

Jesus Christ
What to Make of Him Today?

sofia

down to Earth

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Front cover image: El Greco, *Christ Blessing*, Spain 1600.

National Galleries of Scotland. Photo: wikiart.org

Back cover image: El Greco, *Christ Driving the Money-changers out of the Temple*. Spain 1600. National Gallery, London.

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is the magazine of SOF – the Sea of Faith – Network (Britain). Registered Charity No. 1113177.

Sofia does not think wisdom is dispensed supernaturally from on high, but that it can only be sought by humans at home on Earth, and is inseparable from human kindness.

Sofia regards religion as a human creation and, in rejecting the supernatural, is for this life and for humanity with its questing imagination and enabling dreams.

Sofia is for diggers and seekers in its own native radical tradition and everywhere.

Jesus Christ: What to Make of Him Today?

What to make of Jesus Christ today? He still figures importantly in the lives of many who have grown up in a Christian tradition, even if they can no longer accept all the church's doctrines. This *Sofia* begins with five responses. Though they agree in rejecting fundamentalism, four of them each offer their own distinct approach, and a fifth reports on another.

In his *Landmarks at Sea* Philip Smith focuses on the kingdom of Heaven, sought in a voyage or quest. He says: 'It's a metaphor of course. It is a physical place, the place of justice and peace we should be striving for on our planet. The Bible says a lot about this – more than it speaks of a life beyond death.' However: 'Alas, we know 2000 years later that righteousness and peace are as far away as ever in the world...' and 'we need to look at our goals and not at our past if we seek to reach the peaceable kingdom of God.'

Edward Walker draws on Jungian psychology to see Jesus (as well as the Buddha) as a fully achieved human being, a symbol – which can be a model for us – 'of one who had lived his life to the utmost, who had responded wholly to the vocation to which every human being is called'.

Adrian Alker, Chair of the PCN and a Church of England minister for 37 years, calls for a new Reformation which, he says, the established church 'stubbornly refuses to engage in'. Many people today describe themselves as 'spiritual but not religious' and religion should be 'not so much about belief but about practice'.

Mark Dyer, writing as 'a relative newcomer to SOF', asks whether there is a place in the Network for those who oppose fundamentalism but do not abandon supernatural claims. He says so far we have clearly failed to bring about a reign of kindness on Earth and need some supernatural assistance.

With the *Loughborough Echo's* kind permission we reprint its report on David Paterson's return to Loughborough, *Still Wanting to Change the World at 82*. It was in Loughborough, where he was vicar of St Peter's Church, that Paterson and a few like-minded others founded the SOF Network in the 1980s. Paterson says: 'I realised from the age of 18 that there could not be a "God" that existed. There is no "great Daddy" looking after us.' But he remains a Church of England minister with his focus firmly on the reign of justice and peace on Earth. Determined not to go quietly, he says: 'I will continue to campaign against austerity, capitalism, greed, violence...'

If we regard God and the Christ Epic as creations of the human poetic genius, as myths, Jesus can't really be God because God is not real. But in the myth he is. Myths are poetic creations but if we approach them with 'the willing suspension of disbelief that constitutes poetic faith', knowing that is what we are doing, they still matter tremendously and we retain a very rich resource. Thus, for example, we can celebrate the dramas of Christmas, Easter and Pentecost – indeed, the Eucharist itself – with all their wealth of liturgy, music and treasures of wisdom. Then religion is not reduced to ethics, but embraces a fuller humanity, for which poetry and art are necessary as well as kindness. If the church today 'came out' and admitted that supernatural stories are poetic creations *and* that poetry and myth are vital to us, it could still keep the feasts in good faith. Joyfully acknowledged poetic faith beats troubled half-belief or fundamentalist cognitive dissonance.

If you discard the Christ Epic as an 'accretion' but, wanting to hang on to what you can of your tradition, become a 'Jesusian' rather than a 'Christian' humanist, then there is pressure to idealise the man Jesus. I don't think Jesus was perfect. Particularly in Matthew's gospel, he seems rather keen on Hell fire. And in all the gospels, apart from his (perhaps fictional) words on the cross, in every encounter between Jesus and his mother he is offhand or rude to her and even publicly rejects her and the rest of his family. This may remind parents of having to deal with a brattish teenager. I remember when my younger daughter was 14, she and her friends started going on the non-stop picket of the South African Embassy in Trafalgar Square for the release of Mandela, and staying out very late at night (in days of no mobile phones). When I said I thought she should not stay out so late on a school night, she replied haughtily: 'Mum, don't you want Mandela to be free?'

Lastly, is there a contrast between 'being spiritual' and 'showing spirit'? Jesus was not meek and mild. As Blake says in his *Everlasting Gospel*, part of which is reprinted on page 6, 'If he'd been Antichrist, Creeping Jesus, he'd have done anything to please us...' This *Sofia's* back cover shows him in a fury in El Greco's *Christ Driving the Money-Changers out of the Temple* (probably the last straw for those seeking his death). And on page 5 Verrocchio and his pupil Leonardo's painting of Jesus' baptism shows him as a gorgeous hunk, which makes one have every sympathy with Mary Magdalene wanting to grab him in the garden on Easter day.

Jesus, Son of God

Edward Walker considers whether the 'Son of God' idea might have its origin in the baptismal experience of Jesus and what it might mean for us today.

The presence in our country of an ever-increasing number of Muslims confronts Christians with the question 'What do we mean by calling Jesus Son of God?' This is the big stumbling block for Muslims; as the Koran says (XIX.35), 'It is not for God to take a son unto him.' But it is not only a stumbling block for Muslims.

It was a question faced by John Hick twenty-three years ago in his book *The Metaphor of God Incarnate* (SCM 1993). 'The dogma of the incarnation,' he writes, 'implies the unique superiority of Christianity and of Christian civilisation. But that supposed superiority seems to many of us today to be very dubious. And when we look critically at its religious validation we find it to be shaky indeed. The idea lacks a secure historical basis in the teachings of Jesus' (p.162).

One of the most thorough examinations of the development of the dogma must surely be Geza Vermes' last book, completed not long before his death, *Christian Beginnings* (Allen Lane, 2012). With his characteristic attention to detail, he traces every stage in the development (as the book's subtitle puts it) 'from Nazareth to Nicaea'. The Jesus of history, Vermes declares, 'played the role of the man of God *par excellence*, the prophet of prophets, the shepherd of the flock, the leader, revealer and teacher without being himself in any sense the object of worship as he later became in the fully fledged Christianity created by Paul and John, and especially from the second century onwards' (p.60). The book ends with the suggestion that a new Reformation is now called for, 'zealous to reach back to the pure religious vision and enthusiasm of Jesus, the Jewish charismatic messenger of God, and not to the deifying message Paul, John and the church attributed to him' (p. 242).

Believing Vermes' claims to be irrefutable, I yet retain an affection for the Fourth Gospel, and I wonder if the 'Son of God' idea, however encrusted by subsequent dogma, might have its origin in the baptismal experience of Jesus, attested by all four gospels. The overwhelming conviction of being the beloved son of God with which he emerged from that event, and its renewal in his times of prayer, were undoubtedly the source of that authority, so utterly unlike that of the scribes, with which he taught and acted. And John's Prologue speaks of its effect on Jesus' disciples: 'We have beheld his glory, glory as of an only Son of a Father' (no definite articles in the Greek text). Furthermore, the Prologue affirms, 'to all who received him... he gave power to become children of God' – daughters and sons, in other words – such as he was himself. Certainly the Prologue reflects the process of inflation to which Vermes refers; but through it seems to shine the simple early experience both of Jesus and of his disciples.

