still has value and can provide satisfaction for Mr



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Williams and the children for whom it is built.

I would suggest that this makes the bombsite playground an icon of progressive, liberal, free-religious community. It is intentionally provisional, and no-one working on it has any illusions of it being something everlasting. It is a grassroots movement, albeit one formed by the coming together of the right mix of people, at the right time. It works in and for a specific context, but that doesn't prohibit it from having a ripple effect elsewhere or, via those who visit, an impact on the future. It is formed in the cracks and the forgotten places, outside the mainstream. It is focused on building real community and it is a crucible for childlike imagination and creativity. As such, there is a vitality and even a healthy wildness to it.

The film itself invites us to see playgrounds like this, as symbols of something beyond their literal purpose, but it is also true that building playgrounds for children was another trope of 1950s council work. Even at the time, there was a utopian element to the idea of these new recreational spaces- perhaps particularly when they were erected in bombsites — which contributed to certain, future-focused attitudes towards children and childhood.⁷ The bombsite playground, then, definitely tells us something about what it means to express love in and for this world.

Later in the film, Mr Williams' disciples, as it were, continue his mission. They each claim that, like him, they will not be beset by doubts, or by pressures from their superiors. They all commit to actively working towards their predecessor's ideal. Love, after all, is a verb. It's something you do. Sadly, although perhaps inevitably, Mr Williams' colleagues do not maintain their commitment to a better world, as symbolised by the playground. In the 'grind' of their daily tasks, they soon descend into their old ways. Ironically, though, there is still a fight to take the credit for Mr Williams' project when it is finished. Nevertheless, these reactions are understandable. Perhaps they even represent a typical pattern for spiritual and social justice movements, when the original leader is no longer there to hold the group together. The weight of a whole society is telling Public Works that there is no alternative to business as usual. Indeed, even if some of us have moved beyond putting the founders of our respective spiritual movements on pedestals, at the expense of future progress, I suspect we are not immune to the pressures Ishiguro presents either. In fact, the film is implicitly asking us to confront that possibility. Might we feel the same stultifying weight, for instance, in our liberal religious work, or our work to fight climate change? In these two arenas, and many others besides, there are plenty of forces telling us that the

job is too big and our efforts too small, that things cannot change, that they do not really need to, or that we are foolish for thinking there is any great appetite for change anyway.

Fortunately, the film itself ends on a note of hope. Mr Wakeling, a more recent addition to the Public Works Department and through whose eyes we first see it, becomes frustrated that the energy Mr Williams inspired has dissipated and that the original group have dispersed. It is only Mr Wakeling who recognises the danger of their return to a listless approach to life and work. In response, he resolves that he will not allow Mr Williams' vision to be lost. A visit to the original playground proves energising and we are left with a feeling of potential. The memory of the project and the happiness it generated, for Mr Williams as much as for the children, acts as a spur for Mr Wakeling's own desire to do difficult, rewarding work. He will change himself and the world around him for the better. Just like a small playground in a bombsite, Mr Wakeling is only one sign of hope, but he is a sign nonetheless.

It is probably quite obvious now why the film is so entitled. The message is simple: one must find a purpose, get out there, and live! Live for oneself, and live for others; live for those around you now, for those in your past and for those far in the future. Live now, because this is the time we have. Mr Williams shows us that we have to live in spite of our limitations, beyond our fears and even beyond the sense that any positive change will be too little or too late. The central message is, quite literally, life-affirming.

In other hands, I admit, these messages would seem self-evident, even to the point of triteness. They would be platitudes and nothing more. However, the design of this film is so detailed — from the interspersal of particular pieces of music to the very deliberate choices of clothing and the well-conceived visions of each setting — and the acting is so deft, that the piece bears analysis and even repeat viewing. It is packed with rich and interesting symbolism.

To conclude, I draw the threads of this brief analysis together around the theme of this edition of *Sofia*. Mr Williams learns something about real, agapeic love and the building of an agapeic community. He gives of himself and crafts some genuine, deep and empathetic relationships. He realises that, if we can only learn to see this world differently, we can help to build that which has been called the Kingdom (kin-dom) of God or the Ideal Community. For Mr Williams, this aim is not abstract. It is not something one pursues instead of living fully now, or instead of being in the world. It is a result of living fully — here, now and today.



‘The Guatemala Masons’ (2004) by Cliff Polubinsky (Used with permission).

Cliff, an OCCA priest, woodworker, photographer and technician, has chosen some photos from his artistic portfolio for *Sofia*. On the theme of this particular edition, the photo above depicts a father teaching his son how to lay masonry. Of this photo, Cliff says:

It was shot on a Habitat for Humanity global build. The local chapter went to Guatemala once a year and I went on a couple of trips to document [their work]. Houses in Guatemala are built with cement blocks, instead of wood, because of the termites, and make heavy use of rebar because of the earthquakes. I love how hard the boy is concentrating.

You are invited to spend some time contemplating this image, and the way it speaks to you about ‘love in this world’, as a kind of ‘Visio Divina’.

Continued from previous page

Image Credits and Notes

Image p. 9: Promotional Poster, Lionsgate (fair use)

¹ ‘The Nobel Prize in Literature 2017’, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2017/summary/> [accessed 9 June 2026].

² Edward Morgan Forster, *Howards End* (David Morgan, 1992), p. 195.

³ Brian C. Southam, ‘Jane Austen beside the Seaside: An Introduction’, *Persuasions*, 32 (2010), pp. 167–172.

⁴ Dylan Thomas, ‘Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night’, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/>

46569/do-not-go-gentle-into-that-good-night [accessed 1 June 2026].

⁵ George Herbert, ‘Prayer (I)’, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44371/prayer-i> [accessed 1 June 2026].

⁶ Ina Dudley Ogden, ‘Do not wait until some deed of greatness you may do’ (1913) https://hymnary.org/text/do_not_wait_until_some_deed_of_greatness [accessed 01 June 2026].

⁷ For an example of scholarship along these lines, see Jon Winder, *Designed for Play: Children’s Playgrounds and the Politics of Urban Space, 1840–2010* (University of London Press, 2024).

One Humanism? Many Humanisms

'Reimagining Humanism: Religious Humanisms
as Frameworks for Building a Common Life in a Fractured World'

A conference report by Martin Spence

*The Annual Conference of the
McDonald Centre for Theology, Ethics,
and Public Life, University of Oxford,
Oxford, 11th – 13th June 2026'*

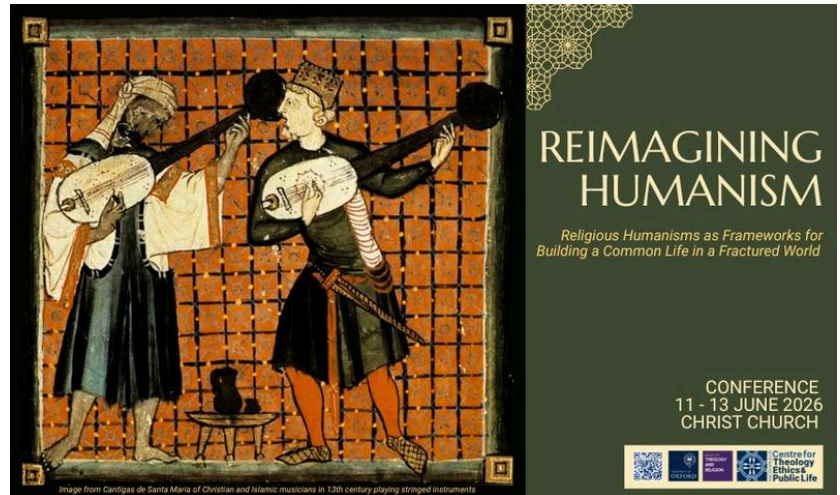
I learned of this conference on “religious humanisms” from a friend who knew of the humanist bee in my bonnet. Intrigued, I signed up. I’m glad I did.