How are we to account for this development, from the original intense experience of sonship to the dogma at which the church eventually arrived? I have pondered a remark of Jung which offers a comment on this process. 'The deification of Jesus, as also of the Buddha, is not surprising, for it affords a striking example of the enormous valuation that humanity places upon these hero figures and hence upon the ideal of personality' (Jung, *Selected Writings*, edited and with an introduction by Anthony Storr, Fontana, 1983, p. 205). To succeeding generations both Jesus and Gotama became something more than Gandhi or Martin Luther King or St. Francis: 'the paradigm,' as one writer has put it, 'of the individuating ego.' To their devotees, each became a symbol of one who had lived his life to the utmost, who had responded wholly to the vocation to which every human being is called.



Andrea del Verrocchio and his pupil Leonardo da Vinci, *The Baptism of Jesus*, Uffizi Gallery, Florence, 1472-1475

The unique divine sonship of Jesus can now be seen not as fact, but as myth; a myth expressing the disciples' experience. The question for us, of course, is how this might relate to our own experience of living in the 21st century. As I looked through the old burial registers in my last parish before I left the ministry, I was struck by the enormous difference of the world which people of those times inhabited from the world

in which I lived. Perhaps a third of every page recorded burials of children under five. The remainder recorded adult burials, but mostly of people who had died before the age of seventy. 'Brief life is here our portion, brief sorrow, short-lived care,' sang the Victorians. There is furthermore the heavy preoccupation with sin by which previous generations of Christians seem to have been obsessed – to be found, for example in the

arias and chorales of Bach's superb Passion music. Is Luther responsible? St. Augustine? We live in a different world. As science has transformed our physical experience, so surely psychoanalysis has transformed our mental and emotional experience. We no longer look for, yearn for, an endless life of bliss after our deaths.

The novelist and psychotherapist Sally Vickers well expresses our modern concern. 'The people we were treating,' muses Dr. David McBride in her novel (*The Other Side of Life*, Fourth Estate, London, 2006, p.20), 'were not so much looking for a remedy for anxiety and depression, they were looking for a reason to be alive... For these hesitant souls it is life and not death that holds the terrors, and if I recognised the feeling it was because I shared it.' And then her novel goes on to suggest, through the mouth of the maverick psychiatrist Gus Galen, the role the church might play: 'See there,' he said, stabbing with a burly finger in the direction of the old church [Westminster Abbey], as if he were about to accuse it of some serious misdemeanour, 'that's what places like that should be for. To help us live. There's no cure for being alive.'

St. Paul may have played his part in the process described by Professor Vermes, but he seems to have held on to the humanity of Jesus too when he asserts that, 'God ordained that [we] should be shaped to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the eldest among a large family of brothers' – and sisters, we must add – (Romans 8:29). This suggests a more helpful image than that provided by the Nicene Creed. In pondering, praying, the Lord's Prayer we stand alongside, not below, the archetypal son.

If Jung is right, that the deification of Jesus expresses the enormous value we place on the ideal of personality, then we might go on to wonder how this archetypal Son might relate to our desire to be alive. Some words of the American psychologist Abraham Maslow seem to me to give a clue: 'Every human being,' he writes, 'has two sets of forces within him. One set clings to safety and defensiveness out of fear, tending to regress backward, hanging on to the past... The other set of forces impels him forward to wholeness of self and uniqueness of self, toward full functioning of all his capacities, toward confidence in the face of the external world' (*Towards*

a Psychology of Being, Reinhold 1968, p.46). The Jesus portrayed in the gospels is precisely one who, since his baptism, committed himself wholly to that second set of forces. And to us hesitant souls Saint Paul writes, in that same chapter of his letter to the Romans: 'The Spirit you have received is not a spirit of slavery, leading you back into a life of fear, but a spirit that makes us sons (and daughters), able to cry: Abba! Father'

Jesus is for Christians the archetypal son, and can we not also say 'archetypal daughter'? This raises the issue of whether it is appropriate still to refer to God as 'Father' to describe the creative Source to which, in prayer, human beings respond. But whatever the significance of Jesus for Christians, it must be insisted that in terms of humanity as a whole, Jesus does not have a superior, 'divine' status above that of Muhammad or the Buddha. And sadly, tragically, as the dark shadow of jihadism demonstrates, it will take a long time for that superiority claimed by the Christian crusaders to be forgotten.

Edward Walker's most recent book is *Treasure Beneath the Hearth* (Christian Alternative, Alresford 2015).

From: The Everlasting Gospel

If he'd been Antichrist, Creeping Jesus,
He'd have done anything to please us -
Gone sneaking into the Synagogues
And not used the Elders and Priests like dogs,
But Humble as a Lamb or Ass
Obeyed himself to Caiaphas.
God wants not Man to Humble himself:
This is the trick of the ancient Elf.
This is the race that Jesus ran:
Humble to God, Haughty to Man,
Cursing the Rulers before the People
Even to the temple's highest Steeple;
And when he humbled himself to God,
Then descended the Cruel Rod.
'If thou humblest thyself, thou humblest me;
Thou also dwellest in Eternity.
Thou art a Man, God is no more,
Thy own humanity learn to adore.
For that is my Spirit of Life...'

William Blake

Landmarks at Sea

Warning against exclusive claims to The Truth, Philip Smith considers how religious traditions can help us towards kind hearts and a kind society.

Picture the scene. You are joining your friends on the shore of your island to row out, across a wide choppy sea, to the mainland just visible on the horizon. You set out. As rowers your eyes are on your point of departure. Keeping in line from there you hope to steer fairly straight towards your goal.

Now call the sea our life, and our destination the kingdom of Heaven. It's a metaphor of course. It is a physical place, the place of justice and peace we should be striving for on our planet. The Bible says a lot about this – more than it speaks of a life beyond death. But it is also a place in our psyche, a place and time which we find ourselves calling 'heavenly'. So aiming for the kingdom of Heaven involves making the place where you live a peaceable place of justice and mutual caring; and also it's where you can just *be*, in spiritual contentment in this life and beyond.

Now see this metaphor as where we are amongst the world's religions and faiths. Hopefully we are all aiming to row towards much the same destination, which we see as Truth, though you could be forgiven for wondering. We may be setting sail from different points on the shore, and we may not end up at exactly the same pier. But we believe that the kingdom of Heaven, of Truth, is large enough to accommodate all who find their way there.

In my congregation we have recently had speakers from three of these other traditions. They have each claimed to have had, in the past, final truth revealed to them. The problem is that they all differ! So can we be sure that any one is not the only correct course?

First, we had a professor of philosophy and a noted spokesperson for the Roman Catholic Church. He was prepared to question everything except his certainty that the Roman Catholic

tradition was a given by God. Everything had to flow from that fixed position. Logical? Or wishful thinking? After all, the Christian history reveals very many differing views on what the true gospel may be, and surely his is only one of these.

Then we had an outspoken minister of the 'wee' Free Church of Scotland whose fixed point is his interpretation of the Reformed, biblical, literal take on theology and politics. He was blunt and dogmatic. But true? I see him as having started from the Christian, biblical, position but then becoming stuck around the Reformation of 1560 on a sandbank half way to the destination and unable to progress further.