The McDonald Centre in Oxford, which organised the event, describes itself as bringing together academics, the church, policymakers and civil society “to build more just, generous and democratic forms of common life and address the existential questions facing humanity today”. All of which is broadly congenial to most SoF members, I think.

Humanism: a contested concept

What intrigued me about this conference was its ambition to explore “religious humanisms” in the plural: not humanism but humanisms. This put me on my guard, because I have argued – in *Sofia*, among other places – that the term ‘humanism’ has a singular historical meaning, which has become confused by repeated attempts to hijack and redefine it. For instance, in the nineteenth century, Comte’s disciples seized upon ‘humanism’ as a label for the bizarre positivist religion he had just invented. And in the twentieth century, the ethical movement adopted the term when it rebranded itself as the overtly anti-religious British Humanist Association (recently rebranded again as Humanists UK). But the original meaning of humanism has nothing to do with hostility to religion. On the contrary, it was emphatically Christian. The origin of humanism lies in the Renaissance, in the scholarly interest in ‘human studies’ or ‘humanities’, especially history and philology, which took hold in western Europe from the fifteenth century. Given my commitment to this singular notion of humanism, a conference predicated on the existence of many different religious humanisms struck me as a challenge.

There were several intriguing papers, but I will focus on just two, which I hope will give a flavour of the event.



Islamic Humanism

Ufuk Topkara² emphasised the diversity of Islam. A key term was ‘entanglement’: throughout its history, Islam has been entangled with the other cultures and religions it has encountered, learning from them, resisting them, and contributing to them. Consequently, there is an enormous range of belief and practice within Islam today. Topkara, brought up in Germany, freely admitted his ignorance of Islam in Indonesia and south-east Asia, where most of the world’s Muslims live.

The main theme of his talk addressed the entanglement of Islam with Judaism, as he sought to frame an Islamic response to the Jewish philosopher Hermann Cohen. In *The Religion of Reason*, published in the early twentieth century, Cohen observed that we find ourselves in the world alongside others, and that it is open to us simply to live alongside them as *Nebenmensch* or neighbours. But, he argued, we only truly realise our humanity if we reach beyond this, transforming passive *Nebenmensch* into active *Mitmensch*, fellow humans to whom we are committed in compassion and love. For Cohen, all other human beings have the potential to become beloved *Mitmensch*. Topkara’s response to this was to endorse Cohen’s ambition to move beyond mere co-existence towards active community and compassion. But he balked at the word ‘love’. Topkara explained that, for him as a Muslim, ‘love’ refers not to a universal bond with all humanity, but to an intensely private bond with family and

the closest of friends. Here was a fascinating distinction between a Jewish thinker and a Muslim thinker in their different approaches to the human condition and their different senses of the boundary between intimacy and community.

African Christian Humanism

On a very different topic, Chammah Kaunda³ provided a fascinating analysis of the roots of present-day African Pentecostalism. He argued that it draws on the avowedly humanist ideology of mid-twentieth-century African independence, as represented by figures such as Kenneth Kaunda in Zambia and Julius Nyerere in Tanzania. For them, the concept of *ubuntu* was central: a philosophical and moral concept of 'relational being', of finding oneself through living and sharing with others. In the early decades of independence, this notion was repeatedly invoked and became embedded in popular consciousness. But it did so as a determinedly secular concept, neither transcendent nor other-worldly, rooting human meaning in worldly human being.

Kaunda argued that Pentecostalism has built on this secular communitarian ethos while giving it a radically Christian twist. It has accepted that human meaning is grounded in human being – while insisting that human being is exemplified by Jesus Christ. It has accepted that we only find ourselves through living and sharing with others – while insisting that 'others' means other members of the church, and that true life and sharing in the church entail commitment, baptism in the spirit, and speaking in tongues.

Humanisms in Plural

Overall, I came away feeling tempted to revise my position on the meaning of 'humanism'. I remain clear that the scholarly Christian humanism of the Renaissance was real and has left

an extraordinary cultural legacy. But this is perfectly compatible with recognising that Renaissance humanism was just one Christian approach to the human condition, and that Christianity has historically entertained other quite different approaches. In fact, we might interpret Christianity's doctrinal and theological arguments precisely as arguments about the human condition, about humanity's status and meaning. And if this is true of Christianity, why should it not be true of other religious traditions? And if it is true of these other traditions, and if we wish to find a single term to encompass these many entangled approaches to the human condition, then perhaps we should indeed refer to them as 'humanisms' – in the plural.

Martin Spence is Chair of the Sea of Faith Steering Group.

Renaissance humanism
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Notes

The McDonald Centre, rooted in Christian traditions of moral and political theology, work at the cross-roads of academia, church, and society to envision and help build more just, generous, and democratic

forms of common life. See

<https://mcdonaldcentre.web.ox.ac.uk>

Contributions from the 2026 conference will be published in a special issue of the *Journal of Religious Ethics* dedicated to religious humanisms as moral and political frameworks. The journal websites address is <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/14679795> [selected articles are open access].

¹The conference followed the 2025 gathering, 'Christian Humanism and the Black Atlantic,' which interrogated Christian humanism as it emerges in the Atlantic world from the fifteenth century, and explored Paul Gilroy's concept of "reparative humanism".

²Professor of Comparative Theology from an Islamic Perspective at the Berlin Institute for Islamic Theology, Humboldt University of Berlin.

³Academic Dean at the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies (OCMS).

Sea of Faith Network AGM ~ Wednesday 30th September 2026, 19.00 ~ by Zoom.

Sea of Faith members have a vital statutory role in shaping the work of the charity.¹ We therefore encourage all members to participate in the AGM, so that we have a required electoral quorum.

Sea of Faith Members will be sent details in due course, but subscribers and friends who are not yet members may join to support its work and help shape it. (See *Sofia* 161, p. 25, on membership.)

The network is dedicated to promoting gender and diversity inclusion and especially encourages SoF members from underrepresented social and religious groups to consider standing for elected positions.

Notes

¹<https://sofn.uk/governance/>
<https://sofn.uk/constitution/> - see Part II



Ben Wood

Programme Coordinator for Applied Theology and Biblical Studies
at The Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre

Q. Hi Ben. You have published articles and books on Quaker studies and ethics, most recently The Living Fountain: Remembrances of Quaker Christianity.¹ Can I ask what led you to into the world of Quaker studies?

This sounds a little grand, but most of my overtly Quaker academic writing has, in one way or another, emerged from a version of Anselm's formula: 'faith seeking understanding'.

In all that I've written, I've wanted to understand what the Quaker Way of waiting, seeing, and listening means, both personally and corporately. I've wanted to know how Quaker words, stories, and disciplines can resource a deeper understanding of prayer, relationships, and citizenship. One of the key driving forces behind these endeavours has been a desire to make the Religious Society of Friends comprehensible to me, and hopefully to others

Q. Your first book, based on your PhD, explored scepticism and liberalism in Augustine and Montaigne, challenging both anti-liberal readings of Augustine and fatalistic neoliberalism today. In brief, why was this subject matter of personal interest?

I began the doctoral project as the neoconservative Bush presidency ended and the Obama administration began. The global financial crisis was in full swing, with deflation and collapsing banks across Europe and the United States. In the back of my mind was a profound sense of unease. Many of the foundational norms of postwar liberal democracy had been badly damaged by the U.S. government's actions after 2001. The 'War on Terror', secret renditions, and torture at Abu Ghraib all suggested a profound moral malaise at the heart of the American state. The language of 'liberal democracy' was being used to justify rule-breaking, invasion, and the domestic surveillance of political opponents.

What I found so depressing about this period was that a great number of public theologians (many of whom I profoundly respect) had decided

that Liberal Democracy was a lost cause. Instead of coming to the defence of hard-won liberal norms such as tolerance, individual rights, freedom of conscience, and deliberative politics, some great minds had embraced a position of conscientious despair. Liberalism, they claimed, was atomistic, immoral, nihilistic and materialistic. Christians needed to disentangle themselves from this ideological nightmare and set about building a countercultural Church. I refused to accept this interpretation. I felt (and continue to feel) that Public Theology should be defending the best of liberal politics while being brave enough to challenge its excesses. I chose Augustine because of his vital role in so many latter-day anti-liberal theological projects. If I could show the liberal potentialities of Augustine, I thought, I would demonstrate the deep imaginative inadequacies of so many anti-liberal theological postures. I hope I succeeded.

Q. You have described yourself as a 'Quaker, theologian, teacher, Hedge Druid. Woodbrooke Programme Coordinator',² and in The Living Fountain state that,

Sitting on my bookshelf alongside Quaker Faith and Practice, one can find modern Druid, eco-theological and Wiccan authors.⁴

Yet, you say that are a 'liberal Quaker ... who refuses to jettison the depths of Christian imagination in the name of some bland generic "spirituality"'.³ Could you unpack how you integrate or navigate different religious traditions and identities as a Quaker, educator, and theologian?

One of the undoubted pleasures of living in a society suffused with liberal politics is the recognition that no single description of a person can ever be wholly exhaustive. We all 'contain multitudes'. My own nod to this inner diversity is my dual membership of the Religious Society of Friends and the neo-Druid organisation The Order of Bards, Ovates, and Druids. I find so much joyful complementarity between Druidry's unabashed reverence for an ordinary, all-suffusing sacred (in the landscape, in rivers, trees, and hills) and the Quaker tradition's insistence that every day is holy.



You asked about navigating different religious traditions. My theological appreciation for others' spiritual journeys stems primarily from my Quaker faith. From our earliest beginnings, Friends have affirmed that the Light which appeared in Jesus of Nazareth two millennia ago was already redeeming the cosmos long before the Infinite Light crystallised so magnificently in a human being. As Justin Martyr famously put it: '[Christ] is the Word of whom every race of men [are] partakers'. It seems to me that part of my job as a Quaker teacher is to seek out God's truth, regardless of who said it, where it was said, or how long ago it was discovered.

Unlike Justin's confident mode of apologetics, however, I think Christians need to show humility. In seeking the presence of Christ in others, we should sit carefully with the differences between traditions and communities, rather than attempting to flatten them into a mushy and disrespectful universalism. When a Buddhist or a Muslim talks with us about their transcendental hopes, we need to listen to what they're actually saying, rather than simply assuming from the off that 'everyone is saying the same thing really'. Being a theologian in intercultural/interfaith conversation is always about cherishing the truths of one's own tradition, without seeking to absorb, colonise, or seize the lives or stories of others. So much of my teaching at Woodbrooke over the last year has been about creating space for such rich and tender dialogue.

Q. How does your approach to religion today inform your day-to-day life — spiritual practices and priorities, family life, and interests?

I think my instinctively dialogical and open approach to the spiritual search is becoming increasingly important to me as time goes on. I keep trying (and failing) to live every day in and through the kind of ordinary sacredness I've described. I have recently moved house with my partner, and now we have a backyard, which we'd like to transform into a little herb garden over the next couple of years. I hope this project will help keep me grounded in the sanctity of ordinary life and encourage me to see shoots of verdant goodness, even amidst painful or difficult situations. The belief that divine wisdom can be found everywhere has invited great joys into my life, but this axiom also presents an ongoing challenge. I keep asking myself: Am I moving closer to the Truth I'm trying to see in the world? What's keeping me from acting on it? In this spirit, I'm trying to find more time for prayer, meditation and

I think my instinctively dialogical and open approach to the spiritual search is becoming increasingly important to me as time goes on.

deep listening. I'm still scarred by years in a university setting that was all about output and impact ('publish or die'). I'm doing my best to unlearn this feverish way of being and to seek greater slowness and deliberation instead. We live in a divided and wounded world, not just at the level of international affairs, but at the level of the street corner. I'm attempting to find a stable and peaceful core, not so I can escape from the world, but rather so I can see the world with greater compassion and clarity.

Q. And how does your approach to religion and religious self-understanding inform your political outlook?

The Quaker Way affirms that God's grace is not merely something that frees us from sin and alienation at death. Grace is continually given to us, drawing us out of egotism and fatalism and encouraging us to build islands of hope and compassion on earth. God loves everyone and cherishes everything. Our chief task as Christian political animals is to work out how a commitment to a ubiquitous divine cherishing should be put into practice at the level of the community and the economy, and at the much murkier levels of international conflict, peace, and diplomacy. While I don't think there are easy answers to any of this, it is by struggling with the painful gap between how the world is and *how it should be* that we come closer to the Spirit.

In this respect, Quakerism embodies a quiet utopianism, a belief that God works in real time on earth as in Heaven. I'm certain I bring these hopeful reflexes into my politics. Despite all the awfulness we see around us every day, it seems to me that the worst thing we can do is submit to

cynicism or become engrossed in despair. Grace is at work, through the hospitality of friends and strangers, among those who seek social and ecological justice, in the lives of those who give something back to their local area, or in those who diffuse hopelessness in their workplace or family. Goodness

is cumulative. Every act, no matter how seemingly small, widens the frontiers of Heaven.

Part of my own kind of frontier-building is captured in the odd label 'liberal socialist'. I have a sense that if we want to genuinely serve God and our neighbour, we have to keep two principles in creative tension. We need liberty — the chance to use our gifts, to experiment, to exercise initiative, to make mistakes, and, crucially, the freedom to change our minds. You can't inherit truth, goodness, justice or peace. If you want these things,

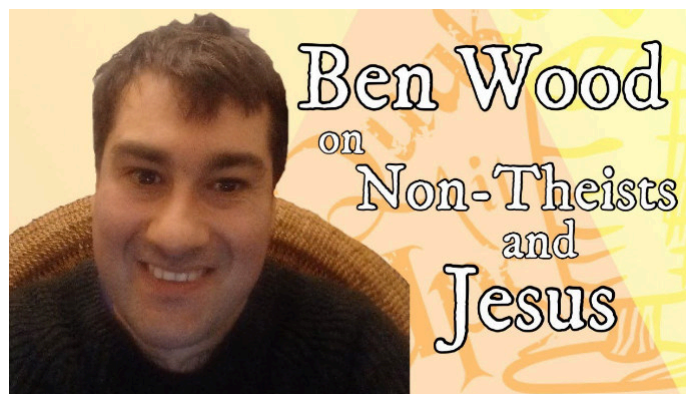
you have to go looking for them. They won't drop into your lap. That's the joy and the heaviness of freedom. But liberty needs company. We can only revise our goals, name our hopes, and discern our course by living with (and beside) others. We cannot become fully formed selves without sociability. By attempting to honour both liberty and community, we can find a helpful vision for the Church on the one hand, and a viable model for messy secular politics on the other. I try to do this in my own political engagement, although I must say I wish I were far more active than I currently am. Perhaps I should start with the herb garden and work out from there!

Thank you Ben, for sharing yourself and the way you navigate Quakerism.

Ben's book *The Living Fountain*¹ considers discernment in the Quaker movement. Noting Friends' commitment to diversity and inclusivity — in welcoming a wide range of religious views and outlooks, including liberal universalism, non-theist religious humanism, mysticism, and social activism — he explores how the movement can find collective Quaker narratives to shape its common discernment.