The kingdom of Heaven is a physical place, the place of justice and peace we should be striving for on our planet.

Soon after we had the rabbi of an Orthodox, Conservative, Jewish congregation. Their fixed point is the law said to have been declared by Moses. This is final and absolute forever. The two subsequent Talmudic writings flow from this, and even such writings finished with the Babylonian Talmud in the 5th century. No other apparently can be forthcoming. Truth is all referred backwards in time. They seem to me to have let down a sheet anchor, and they can't allow themselves to progress further.

If we asked Muslims they would say that the writings in the Qur'an are their fixed point. The Sharia Law is derived from it. But Shiite and Sunni wings come to blows over their different versions. Other faiths have difficulties over all

Islamic beliefs. So can we say that we all are heading in the same direction?

We could tabulate many other fixed positions taken by other groups including diverse Christian ones. When I was training to be a Church of Scotland minister in Edinburgh from 1955-58, the teaching was that God progressively revealed himself, through the Old Testament days, to the fulfilment in Jesus Christ. That became our fixed position. Yet when you study early church history you discover that there were at its outset many different versions of belief and practice. Christianity has been an evolving story. Except for those who don't want to evolve! For me, as for many labelling ourselves 'progressives' in the Church of Scotland, the process of revelation, of how to steer, has not come to an end.

There comes a time when the fixed position from which you have been steering is receding in the distance. It's becoming fainter and less important. A greater priority arises because it is time to turn round and peer over your shoulder into the distance to see where you are aiming for. We no longer steer by past landmarks. We look for landmarks ahead where we hope to make landfall. Alas, where we are in mid-ocean the waves are higher, the wind more troublesome, the steering and the courage required more taxing. But onwards we must go. We have passed the point of no return.

Where the traditional religions of the world compete in their claims to be the whole and unique Truth we are left confused. We must concede that all religions have developed into their present forms because they are all human creations. They may indeed be based on earlier inspired, tumultuous, visions of the divine experienced by their founders. But then they were developed, perhaps debased, by those who followed from moments of crisis into cultures, practices and laws. So mustn't we be humble and open-minded when thinking and trying to define God's self-revelation to his creation?

These fixed positions throughout the world's cultures cannot all be completely correct. They cannot all define one true faith. So is any one fixed position true? Can we take it for granted that only ours is that one? In any case, should we

not look ahead, move on, into our long journey? Should we not consider the possibility that all religious faiths and practices need to be open and ready to evolve? Human understanding in other spheres is certainly evolving; so why not here too? Or has God ceased to reveal his ways for us? And need we look, for further revelation, only to religious groupings? Could it be that understanding of God's truth may be found also within other spheres of life? Might God not be speaking also to those who don't see themselves as religious, but who do care responsibly for the world and all within it? After all, Jesus found truth in some Samaritans, who did not represent any orthodoxy.

The small book *Seven Brief Lessons on Physics* by Carlo Rovelli (Penguin, 2014) is a popular, helpful and dramatic statement of where physics is at today, which has been translated into 24 languages. While I still can't picture how space and time bend, or where gravity comes into the whole business, what really struck me was Rovelli's humility. As a top scientist he is the first to admit how little we still know. Great minds in the past, Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, Einstein in their explorations of the universe, and Niels Bohr in Quantum Theory, have all been corrected or updated later. Knowledge has been evolving and still is. Our understanding of the universe and of our place in it is evolving. Theology has to catch up and evolve too.

The Jewish faith in Jesus' time was that the 'End of Days' would come with Messiah. This would not yet be the end of the world, but the end of life as we know it. With it would come peace and righteousness. Paul espoused this belief, declaring that Jesus was that Messiah and that the end of days was soon to come about. All should prepare for it and be saved, for the time was short. Alas, we know 2000 years later that righteousness and peace are as far away as ever in the world, though not necessarily within a believer's psyche. 'Religious' folk fight each other, for instance, over possession of the Holy Land, and will continue to do so while they look backwards, believing that God made promises way back that the land should be theirs. This was wishful thinking then and still is today. We need to look at our goals and not at our past if we seek to reach the peaceable kingdom of God.

I wonder, hopefully, whether world societies may be beginning to discover, through agencies other than religious ones, that all peoples of the world belong together. Some folk are turning to humanism, which teaches this; but was not Jesus a good humanist? He was assuredly a spiritually driven humanist, not a secular one. But in God's sight might not all humanists be drawing their motivation from a spiritual basis? Might not God be revealing his ways for us also through apparently non-religious channels? Do we not need to think out of the box and see how understanding can evolve when we are not anchored to the past?

We popularly think of the world as being in three dimensions: length, height, depth. We're told by brainy folk that there are other dimensions, involving space and time. Hegel in the early 19th century believed that the divine is a dimension of our humanity; and this accords with our incarnational theology. So might there not be a spiritual dimension to life – could this be where the divine is to be found? This dimension cannot be measured by our scientific instruments, but is another dimension to our life in which we all exist.

The spiritual – God – is hard to define but has to do with feelings, with aspirations, with sensitivities, with loyalties, with responsibilities, with love – the things important and common to us all. This is more than a matter of how our brains work to bring about such feelings. It is the significance of the fact that we have such feelings and of what this means for the lives we live. In Rovelli's last lesson, entitled 'Ourselves', he writes: ‘

In the big picture of contemporary science there are many things that we do not understand, and one of the things which we understand least about is ourselves.

He goes on to teach that we are not entirely programmed by our inherited natures. He declares: 'We are parts *of* but only partly belonging *to* nature, with a longing for something else.' We have consciousness and emotions and curiosity to find out things:

Our reality is tears and laughter, gratitude and altruism, loyalty and betrayal, the past which haunts us and serenity. Our reality is made up

of our societies, of the emotion inspired by music, of the rich intertwined networks of the common knowledge which we have constructed together.

Rovelli goes on to state his belief that our human race is bound to terminate, if not by war, or disease, or exhausted resources, or pollution, or the rough forces of nature, then hopefully by natural evolution into something stronger. We are born to die as the stars are born and die. We belong to a short-lived species. All our earlier cousins are already extinct, e.g. the Neanderthals. What then would be left of the 'fixed positions' adopted by little earthlings long before?

Let us hope that any new race will be more intelligent than ours. There is some, perhaps wan, hope. There are geniuses today who can do what few others can, and seem to inhabit a realm beyond our own. There are mystics, artists, poets, musicians like Vilde Frang playing the Brahms violin concerto, or a cellist playing the Bach *Adagio*, or William Byrd's *Miserere*, or a Christmas carol, to name just a little of the music which has recently brought a lump to my throat and a 'wow' to my lips. Let us pray that such inspirations suggest what might be part of the nature of a future, more spiritually evolved, race.

But for now: Is there any hope of any revelation of the divine? What is the divine? Who, or what, is the infinite truth out there? We give it the name God, not because God is a He, a bearded man above the bright blue sky, but because we have to give it some name. Paul Tillich called God not 'a being' but Being itself. Others call the divine the Great Mind, the Life Force, the Unknowable One, or – the one I prefer – Divine Energy (this seems to accord with what physicists tell us, that all things – electrons, light waves, radio waves etc., and matter itself – are composed of energy particles of some sort).