Image Credit

p. 16. Image by permission Ollie, producer of *Quake it Up*, from an extract of an interview on *The Living Fountain*, available at https://youtu.be/yzLG_Ijy4sU?si=If1wq1YQZYVj7bmF



Ben discusses his book *The Living Fountain* on the Youtube Channel 'Quake it up'. (Search 'Ben Wood' on <https://www.youtube.com/@Quake-It-Up>)

Notes

¹ Benjamin Wood, *Living Fountain: Remembrances of Quaker Christianity* (Christian Alternative Books, 2023).

A list of some of Ben's other publications is available at <https://www.woodbrooke.org.uk/people/benjamin-wood/>.

² Bluesky social media account <@cosmichope.bsky.social> available at <https://bsky.app/profile/cosmichope.bsky.social>.

³ Benjamin Wood, *Living Fountain*, p. 160.

⁴ Benjamin Wood, *Living Fountain*, pp. 45–46. *Quaker Faith and Practice* (5th ed with updates) is available at <https://qfp.quaker.org.uk>.

books

Book Editor, David Lambourn

books@sofn.uk

Some recommendations of recent publications from the editors.

Biblical Studies

David Gushee, *Job in Exile A Guide for Spiritual Refugees* (Orbis, September 2026).

- For further information, please see <https://www.davidpgushee.com/book/job-in-exile/>

Bible: Hermeneutics

Giorgio Agamben, *The Spirit and the Letter: On the Interpretation of Scripture*, translated by Scott Kirkland (Seagull Books: 2026).

Religious Studies: Environment

Michael Barnes Norton, *Anthropocene Religion: Rethinking Nature, Humanity and Divinity Amid Climate Catastrophe* (Edinburgh University Press, 2026).

Susannah Crockford, *A Perturbed System: Religion and Climate Change from the End of a World* (Chicago University Press, 2026).

Philosophy

Christopher Insole, *If God Is the Answer, What Is the Question?* (Oneworld Publications 2026)

Brook Ziporyn, *Experiments in Mystical Atheism: Godless Epiphanies from Daoism to Spinoza and Beyond* (Chicago University Press, 2024).

John D. Caputo, *A Radical God: Theopoetics, Phenomenology, and the Future of Religion* (Columbia University Press, 2026).

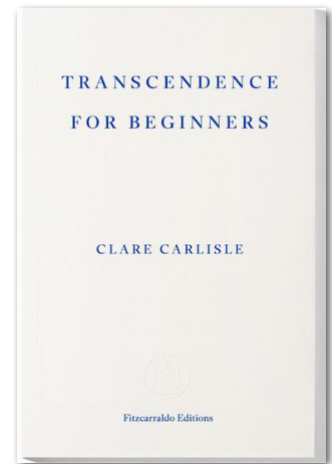
Islamic Studies: historical Muhammad

Kurt Bangert, *Muhammad and the Origin of Islam* (Springer, 2026).

Love and Devotion

When we attend to the lives of philosophers, we see how their work is moved and sustained by devotion. Devotion is a repeated movement of return that expresses love. And when we ask, as a philosopher must, what is Love?, the answer surely lies in this concept of devotion: at once an action, a feeling, a relationship and an affirmation of value. Devoted partners return home to one another at night; a devoted daughter calls her elderly mother each day. A devout Catholic goes frequently to Mass; a devout Hindu goes frequently to the temple. These examples come readily to mind, but there is the devotion of a sports fan, a gardener, or a biographer. Devotion means giving yourself willingly to what you love. This is a lived love, never simply an inward feeling. Essentially active and expressive, it is a virtue as well as an affect. Devotion gives ethical shape and emotional colour to our expressive, exhibitiv way of being in the world.

Claire Carlisle, *Transcendence For Beginners* (Fitzcarraldo, 2025) pp. 134–135.



Fitzcarraldo cover

Andy Kemp Reviews

Clare Carlisle, *Transcendence for Beginners: Life Writing and Philosophy*

(Fitzcarraldo 2025; and New York Review of Books, 2026). pp. 184.

Clare Carlisle's thought-provoking little book began life as a Gifford Lecture series delivered at the University of St Andrews in 2024. The text is not lecture-like; certainly not dry, didactic or overly academic. Carlisle's prose is often beautiful, at turns elegant and meandering, curious, even elegiac. The author is a gentle, questing, undogmatic philosopher, but she is also a biographer, having written well-received lives of Kierkegaard, Spinoza — on his religion — and, most recently, George Eliot. The territory explored in *Transcendence for Beginners*, then, is that which lies between the two practices of "life writing" and philosophy, and how they may complement each other in gaining a greater understanding of what it means to be human: to be human at our best, our transcendent best.

When we attempt to examine our own lives — to discern purpose, question decisions, accommodate losses — to make sense of the muddle of our existence, it is a difficult task, as we are still very much in the process of living them. The life writer, however, is not a biographer in real time. Liberated from time, viewing the 'drone-shot' of an entire life,



New York Review of Books cover

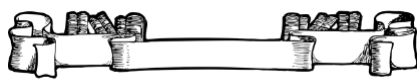
selective though this may be, one can see the life as Spinoza suggests, "under the aspect of eternity". Carlisle engages with several familiar philosophical tropes; she climbs mountains, enters caves, sits beside shrines, and takes detours that make connections between the philosophical spirits of West and East. But she also nudges her readers towards the lives of those she sees as good, virtuous or 'noble', so that we may find in their ways examples of practice, attitudes of mind, and struggles towards expression that echo our own quest for what some would describe as 'transcendence'.

Close readings of passages from George Eliot, Proust and Spinoza, together with a detailed account of the working practice of her friend, the artist Celia Paul, intersect with Carlisle's retelling of significant elements of her own life path. She is aware, though, that transcendence is a slippery fish. Talk of transcendence can drift all too easily into the otherworldly and further back into an unhelpful metaphysics of divine reality. Carlisle was a pupil of Don Cupitt and one of the speakers at the excellent short conference held at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, in 2024, to mark the 40th anniversary of Cupitt's *Sea of Faith* TV series (see *Sofia* 155, March 2025).

Cupitt's non-realist rejection of an objective God, and of both an 'afterlife' and any distinctly separate 'inner life', led him to rethink transcendence. He insisted that there was nowhere else to locate transcendence but in the dynamic energy of human society, in ethical action, and in the constant, creative flux of the everyday. Essentially, he made sense of transcendent experience and mystical intent by exchanging the metaphysical for the immanent.

Carlisle, too, in her winding appreciation of the good in others, in historical and fictional lives, finds transcendence in the human everyday: in the love of others, the love of nature, and in lives of repeated, devoted care and attention. Carlisle's mouthpiece for this 'ethic of exemplarity' — the moral power of ordinary lives — is often George Eliot. Eliot wrote of quiet, noble Dorothea Brooke in the closing passage of *Middlemarch*: 'the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive'. To a young friend, Eliot wrote: 'human goodness is the only guarantee that there can be any sort of goodness in the universe'. Ultimately, Carlisle finds transcendence in devotion, in time given and time shared. 'Devotion gives ethical shape and emotional colour to our expressive, exhibitivite being in the world'.

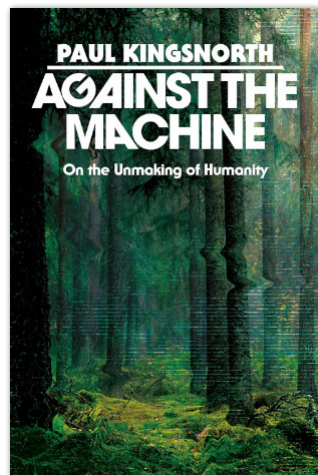
Andy Kemp has been involved with the Sea of Faith Network for over 30 years. He is currently Vice-Chair of its Steering Group, is a member of the Merseyside & North Wales Group, and helps organise 'SOF In Conversation'.



Andrew Edgar reviews

Paul Kingsnorth, *Against the Machine: On the Unmaking of Humanity* (Particular Books, 2025) (pp. xvii+348)

Paul Kingsnorth has had a varied career, embracing journalism, environmentalism, and the publication of three novels (including the recently republished *The Wake*, which is extraordinary, not least for being written in a form of Old English). He was baptised into the Romanian Orthodox Church in 2021. He is a man not afraid to change his mind, and has pursued a long intellectual and spiritual journey, allowing his understanding of his self and his place in the world to shift and develop. *Against the Machine* is presented very much as a detailed defence of his current stance. It is, above all, a perceptive account of the malaise of modern society, the statement of someone out of sync with their times. Yet, while I suspect that I share many of Kingsnorth's misgivings about contemporary society, this can be a disquieting read, as it explores the implications of finding an alternative



to a world homogenised by globalisation, and driven by the goals of technological and economic progress.

At the book's core lies the argument that contemporary society can be characterised in terms of the ways in which technology undermines the freedom of individual humans, and more radically that this technological society has led to the destruction of any profound sense of meaning in our lives. Modernity has torn up the roots that once bound us to our past and to our ancestors, not least in that there are no longer any satisfying stories or myths that allow us to make sense of ourselves, be it as individuals or as social and historical beings.

Kingsnorth draws on an impressive range of thinkers and writers who have articulated similar concerns, from philosophers (for example, Alasdair MacIntyre and Simone Weil), through social theorists (Jacques Ellul and Lewis Mumford), to theologically or spiritually oriented authors (René Guénon and Nikolai Berdyaev). Kingsnorth omits some key thinkers: Max Weber gets barely a sentence; Jürgen Habermas and Charles Taylor nothing at all. Given also the tenor of Kingsnorth's argument, surprisingly there is no engagement with John Ruskin or William Morris. But there is something sobering about recognising the number of thinkers who have railed against the 'malaise of modernity' (to use Taylor's phrase), and yet the problem only seems to get worse.

The Machine is, put bluntly, the fundamental organising principle of the modern world. It is the embodiment and product of the rationalism of the European Enlightenment, and as such manifest not simply in the rise of technology and the dogmatic assessment of social success in terms of technological progress, but also in the underpinning attitude to science, and the priority of natural scientific materialist reductionism over all other claims knowledge. Entwined with this is another dogma, that of economic progress. A growing GDP trumps a meaningful or happy life. The world is thus quantified, and through that quantification both the natural and social worlds can be manipulated and controlled. Quality, and thus meaning, counts for little or nothing.

The consequences of the rise of this Machine include, for Kingsnorth, the destruction of any communal sense of history or place. The narratives that once sustained our links to the past — to our ancestors — are rendered irrelevant. Across the globe, people live increasingly homogenous lives as urbanism and consumerism spread. To escape the Machine, to get off grid, becomes increasingly difficult. Technology also destroys nature, in the sense that nature becomes a mere resource that

can be manipulated endlessly, without respect for any inherent limits or essence within it. This is as true, Kingsnorth argues, for human nature as it is for the external world. Technology destroys inherent, natural, limitations. There is no problem for which there is not a technological solution (including the ecological crisis). Billionaire tech-entrepreneurs entertain absurd technological fantasies about human immortality and the colonisation of space.

The Machine ultimately changes what it is to be human. We shift from understanding ourselves as communal beings, embedded in history and tradition and a sense of place, to becoming isolated selves — consumers, focusing on our (predominantly sexual) pleasures and who, through the application of technology, can remake and change ourselves endlessly. As Kingsnorth summarised this, past, people, place, and prayer, have been replaced by science, self, sex, and screen.

As noted, Kingsnorth draws on a wide range of significant and insightful thinkers to make his case. At his best he highlights important issues. The increasingly ludicrous faith that modern technological entrepreneurs, such as Musk and Bezos, have in technology as a solution to environmental and social problems is a case in point. To assume that the ecological crisis is solved by finding another planet to colonise is an absurdity, and distracts from the need for fundamental changes in our culture and attitudes to the natural environment.

But at times one can wonder if Kingsnorth has succumbed to both hyperbole and to a tendency to indulge of his own preferences. For example, he implies that all city dwellers are miserable, and that modern cities have no sense of place or history. Yet many people enjoy city life, and any good city museum will demonstrate how stories of the city's history are still told, re-told and argued over. A city such as London does have a sense of place that Kingsnorth neglects. He fails to see that historical and communal stories are not absent. Rather they are contested, and this contesting can be a source of their vitality and importance.

In discussing place, Kingsnorth comes close to articulating certain strands of far-right thinking, and although he works valiantly to maintain balance and nuance, reading his arguments does highlight the difficulty of thinking about place and cultural identity, in the face of modernity and globalisation, without touching upon uncomfortably nationalistic, and even xenophobic tropes. There is an undeniable conservatism in Kingsnorth's thought. There is a hint of nostalgia for what he admits is a mythical past. He happily surrenders what he sees as a failed liberalism in order to embrace a traditional Christian culture,

with its sense of history, place, and social hierarchy, as well as an awareness of the limitations of human nature. He is remarkably dismissive of less historically situated or orthodox religions.

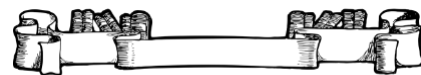
The most disturbing part of the book is Kingsnorth's discussion of the transgender debate. While perhaps insightfully viewing transgender surgery as being driven by technology and its marketing, there is nevertheless a crass insensitivity to the real suffering and needs of transgender people. Transgender surgery violates, for Kingsnorth, a limitation that is inherent to human beings. As such, for him, it is wrong. It embodies all the ills that he perceives in transhumanist positions.

But perhaps the fault is that Kingsnorth is far too conservative in the narratives that he seeks as a remedy and challenge to the Machine. He cannot, oddly given the brilliance of his novels, see beyond traditional stories of human community and human nature. The experiences of transgender people, like the experiences of city dwellers, and many more of us coping with modernity, invite new and radically innovative ways of articulating what it is to be human — and for the Sea of Faith, radically new ways of articulating what it is to be religious.

Kingsnorth claims that 'We remain, I think, despite our ostensible belief in "science and reason", fundamentally religious people in a religious time' (p. 134). If true, and I hope it is, then this is a challenge, not to return to an old tradition, but to find new ways of narrating what it is to be human, and as such a spiritual being, today, within modernity, and in the face of modern technology, commerce, and globalisation.

Kingsnorth's book should be read. It is an important challenge, but not yet the end of the debate.

Andrew Edgar is Emeritus Reader, School of English, Communication and Philosophy, Cardiff University, and is a member of the Sea of Faith.

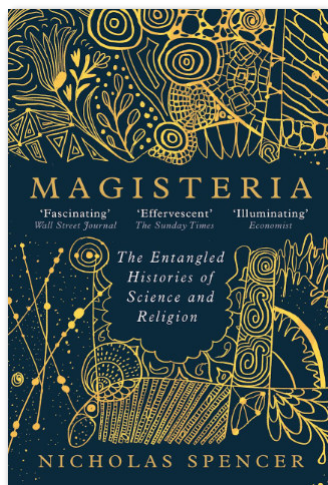


Robert Boucnick reviews

Nicholas Spencer, *Magisteria: The Entangled Histories of Science & Religion* (One World, 2023). pp. 480

A common misconception about the relationship between science and religion is that these have always been in opposition and that science has basically won.