Far back in Old Testament times the Hebrew people had different names for God, but they settled for four letters: JHWH (we read this as 'Jahweh'), which they dared not pronounce. For them these letters suggested that they could not give the Almighty a fixed name because the Almighty is elusive and unknowable. That is still our feeling. The unknown looms above us

whenever we look at the night sky and the billions of galaxies and planets out there, or look within in wonder at the tiniest electron.

So this is, I suggest, where a theology ought to take up its direction. Not only looking backward to past insights but with openness to the future. The divine will guide us through caring, spiritually driven humanism, into the peace and goodwill promised in the Jesus movement. The Christian scriptures themselves witnessed to change and evolution. The writers in their varying times, had differences as well as similarities. Scriptures probably should never have been read literally, for their writers could only speak in metaphors when dealing with the infinite and unknowable. All writers put into their own words where they were at in their time and in their spiritual journey.

So what are we seeing when we turn round and look towards our kingdom goal? We see a spiritual reality, beyond the final definition of human words. One involving something more

mystical, more to do with feelings and emotions, aims and ambitions, love, and caring involvement with our planet and our fellow travellers. We know we should see ourselves no longer as competing tribes and countries, fighting other tribes for the means of life. All on Earth are members of the one tribe, in which even enemies are to be loved and cared about. May these realities be our compass points as we struggle on to our final home.

And for me? I look back also, to the founder of my faith, Jesus of Nazareth. He was a man of his time. His followers have developed their religions in many, sometimes questionable, directions. Yet Jesus still today embodies what I see as true kingdom values. For me he remains the guide for our pilgrim journey, the landmark both behind and ahead of us.

Philip Smith is a retired Church of Scotland minister who has also worked in religious broadcasting and as a hospital chaplain



The Ship of Faith. Anonymous Russian icon, 17th century.

Spiritual but not Religious?

Adrian Alker, a Church of England ordained minister for 37 years, calls for a new Reformation which, he says, the established church stubbornly refuses to engage in.

Churches in the United Kingdom, as elsewhere in much of Western Europe and North America, face an accelerating loss of members. The latest statistics¹ show that the average weekly attendance in the Church of England has dropped below one million people for the first time, the latest outcome of the 12% decline in weekly attendance over the past ten years. At the same time being 'spiritual but not religious' is an increasing phenomenon on both sides of the Atlantic, evidenced in survey after survey.

The Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life, chaired by Baroness Butler-Sloss, in its report *Living With Difference*² also identified this trend in reference to a YouGov study of 2013, where a quarter of those interviewed about religion said they were spiritual but not religious.³

Only in recent decades have the terms 'religious' and 'spiritual' become less interchangeable and this, I believe, is connected to the accentuated differences between the 'private' and 'public' spheres of life. The growing prestige of the sciences, the gained insights of biblical scholarship, the relevance of cultural conditioning have led more and more people to shy away from loyalty to religious institutions with their enforcing creeds and rituals.

'Spiritual' for many has come to be associated with a private realm of thought and experience, heightened interest in mysticism, intense connectivity with the natural world, an openness to other faiths and ideologies. On the other hand, for many the word 'religion' does, true to its

meaning, feel too binding, too enlisting and demanding of acceptance of doctrines which may not seem plausible in this twenty-first century.

Whilst this contrast is, of course, more complex than any simple binary interpretation, nevertheless I think it does point to distinctions which are all too evident in our public discourse over faith and religious practice. One distinction was made over twelve years ago by Don Cupitt in his book *Reforming Christianity*, where Don argued that the elaborate machinery of sacramentally mediated church religion has had its day. The kingdom religion of Jesus, he argues is about religious immediacy. Kingdom religion feels more authentic, more democratic, more personal. Kingdom religion speaks less about doctrines and dogmas and more about journeying and experiencing.

Since then a stream of writers – Marcus Borg, Brian McLaren, Dave Tomlinson, Gretta Vosper, to name but a few – have pointed their readers in much the same direction. PCN Britain and other partners sponsored a conference in May 2016 in Birmingham, at which our guest speaker Diana Butler Bass took up the themes of spiritual but not religious to be found in her latest book *Grounded – Finding God in the World – A Spiritual Revolution*.

When people claim to be spiritual but not religious, I understand this in part to be related to kingdom religion. In Christian terms, I would see this as taking the kingdom teachings of Jesus as



framing an ethical basis for human behaviour and how we treat each other. Certainly the Eight Points which guide the work of the Progressive Christianity Network would reflect this notion of kingdom religion.

Depressingly, the established Church, of which I have been an ordained minister for 37 years, responds to these trends not by opening up a debate about what it means to be spiritual but rather points to churchy initiatives such as Messy Church or to an increase in attendance at cathedrals! Church leaders stubbornly refuse to engage in what many writers, theologians, commentators and organisations are calling for, namely a new reformation of the church, a public debate about what truly binds people together in the religious or spiritual quest. John Robinson's *Honest to God* in 1963, the debates in the 1970s around the 'Myth of God Incarnate', the honest challenges by Bishop David Jenkins, seem to have left little impression on the presently evangelically led Church of England whose doctrines, worship and practices have altered little over the centuries.

I do maintain a high regard and love for the local church and the breadth of good work which it does. The church can provide the public space in which goodness, virtue, equality, peace, tolerance and love can flourish. We so desperately need this narrative of care and compassion in our own country today as we face the challenges of migration and the widening gap between rich and poor. Yet we also need our church leaders to shed their fortress mentality, be more honest about the fruits of two hundred years of critical scholarship, allow the real debate not to centre on conversion and the growth in attendance at services but rather to encourage those conversions when folk talk about their deep longings and experiences of life, their doubts and their hopes. Cut the cords of 'right belief', search honestly for truth, stop wrapping Jesus of Nazareth in a coat of many doctrines.

Churches can respond to the notion of being 'spiritual but not religious' by, for example, allowing those important rites of passage in our lives – the birth of children, love expressed in marriage, the mourning of the bereaved – to be met not with doctrine-laden services, which can mean little to unchurched folk, but rather to

recognise that here are opportunities to meet people where they are and to journey with them into the depths of their emotions and search for meaning.

In so many other ways, not least in the content of worship, churches can become places where honest questions are validated, where doubts are respected and religion is not so much about belief but about practice, as repeatedly emphasised by Karen Armstrong.

In many of our networks such as PCN, SOF, Free to Believe, Inclusive Church and many others, we find people who, in their honest search for truth have given up on church. They may not wish to withdraw into a private sphere and may miss that sense of community. I find this is a tragedy, an indictment of the kind of religion and churches which allow no space for spiritual growth, no space for the imagination. Some churches are thankfully bucking the trend through imaginative acts of worship, through a willingness to dialogue with other faiths and with people of non-theistic convictions. But such examples are few in my experience.

But I am delighted that SOF, PCN Britain and other organisations can work together to encourage the search for meaning in and beyond religion and to offer a vision to churches of what the religious landscape might indeed offer as we seek to build that kingdom of love and compassion which Jesus spoke of and enacted in his life.

- 1 *Statistics for Mission 2014*, published by the Archbishops' Council, Church of England
- 2 *Living with Difference*, published by the Woolf Institute, www.woolf.cam.ac.uk
- 3 In the *Eurobarometer Study of Values* and in the *British Cohort Study*, quoted in the *Living with Difference* report.