Nicholas Spencer points out that the relationship



between the two 'magisteria' of science and religion has been more of a complex and inconclusive debate than a narrow argument. However, there are certain key flashpoints in history where scientists and theologians have squared up to each other, mainly over two issues: who has authority to proclaim

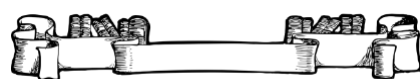
what is true; and the sacredness of human life (how astronomy, geology or natural selection diminishes our central or special place in the universe). The main three of these flashpoints are the trial of Galileo, the Huxley v Wilberforce debate at Oxford in 1860, and the Scopes trial in Dayton, Tennessee, just over a century ago. In each case, the common perception of what took place is revealed as an over-simplification. While Galileo was defending heliocentrism, for example, the hypothesis was already about 100 years old and had caused no controversy previously. Indeed, there were hybrid hypotheses between helio- and geocentrism which many church fathers favoured. Galileo met trouble because the use of his telescope gave tangible evidence to the new hypothesis. He fell out with Pope Urban VIII because his holiness felt personally mocked in one of Galileo's books, and, contemporaneous with the Thirty Years' War, challenges to Catholic authority were perceived as having a Protestant aspect to them. Spencer points out that whether you were a Biblical literalist or more sympathetic to evidence-based descriptions of the cosmos had nothing to do with Protestantism or Catholicism; both contained literalists and rationalists. Indeed, the way each controversy is deepened and broadened to include each actor, their sympathies and objections, as well as contemporary perspectives, is hugely impressive. But it can be a little over-complicated. The book presents itself as an antidote to the over-simplification of the science versus religion narrative, but the story is then framed in a context of opposition. However, it is a most comprehensive study. Many examples of scientists are cited, such as James Clerk Maxwell, who held a deep conviction that the scientific method is ultimately limited in what it can achieve. While medieval scientific 'dark ages' are revealed as being more enlightened than is recognised (the work of the '*physici*'), periods of contention or enlightenment are shown to be less controversial or ground-breaking than we are generally led to believe.

The book is best read as a history. It aims to set the record straight and generally succeeds. It does not explicitly delineate the limits of science to explain how the two magisteria can stand alongside each other. Instead, it explains how this complex debate will endure, mainly in the field of artificial intelligence. All points of view are treated with respect and understanding. Spencer only runs out of sympathy with those who are unduly adamant. So materialist reductionists are accused of disciplinary overreach for trying to explain complex behaviour merely from biochemistry or the architecture of the brain, or for equating thought with computation. Just as maps can be topological, navigational, political, electoral, or thematic, etc., so human beings have many aspects, and trying to explain the whole from one point in one layer is plainly fruitless. Spencer concludes by stating that the overlap which he sees between science and religion is a feature of we human beings — we are embodied (physically bound) and embedded (integrated into a collective), whereas the models of neuroscience are characterised by isolation and insensitivity and therefore lose such matters as meaning, mortality, empathy and love.

More might have been said about the soul or spirit: meta-consciousness, not just the soul, may have merited more mention in the conclusion and vitalistic thinkers such as Goethe, Swedenborg, Mesmer or Steiner might have been included. The idea that consciousness cannot be explained merely by matter, energy or emergence is most pertinent to predicting the properties of machine intelligence, even if you do not ascribe to the presence of an '*elan vital*'. And Hindu cosmology deserves more mention; their emphasis on the unknown rather than the known has seen much less retreat from scientific discovery than the Judeo-Christian or Islamic traditions.

Where the book really succeeds is in dispelling commonly held beliefs, such as the idea that Columbus proved the Earth is round, even though its circumference had already been calculated in Hellenistic Egypt in the third century BCE. The basic message is that while science may have diminished the remit of religion, it has not diminished its relevance. Despite a few possible omissions, as a scholarly work and an engaging retelling of the story of science and religion, *Magisteria* is an outstanding achievement and a genuine education.

Robert Boucnick is an FE Teacher, a Sea of Faith member and a regular contributor to *Sofia*.



Lamorna Ash, ***Don't forget we're here forever: A New Generation's Search for Religion*** (Bloomsbury Circus, 2026), pp. 352.

Lamorna Ash takes a year-long road trip around Christianity, gathering the stories of some sixty young adults who have converted. It paints a picture of Christianity in Britain today, not through polls and statistics, but through her conversations.

The 'Quiet Revival' report, in which a YouGov survey found Christianity on the rise among young people, made headlines in April 2025, just before publication of this book. The timing must have delighted the publishers! Some reviewers saw the book as answering the headline questions: who is converting, and why?

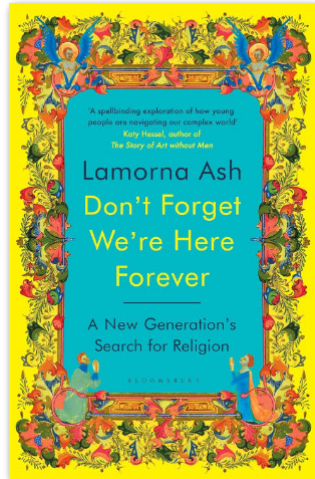
Ash herself rejects this: the book was written before the survey, and not with the aim of explaining generational change. She was sceptical of the survey's claims and has been vindicated; YouGov have since retracted the data. There is no quiet revival.

But there are real stories to tell. Lamorna meets people from more than a dozen traditions, from Quakers and Pentecostals to Anabaptists and mystics. In telling their stories she reflects on her own struggle with Christianity, drawing on Jacob wrestling the angel. Like most of our generation (millennials) she grew up relatively 'unchurched' but with some cultural familiarity: a Church of England schooling and a grandmother who attended Anglican and Quaker services.

Given that Lamorna is progressive and queer, it's surprising that her starting point was the conservative evangelical *Christianity Explored* and *Alpha?* courses. But these are the best-promoted introductions, so hers is a common route, sadly leading some into abusive theologies.

In this version of Christianity, the first I had been offered, it felt like there was harm stitched into the other side of its welcome.

I took guilty pleasure in the wild things Lamorna recounts of evangelical bible classes. She approaches them with impressive generosity and an open mind. But not so open that her brain falls out.



As a conservative evangelical venture, *Christianity Explored* imposes 'unspoken limits on what can happen in the classes ... we could never contest the text's veracity, find contradictions or irresolvable ambiguity within it'.

Her course leader, Rico Tice, a leading opponent of same-sex marriage blessings who describes sin as a 'far worse problem' than climate change, tells Lamorna that he chooses to teach Mark because it's the shortest gospel, betraying, she notes wryly, the limited faith pastors often have in those they seek to convert.

Her own take on Mark is that it is the strangest gospel, ending (originally) not with the resurrection but the empty tomb, inviting faith as an imaginative leap rather than a fixed answer. Not an insight she could have shared at *Christianity Explored*!

Lamorna comments that 'the more time I spent at *Christianity Explored*, the more it felt like the outside world was not making it through the walls in any meaningful way.' She concludes on this form of Christianity, 'I think it would make my life smaller. I think it would make me a worse person.'

Is faith good for us? That is the main question, for her, not whether its metaphysical claims are true. She cites the term 'flexible ontologies' from the anthropologist T.M. Luhrmann, describing how believers speak as though God is straightforwardly real while acting otherwise.

Speaking to Laurence, an atheist Quaker, his atheism is noted but the focus is on his interest in social justice: 'in political activism, you fight because you want to attain an equality that does not yet exist. It appealed to Laurence that Quaker meetings already ran on this principle. The goal was to sustain the conditions of equality within the space for an hour each week.'

At the start of her journey, Lamorna tells a friend, 'I don't think I have the capacity for faith.' By the end she writes: 'I choose to become a Christian with my scepticism about organised religion intact ... I believe I come closest to knowing something of God in my interactions with other people ... I believe that the God of the religion which is my heritage might have come down to Earth as a man 2,000 years ago to walk alongside us and help us with our terrible pain because I can't think of a more beautiful story for how a god might behave. My belief is not founded on certainty, and I don't want to persuade anyone else of it ... I haven't found any answers. I'll go on looking.'

I must write to her about the Network!

Edward Nickell is Secretary of the Sea of Faith Network, and a member of the London Local Group.

Dear Editor,

In June, our London local group tried something new: a "sacred text" reading of the first two chapters of Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, through the theme of hope – inspired by your previous *Sofia* issue on the same theme.

Sacred text practice applies the approach taken by religious communities to sacred texts to a secular book. The approach started in a Harvard Divinity School course with Jane Austen, but became popular via the 'Harry Potter and the Sacred Text' podcast.¹ I'm part of a group who are currently taking this approach with *The Northern Lights* by Philip Pullman. We meet via Zoom and are grateful for the use of the Network's Zoom account.

Sacred text practice has three principles – trust that the text has something to give you, rigour in reading closely even when a passage seems slight, and reading in community. Rather than a whole book we take a chapter or two, read with a theme in mind, and finish with monastic techniques such as *florilegia* (gathering the sentences that caught your attention) and *lectio divina* (rigorous reading of a randomly selected passage).

Much of our reflection on 'Hope' and *Oliver Twist* can be related to articles in the past *Sofia*. In the editorial, Pope Benedict is taken to task for a hope pitched at eternal life while passing over the suffering of this world and the hope of an earth remade in justice. Dickens hands us precisely that suffering world: a nameless mother dead without rites, her child left to the mercies of a board of

"wise and humane" gentlemen who calmly resolve to starve their charges by degrees. After that, it is hard to be satisfied with a hope that is only other-worldly.

Then Oliver stands and asks for more. Christiane van Duuren called her piece 'Hope Against the Odds' (*Sofia* 160); she might almost have been describing Oliver. We wondered whether some sort of 'want' or hunger is always the start of hope. We wondered whether hope was always good. Was it perhaps the brother of 'anxiety'? Could it become meaningless like dismissing problems with 'thoughts and prayers'? But on the other hand, perhaps we can live without faith, but not without hope – we had the arguments from Carroll and Norman in mind from *Sofia*.

Reflecting on what the text might be calling us to do, we had reflections on people's hopes for the session itself and for the Network, as well as on what they had hoped for their own lives. To close, we each selected a character to 'bless'. I chose the 'sage, deep, philosophical' men of the Board who delight in their own clever reasoning but end up administering a cruel inhumane system. My blessing was to hope that I could avoid being one of them!

Several members in the group would be interested in doing it again, perhaps others in the Network might be interested?

Edward Nickell,
London Local
Group

Sof Letters Editor
93, Bantocks Road
Great Waldingfield
SUDBURY
CO10 0XT

Notes - by the *Sofia* Editor

¹ 'Harry Potter and the Sacred Text' podcast is available at <https://www.harrypottersacredtext.com> [accessed 24 July 2026]

For further information, please see:

Vanessa Zoltan, *Praying with Jane Eyre: Reflections on Reading as a Sacred Practice* (TarcherPerigee, 2021).

John Michael Baglione, 'The sacred in Harry Potter: Divinity School alumni and student develop popular podcast that interprets the books through a spiritual lens', *The Harvard Gazette* (14 September 2016). Available at <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2016/09/the-sacred-in-harry-potter/> [accessed 24 July 2026]

Also, Rosemary Laoulach writes on the use of *Lectio Divina* as contemplative pedagogy – 'to teach towards wisdom and holistic learning':

Lectio Divina is a tool that can be used to facilitate a slow reading of significant texts that are meant to speak not only to our minds but also to our hearts. Texts in the humanities such as poetry, philosophy and religious texts, can speak to us in ways that facilitate self-knowledge and even an understanding of a reality beyond ourselves.

Rosemary Laoulach, 'The revival of *Lectio Divina* as a way of reading significant texts', *International Studies in Catholic Education*, 2026 [Open Access] (PDF, p. 2) <https://doi.org/10.1080/19422539.2025.2561882>



Network Matters

Religious Education, by Dave Francis

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

sofn.uk

These 'Network Matters' pages explore the charitable work of the Sea of Faith Network. In this edition we focus on part of its educational work.

Rise of the 'Nones'

The 'religious' profile of UK citizens is changing rapidly. According to the 2021 UK census, the share of individuals identifying as having no religion rose significantly from 25.2% in 2011 to 37.2% in 2021. They are the 'nones'.

Meanwhile, the proportion of Christians fell from 59.3% in 2011 to 46.2% in 2021. This is the first time since the census began that fewer than half the population identified as Christian. The trend has continued, only marginally offset by immigration over the last 20 years, with around 50% of immigrants to the UK identifying as Christian and around 18% as having no religion. In fact, according to Humanist UK's analysis of the 2024 British Social Attitudes Survey, 61% of adults aged 16 to 34 now identify as having no religion. They are the 'young nones'.

Taken together with the fact that there have been small increases in the number of people identifying with religions other than Christianity, these changes have brought special challenges for the teaching of Religious Education, not to mention the whole of society.

And that's why many of us in the Sea of Faith Network and beyond have been asking the question, 'How are children and young people going to successfully navigate this complex world in which we live?' Moreover, how are they going to interpret their own experience of life's diversity and know how to weigh up the multitude of voices and values coming at them from all angles through different forms of media?

Content and Discontent

The Sea of Faith answer has largely taken the

form of involvement in two major educational initiatives. Neither of these takes the view that children need to study 'all the religions'. In the curriculum time available to RE, that would be a plainly ludicrous undertaking; a little knowledge being a dangerous thing. In any event, the unseemly horse-trading that might result from a curriculum divided into percentages of time for each major religion, plus Humanism, is surely to be avoided.

The point is that dividing up the 'content' of the RE curriculum amongst the religions (and non-religious worldviews) would be a bit like ignoring the broader purposes of students becoming competent in geographical studies by concentrating only on the study of different countries; 50% on the UK, say, and scrapping over which other countries get how much time to make up the rest.

Nor is the answer, suggested by some (with barely disguised agendas), to study one religion in greater depth as a model for understanding the 'others'. No prizes for guessing which religion these commentators, okay, Christian theology-based

academics, say should be studied. It's as though the deep study of one political party, let's say the Conservative and Unionist Party for want of a better example, will give pupils all they need to know about the wide variety of other political beliefs commonly held in this country and abroad. Some might be content with this, but the rest are deeply discontented!

Ignorance

But nor is the solution to do away with RE in state schools altogether, as in countries such as France and the USA. Here is where ignorance can be a very dangerous thing. Not that such countries are completely uncivilised, but just think of generations of adherents of minority (and majority) reli-



gious groups growing up without planned exposure to the varieties of religious and non-religious worldviews that make up our world. Is it possible that young people might be more easily recruited into extremist, unchallenged and simplistic views? Yes, it happens here too, but at least our educational system, at its best, offers some critical inoculation against the unthinking 'my worldview is the right worldview' prejudices we can all tend towards. And with good RE, students also learn to recognise the many myths and misinformation about religions that contaminate the e-world.

Solarity

All the same, our system does need to be 'at its best'. All too often, with a crippling dearth of qualified RE teachers and a debilitating lack of curriculum time for RE on the timetable, RE provision is far from ideal. Readers may know the story of how our first project, 'Solarity', was born. Briefly, your correspondent's experience of a lunchtime Bible Club at a primary school sparked a campaign to offer children something better than hearing how Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey and asking those bemused children to colour in a picture. (Not a word of discussion or enquiry about this remarkable event was ever shared).