Adrian Alker is Chair, PCN Britain.

His book, *Is a Radical Church Possible?*, published by Christian Alternative, (reviewed on page 23) can be purchased at the discounted price of £9.99 inc. postage through the online bookshop on the PCN Britain website: www.pcnbritain.org.uk/

Still Wanting to Change the World at the age of 82

John Brindley of the *Loughborough Echo* reports on David Paterson's return to the town where he and a few like-minded others founded the SOF Network in the 1980s.

It will surprise few folk who followed David Paterson's 40 years as a Loughborough vicar that his mission at the age of 82 remains to change the world.

From his appointment at St Peter's Church in 1964 to his initial retirement and departure from the town in 2004, the Rev Paterson was a source of inspiration and challenge to many and annoyance and irritation to others. Pipe and slippers was never likely to be his form of retirement.

His practical hands-on Christianity was admired by believers and unbelievers alike, but when he and other local members of the SOF (Sea of Faith) Network were featured in the BBC TV Heart of the Matter programme in Easter in the 1980s, confirming his disbelief in the physical **resurrection of Jesus** the religious fall-out was huge.

The *Echo* lapped up the controversy which David now reveals resulted in a one-year battle to save his job.

'Yes, I suppose I've been on a journey. I realised from the age of 18 that there could not be a "God" that existed. There is no "great Daddy" looking after us. But the scale of the comeback from the programme did take me by surprise.

'I thought the resurrection was old hat then. But it wasn't and it still isn't now.'

David faced intense questioning from the Bishop of Leicester, the Rt Rev Dr Thomas Butler. His small but passionate congregation

remained strongly behind him whilst many other local Christians called for his spiritual head.

He recalls: 'It was a very difficult time and went on for about a year when my job was on the line.

'I maintained all along that what I was saying was nothing new, having been voiced by Christian mystics long before my time.

'In the end I came up with a form of words I was happy to stand by and, to my surprise, the Bishop agreed.'

So why did he join the church and stand by it so

vehemently? 'It was a case of wanting to reform it from within,' he says. 'And I also happen to believe that religion itself is very important.'

A member of the Brotherhood of Prayer and Action, David's mission in helping the homeless was a fore-runner of some of the town's excellent charities today.

Opening his own church for the homeless to sleep in, plus a room in St Peter's Social Centre – moves that cause a fair deal of disquiet – was followed by a couple of condemned houses near the railway station becoming hostels.



David Paterson. Photo *Oxford Mail*

A very keen part of the newly established Loughborough Ecumenical Parish, aiming to bring churchgoers together, David explains his vision: 'We felt there was a lot of support for middle-aged and older people who became homeless. But not for the young. That's why we formed the Young Single Homeless Project.'

David was also an instigator of the town's Inter-Faith group and felt strongly that the church should take a lead in welcoming new Loughborough residents from Gujarat and the Punjab. He helped establish links that led to the town's partnership with Bhavnagar that still flourishes today.

His controversial columns in the St Peter's magazine pointed a finger of blame at the



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Government and the United States, to name just a couple of the authorities on his hit list. Mix in the fact that St Peter's hosted weddings for different religions and David's support for female and gay clergy and he was the 'Marmite' priest of his time.

'I took a lot of risks in my younger days, including some that were a bit daft,' he admits. That's not to say, of course, that he renounces any of the above.

David says he left Loughborough because he'd 'run out of steam' amid a hugely heavy workload but his desire to retire to a quieter life never materialised.

The former Oxford graduate got only as far as the famous University City where he replicated much of his work, helping to form a local Inter-Faith group, a branch of the SOF Network which spreads non-conformist religious views, and working for an Oxford church.

Now he is again back in Loughborough, riding around in his motor scooter – and determined to do anything but go quietly.

He says: 'Again I ran out of steam and I also came back for family reasons. But I still want to get involved in what I regard as a very remarkable town.'

'As soon as Jeremy Corbyn was elected leader, I joined the Labour Party for the first time in my life. I've always been a Socialist but unfortunately it hasn't been a Socialist party for 20-odd years.'

'I will continue to campaign against austerity, capitalism, greed, violence and the assumption that nuclear weapons are important for peace.'

'I'm looking to start a local Stop the War group to campaign against what is currently happening in Syria.'

Same old David Paterson. Always interesting. Dividing as well as uniting. Always prepared to talk with those who disagree, never afraid to tackle the real issues.

This article by John Brindley was published in the *Loughborough Echo* on Wednesday March 9th 2016. It is reprinted by kind permission of the editor Andy Rush.

Christianity: Where Next?

Mark Dyer asks whether there is a place in the SOF Network for those who oppose fundamentalism but do not abandon supernatural claims.

Forgive my adaptation of the subject of the SOF 29th Annual Conference; but I read the article on *Death and Resurrection* by Dinah Livingstone in the Easter *Sofia* as I had just completed my first reading of the late and wonderful Geza Vermes' book, *The Resurrection* (Penguin 2008). I have to confess to being one of Jack Spong's *Believers in Exile*: a 63-year-old, self-respecting, gay, Jesus-follower, who has not attended any church for the past forty years.

This 'outsider' status has meant I have had 'to work at bringing about (my) own salvation' (Tom Wright's translation), by which I mean, make sense of my faith in a way which does not do insult to my God-given brain, through reading, and enjoying occasional episodes of *koinonia* with fellow Christians. Costa coffee and cakes have been my Eucharist!

What has long concerned me about my faith is the discrepancy between what I learned during the Seventies, whilst at university, and what is promulgated from the pulpit: particularly at times such as the Great Christian Feasts. Surely the clergy have undertaken the same theological studies as I have; and yet their religion often remains unreconstructed, and ill-suited to the needs of our 'post-modern' world. Indeed, at Christmas and Easter, it seems to be the case that fundamentalism reigns!

However, I am also concerned by what I perceive to be the contradictory ethos of SOF. On the one hand it, surely, seeks to liberate us from fundamentalism, and the creedal beliefs of any religion: and yet there seem to be dangerous signs of a 'SOF-approved' form of spirituality. For example, in the April 2016 edition of *Portholes* (132), there is an item on one of the founder-members, David Paterson, in which he is described as publicising 'his personal SOF-sympathetic theology'. Paterson is, then, quoted as saying, 'Religions are needed but have to *stop* (my emphasis) supernatural claims', before continuing to tell us how we (must?) interpret the biblical stories; as 'imaginative and inspirational'. Was that the purpose of their authors? I wonder. A further quotation from Paterson's article in the *Lough-*

borough Echo (16.03.2016) is almost creedal: 'There is no Creator, no almighty, supernatural power, just people marvelling at the wonder of it all, and wanting to fill life with love, joy and peace.' Is that a fact: especially in the Middle-East?

Portholes Editor, Penny Mawdsley, then asks: 'Why don't more of us take up the challenge and send something similar to our local papers?' I have regularly commented on religion in my local papers (*Somerset County Gazette* and *Wellington Weekly News*) for the past couple of decades: usually to correct a fundamentalist pontificating 'Churchian', who is taking the existence of God for granted, and as sufficient basis to enable her/him to write a prescription for our behaviour; or to condemn a sinner, such as me. However, one thing I have realised is that one is able to write almost any amount of rubbish, provided one has the letters REV in front of one's name!