The Sea of Faith's Wessex Group took up the idea of providing an alternative out-of-school-hours 'Religion and Philosophy Club' for primary- and secondary-age pupils. In 2018, with the support of the trustees and the work of practising teachers, 'Solarity' was launched (taking our cue from Cupitt's 'Solar Ethics'). This online provision of materials to help teachers and other responsible adults lead children and young people in investigating issues of spiritual, moral, social and cultural import was developed over the next few years and has recently been updated so that all links to stimulus material are working.

At primary level, pupils can begin to investigate and discuss questions such as 'What makes a true friend?', 'How we can have hope in our world?', 'What we can learn from a "miracle"?' and 'Coping with bereavement', as well as 'Is it good to be different?', among other topics. At secondary level, students investigate and discuss questions such as 'What is religion and what is a cult?', 'Are all reli-

gions equal?', 'Can atheists learn anything from religion?', and 'How spiritual are you?', as well as learning about Don Cupitt's 'Religion of Ordinary Life' and examining 'The Power of Words', 'Mind, Memory and Justice', 'Art and Beauty' and 'Harry Potter and God'. See the full list of topics at <https://www.solarity.org.uk/>

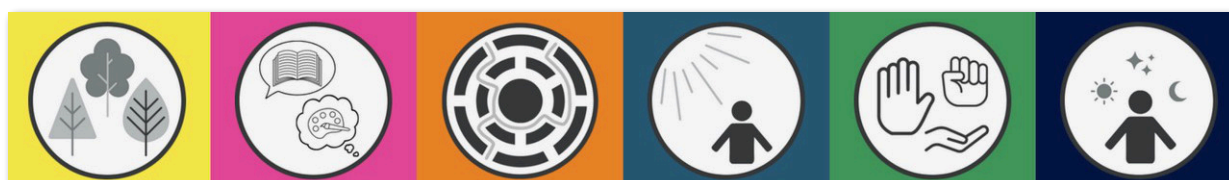
Now, some of you may be thinking these look like good topics for our next SOF regional meetings! Or perhaps there's something there for our monthly 'In Conversation' sessions.

The individual session materials have been downloaded many hundreds of times. The most popular were those offering specifically religious content. The likely explanation is that they were being used in RE lessons rather than for their original purpose: out-of-school-hours clubs. I reasoned that if the need out there was for better online RE materials, then we ought to consider how to provide a proper RE programme, built on sound educational principles, for use in schools. What would such a programme look like if it were built not around the religions themselves, but on what we think students ought to understand through their study of religion and worldviews from 5 – 18 years? Moreover, what would an RE curriculum consist of if it were consistent with the thrust of Don Cupitt's oeuvre and subsequent developments within the Sea of Faith Network?

Big Ideas for RE

Imagine a world where the vast majority of people recognise the dangers of generalising from particular examples (and thereby victimising others); where they are skilled in appreciating, interpreting and expressing a wide range of artistic endeavours; where they are deeply committed to leading a good life and helping keep people out of bad ones; where they have a broad awareness of the many varied, sometimes mysterious experiences of life and know how to make some sense of them; where they habitually apply critical thinking to identify the cultural, political and environmental influences on individuals and society; and where they have their own appreciation of, and lightness of touch towards, a 'big picture' of the way things are.

Perhaps I have just described members of the Sea of Faith Network! Or perhaps you have your own utopia?



Is such a world desirable, even possible? And if it were, what kind of upbringing, what kind of education, what kind of experience of life, might produce such a world? We cannot hope, of course, to do any more than our small bit, but our honest hope is that those following our 'Big Ideas for RE' programme might get a little way towards that 'better world'.

Our 'Big Ideas' are crucial to helping children and young people understand the complex world of religion and belief. They help make sense of a mass of information, are memorable, and transferable to events outside the classroom, both now and in the future. 'This', sang Eric Bibb, 'is the needed time', and our 'Big Ideas' are what young learners need to reach their own understanding of the tangled webs of information and misinformation that abound in our social-media-infested world. Many of the alternatives do not bear much contemplation.

Our Life, Our Worldview

The Network has nearly completed its work on the Big Ideas project, though, in another sense, it never ends. But we are not stopping there. We continue to participate in the public debate on RE and to support high-quality resources for learners.

Most recently, we have provided advice and lesson plans for the next iteration of BBC Bitesize religious education resources for primary school-age children.¹ These consist of short films, presented by young teenagers, introducing their own religion or worldview. The films include non-religious worldviews, such as Humanism and 'Spiritual but not Religious', as well as some of the 'smaller' traditions, such as Bahá'í and Rastafari. They are great little films, illustrating the diversity within and amongst the traditions represented in the UK today. We'll be sure to let you know when they are online.

Dave Francis is an educational consultant and former Chair of the Association of RE Inspectors, Advisers and Consultants. He is a regular contributor to *Sofia*.

Image Credits and Notes:

pp. 23, 25. The images were generated using Gemini AI, created and modified by Dave Francis.

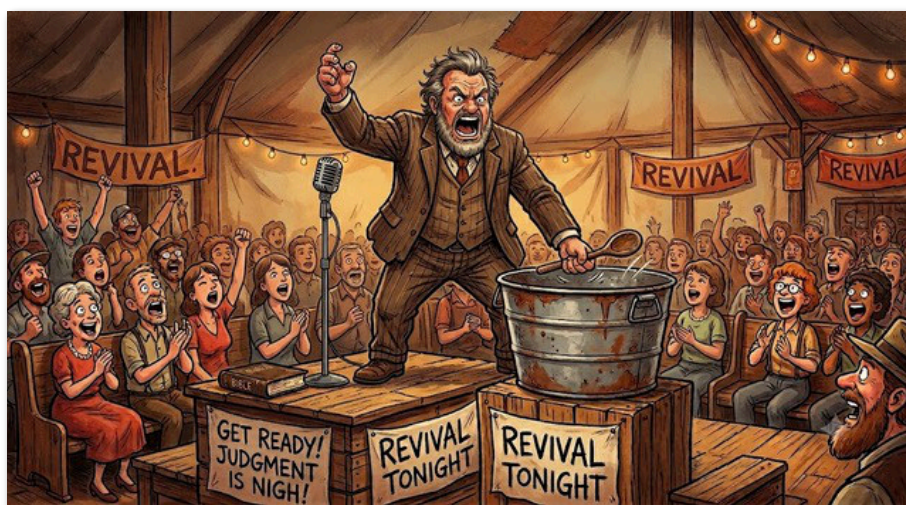
p. 24. The symbols on the banner at the bottom of the page represent the Big Ideas of RE:

1. *Continuity, Change and Diversity* — within and across traditions, through time and places
2. *Words and Beyond* — expression/interpretation through texts and creative arts
3. *A Good Life* — being a good person, living a good life, ethics
4. *Making Sense of Life's Experiences* — life experience, religious experience, ritual
5. *Influence and Power* — social, cultural, political influences and interactions
6. *The Big Picture* — overall account of life/universe/everything

For age-related understandings of these, see <https://bigideasforre.org/what-are-big-ideas-for-re/>

Notes:

¹ BBC Bitesize, RE, Key Stage 2 (for pupils 7–11 years) <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/subjects/z7hs34j>



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The SOF Secretary: Edward Nickell, Flat 51 Park Central, Bow Quarter, 60 Fairfield Road. London E3 2US. secretary@sofn.uk

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‘Love in Blue’ by Carol McCrady

Carol’s artistic works employ ancient techniques of making and drawing on papyrus. She is often inspired by Celtic imagery, particularly relating to the interconnected web of (this) life. Her artistic expression is central to her spirituality. Used with Permission.