I am a follower of Jesus; and yet I find such narratives as his parthenogenesis (arguably not found in Scripture), and the baptism of infants (not found in Scripture), unnecessary and irrelevant. Now, I think I have even reached the stage where I feel the Resurrection may fit into the same categories: insofar as treating it as an historical event is concerned.

As Vermes points out, the monotheistic Jew Jesus's entire focus was on the coming kingdom of God. God is absolutely central to his own adoration and teaching: not his own person. Even the great christological title, 'Son of God' is placed on the lips of Jesus only once in the Synoptics (Mt 11:25-7; Lk 10:21-2); and Vermes interprets these as reflecting the high christology of John's Gospel, and as possibly part of a later hymn, which found its way into Matthew. If the title were genuinely typical of Matthew's theology, surely it would appear more frequently.

The development of Jesus' divine status was a lengthy process; thoroughly and succinctly traced by Vermes in his later book, *Christian Beginnings: from Nazareth to Nicaea, AD 30-325*, (Penguin 2012). The matter was only 'settled' at Nicaea in

325: and, yet, how many Christians today are aware of the length of this process, or the names of the many *dramatis personae* involved in it? How many ask themselves what the early Christians believed of Jesus for the first three hundred years following his death? How many continue to believe, of the infant Jesus, that, 'all knowledge and all power and all dominion were invested in that baby boy' (A.N. Wilson, *Jesus*, 1992)?

Then we come to the Resurrection, and the Atonement: probably the greatest stumbling blocks for us today: and this is where Dinah's article is illuminating. Jesus of Nazareth, in the perfection of his humanity, as recorded in the Synoptics, surely revealed the Divine. That is not to say that a perfect human being would be divine: but that our Creator (there, I've written it!) might perfect our humanity, and dwell among us. The only problem is that we, who never learn, would repeat the exercise and judicially murder that perfect human being again. Therein, I feel, lies the concept of 'atonement': the realisation (revealed through the life of Jesus) that we are incapable of fulfilling Dinah's ambition:

It [the Christ Epic] is another version – vision – of what Jesus himself preached, the reign of God coming on Earth. But as there is no supernatural being to bring it about we have to keep on trying to do it ourselves. (Sofia, 119, p 14)

This is a hopeless task, even given an evolutionary time-scale. It omits a small characteristic of humanity, recognised by generations of our religious forebears: our 'nature'. Here we need to be realistic, and engaged. We may consider ourselves 'civilised'; but a glance around the world today serves to demonstrate that man's inhumanity to man is as vicious and cruel as it ever was. Power, status and wealth remain the principal driving factors in the lives of many of us and, once achieved, we do not readily relinquish any of them.

Contrast our behaviour with that of the One who lived only two thousand years ago. The difference – and the impossibility of the task of our becoming more like him – reveals our need for forgiveness and grace.

And that is before we scrutinise that other major problem for religion: the classical 'problem of evil'. And here we do not mean the wish of Islam to inflict a compulsory form of belief on our planet through cruelty, or 'our' retaliation through indiscriminate bombings. It is in the type of situation identified by Stanley Hauerwas, the death

of a little girl from leukaemia, that we identify the real problem. John Hick tried to side-step the issue, by saying that the problem only applied to those holding to a Deistic form of theology, a God who is held to be almighty and omnipotent, rather than the Suffering Servant version we find in Jesus of Nazareth. This is too neat; and still leaves the problem. The problem also remains for those holding to an approved SOF-sympathetic theology.

One of the factors that Vermes identifies as being characteristic of Jesus of Nazareth in every Gospel is in his ability to heal. Having been a nurse (in haematology), I became very interested in the perceived transition in 'western' medicine, from the 'art' of healing, to the 'science' of the cure of death. And here, I have found the writings of Jürgen Moltmann to be especially illuminating. In his Gifford Lectures of 1984-5, Moltmann wrote:

But if we understand health as the strength to be human, then we make being human more important than the state of being healthy. Health is not the meaning of human life. On the contrary, a person has to prove the meaning he has found in his own life in conditions of health and sickness. Only what can stand up to both health and sickness, and ultimately to living and dying, can count as a valid definition of what it means to be human. (p 273)

This is why I (as a new-comer) am concerned about how I perceive the SOF Network Christianity. It needs to be practical and attractive if it is to be true to the version of Judaism practised by Jesus. But SOF seems incredibly intellectual and rather nebulous; and I have to ask whether in this perceived intellectualism lies a clue as to why its numbers are static.

I do not feel that the only option for a Christian, in the face of what we have discovered about the scale of the cosmos, time, and evolution, (to say nothing of basic particles!) is to turn to the Gospel of Richard Dawkins. Indeed, for me, the unimaginable scale (and what that says about the utter unimportance of Earth), has the opposite effect that same awareness had for Blaise Pascal. For the unimaginable scale, coupled with the constant of human nature, only serves to enhance the absolute miracle I take Judeo-Christian *Heilsgeschichte* to be. Does that mean I ought not to belong to the SOF Network?

Mark Dyer is a retired haematology nurse from Somerset.

Theological Reflection

Religion as a Human Creation

3. Spirit and Trinity

Dinah Livingstone ponders a classic Christian doctrine.

Spirit

I am writing this shortly before the feast of Pentecost, which is immediately followed by Trinity Sunday and the long series of Sundays after Trinity. In the Acts of the Apostles we read:

When the day of Pentecost had come they were all together in one place. And suddenly there was a sound like a rushing mighty wind and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit ...

The spirit is a rush of energy like a mighty wind or tremendous breath. Like tongues of fire it falls upon the bereft little group of apostles and family and friends of Jesus, infuses them with new life and confidence, so that together they become a living body. Jesus has gone but now the spirit of him and his Father breathes into this little group the community spirit that makes them become his body still active on Earth, the body of Christ.

So what is spirit? When someone dies, those to whom he or she has been important often feel that person's spirit lives on. When we say an individual has spirit we mean their oomph, their generous energy. That spirit may come and go, 'it blows where it will'. For example, sometimes I feel listless and don't 'get it together', sometimes I feel I just can't write what I want to, but then suddenly something clicks and it starts pouring out. 'Inspiration' comes.

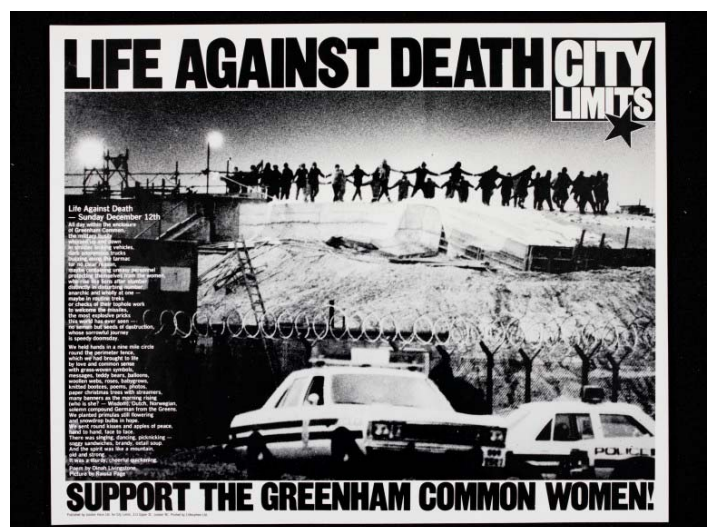
When we talk about the spirit of a place, such as the spirit of London or the spirit of Exmoor we mean its particular energy or ethos. We may speak about the spirit of a group of people, a city perhaps infused with a common energy or purpose, as in in 'the spirit of the blitz', or a country trying to create a better

society after a terrible war, as in the title of a recent film, *The Spirit of 45*. Or at Greenham Common women sang: You can't kill the Spirit,/ she's like a mountain, old and strong./ She goes on and on and on.

In the past that spirit was often personified – or 'supernaturalised' into a supernatural person. As Blake puts it:

The ancient poets animated all sensible objects with Gods or Geniuses, calling them by the names and adorning them with the properties of woods, rivers, mountains, lakes, cities, nations ... And particularly they studied the genius of each city and country, placing it under its mental deity...

Such supernatural personification is a poetic activity but it is a poetic way of talking about *real* energies active in the world. At Greenham, for example, I don't think most of the women thought of the Spirit as an actual person, more as a communal female energy against the weapons of mass destruction. But the spirit there was strong enough to 'move mountains' or, in fact, US nuclear missiles.



'You can't kill the Spirit.'

In the New Testament the Greek word for spirit, πνευμα (*pneuma*), is neuter. Sometimes it refers to a distinct person but sometimes the appropriate pronoun for it could equally well be 'it'. For example: 'The spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing' (Jn 6: :63). Or 'You did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of adoption υιοθεσια (*huiothesia*: 'sonship': Rom 8: 15).

But when Jesus speaks of the Spirit as the 'Comforter', or 'Counsellor': παρακλητος (*paraclete*), which is masculine in Greek, he is referring to a person: 'The Comforter, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, *he* (*ἐκεῖνος*, masculine) will teach you everything...' (Jn 14:26). And in the rest of the New Testament when the Holy Spirit is portrayed acting as a conscious agent, this is the activity of a *person*. For example, 'We do not know how to pray as we ought but that very Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words' (Rom 8:26).

Actually *ruach*, the word for spirit, wind and breath in Hebrew (and cognate languages Aramaic and Syriac), is feminine and for some centuries the Holy Spirit was held to be feminine in the ancient Syriac church. I recently read the fascinating book, *Sisters of Sinai* by Janet Soskice, which tells the story of two intrepid Scottish Victorian ladies, Agnes Lewis and Margaret Gibson, who discovered, among other things in St Catherine's monastery in the Sinai desert, an ancient Syriac Gospel in which the Holy Spirit is feminine. However, eventually, even the Syriac church changed the Spirit's gender to masculine to conform with the other Christian churches.

In his article Edward Walker speaks of Jesus' baptism (and see picture on page 9), when the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus in the form of a dove and the Father's voice from heaven says: 'This is my beloved Son.' After this in Luke's gospel Jesus begins his ministry by going into the synagogue in Nazareth on the Sabbath day and quoting the prophet Isaiah (Lk 3:18-21):

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim
release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim favourable year of the Lord.

Then he rolls up the scroll and says: 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' He proclaims he is inaugurating the reign of God, the reign of kindness, about to come on Earth

Jesus leaves his disciples still believing this will come quickly, because 'God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (Rom 5:5). They are hoping for 'the freedom of the glory of the children of God', for which 'the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now and not only the creation but we ourselves who have received the *first fruits* of the Spirit groan inwardly while we wait...' (Rom 8:21-23). They have received the 'first fruits' but are hoping for fulfilment, they must 'fill up what is wanting' for the reign of kindness, the spirit of love, to prevail on Earth. 'For the reign God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of justice and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit' (Rom 4: 17).

Of course, except here and there, the reign of kindness still has not prevailed in our hearts or society. But we can still believe in the spirit of love, – that you can't kill the spirit – still hope and perhaps try to contribute to a reign of kindness, even knowing we have no supernatural guarantee.

Trinity

Father, Son and Spirit, all three are present at Jesus' baptism. At the end of Mathew's gospel the apostles are told to go out and make disciples 'baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.'

Over the next few centuries the church developed a theology of God as Trinity, with the Son being proclaimed as true God, consubstantial with the Father, at Nicea in 325 and the full divinity and equality of the Spirit at the later Council of Constantinople in 381. In the New Testament the Holy Spirit is associated with *breath*, yearning *sighs and groans*, with God's *love pouring out* and with *communion*. Paul's triple farewell greeting at the end of his letter to the Corinthians is: 'The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion (fellowship, κοιινωνια: *koinonia*) of the Holy Spirit be with you all' (2 Cor13:13).

At the beginning of the fifth century Augustine explores the doctrine in his monu-

mental *De Trinitate*.

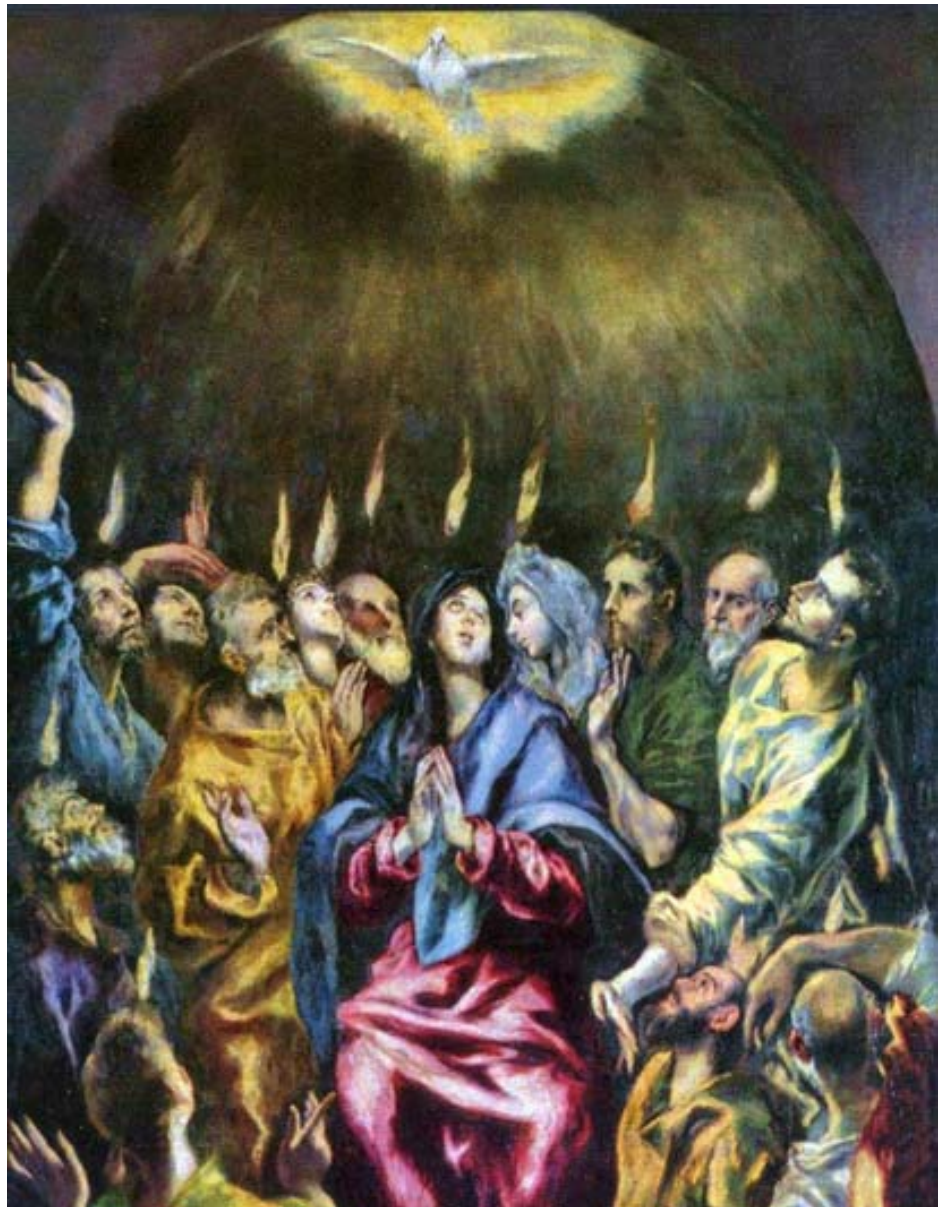
Very briefly, Augustine says that all three persons of the Trinity wholly possess the one same divine nature or substance, everything that God is. They are one God but as three persons, they are distinguished by their *subsistent relationships*. The Father *begets* the Son and together they *breathe* the Holy Spirit. Just as the Word, which expresses God the Father's self-knowledge, is so perfect that it is a distinct person – the Son – so the Father and the Son love each other so perfectly that this love is also a distinct person – the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from both of them, their mutual love:

The Holy Spirit, according to the Holy Scriptures is neither of the Father alone, nor of the Son alone, but of both; and so intimates to us the mutual love with which the Father and the Son love each other: *communem qua invicem se diligunt pater et filius nobis insinuat caritatem* (*De Trin.* XV:17:20).

In his *Summa Theologica* Thomas Aquinas develops his theology of the Trinity, closely following Augustine.

As therefore we say that a tree flowers by its flower, so do we say that the Father, by the Word or the Son, speaks himself, and his creatures; and that the Father and the Son love each other and us, by the Holy Spirit of Love proceeding (*Summa* I: 37:2).

Both Augustine and Thomas go to great lengths to expound this very complex doctrine. They explore what is meant by the term 'person', but although they insist that the Holy Spirit is a



El Greco, *Pentecost*, Museo del Prado, Madrid, 1596

person, his 'personality' remains less fully 'realised' than that of the Father and the Son.

With his usual psychological insight, Augustine spends several books of *De Trinitate* investigating memory, understanding and will in a single human mind as the image of the Trinity:

Since, then, these three: memory, understanding, will, are not three lives, but one life; nor three minds, but one mind; it follows certainly that neither are they three substances, but one substance (*De Trin.* X:11:18).

Augustine thinks of the human mind as the image of the Trinity, but we can look at it the other way round. The Trinity is an ideal model of the possibilities of the human psyche. God the

Father personifies the origin, the generative power giving us the life that we receive from parents and from the cosmos through evolution. By knowing himself he pours all this into his Son, his Word, with nothing held back, his whole divine nature, so that the Son has everything that the Father has. Then together they pour that same whole divine nature into the Spirit, into *love*, so that the Spirit is the personified 'mutual love with which they love each other'. The term used is 'circumincession' – 'flowing round into': life-power flows into knowing; life-power and knowing together flow into loving; and knowing and loving flow back round into life-power.

Similarly, although of course we are neither perfect nor infinite, we humans pour our energies into knowing (and speaking). But knowing on its own is not enough for full humanity; loving is also necessary. On that Trinitarian model all our knowing should pour into loving. Or as Augustine and Thomas would put it, *breathe* love.

As well as seeing the Trinity as a model of the human psyche, we can look at it cosmically. In their major work, *The Universe Story*, 'geologist' Thomas Berry and mathematical cosmologist Brian Swimme describe a cosmic, material trinity in a triple Cosmogenetic Principle, which operates throughout the cosmos, and 'assumes that the dynamics of evolution are the same at every point in the universe'. The Cosmogenetic Principle, they say, 'states that the evolution of the universe will be characterised by *differentiation*, *autopoiesis* and *communion* throughout time and space and at every level of reality'. Or perhaps we could call these three processes individuation, self-expression and relationship.

It is easy to see a parallel between that cosmic trinity and the theology of God as Trinity: God the Father as the origin, the creative life-power; God the Son as self-expression, Word; God the Holy Spirit as love, communion. That is not to say that there is any supernatural principle at work in the universe. On the contrary, the contemplation of the universe may lead people to express reverence for it by *deifying* forces they find in it. But it remains very fruitful to reflect on the Trinity as a work of the human poetic genius, supernaturally personifying real forces that are in the cosmos and actually or potentially in ourselves.

One insight the Trinity affords is that our power and our knowing should flow into loving. Another is that one God in three persons combines the insight of monotheism: a single ground of being of a single ordered cosmos, with the insight that God is *social* – three persons 'flowing round into' one another. This reminds us that we ourselves need other people in order fully to become persons, to become human. Cosmologists speak (non-supernaturally) of the 'initial singularity', from which the Big Bang exploded, and number three in Berry and Swimme's Cosmogenetic Principle is *communion*, corresponding to the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, as love, communion. We need to love and be loved, we need communion. As they put it:

The loss of relationship, with its consequent alienation, is a kind of supreme evil in the universe. In the religious world this loss was traditionally understood as an ultimate mystery. To be locked up in a private world, to be cut off from intimacy with other beings, to be incapable of entering the joy of mutual presence – such conditions were taken as the essence of damnation (*Universe Story*, p.78).

Two further points. As we noted, the 'personality' of the Spirit remains less 'realised' in the story and we often use the word 'spirit' to express an impersonal energy. In John's gospel Jesus promises the Spirit 'will lead you into all truth'. Perhaps it will be this shadowy Spirit that makes us realise divine persons are not real, but poetic personifications of real forces in our world.

Secondly, we saw that (after some opposition) all three persons of the Trinity are usually regarded as male. Although I think the Trinity is a very rich doctrine, this seems like a glaring flaw in it. Was it a male-dominated society that created a male God in its own image and then that male God reinforced the male-dominated society? In this respect the ancient Toltec Supreme Deity Ometeotl (which means 'God Pair'), the Lord and Lady of Duality, seems better imagined. I must leave it there but my Theological Reflection in the next *Sofia* will be on Woman.

載營塊抱一、能無離乎。專氣
致柔、能嬰兒乎。濃除玄覽、能
無疲乎。愛民治國、能無爲乎。
天門開闢、能爲雌乎。明白四
達、能無知乎。生之、畜之。生
而不有、爲而不恃、長而不宰。
是謂玄德

Resistance

—can you prevent your mind from straying
can you hold to the one never let it slip

can you make your breath as a soft as a child's
can you listen to its long-drawn out and in

can you renew the glass through which you gaze
so the world is whole and vivid

can you feel a love of others and persuade
yet resist the desire to dictate

can you latch and unlatch the doors of perception
yet be content to play the female part

can your insight range and penetrate
near and far yet back off not interfere

then raise them every one nourish them all
raise them but stake no claim

influence them but do not dictate
govern them but do not be drawn to legislate

only this my teacher says can be called power

Laozi
Daodejing, 10
version by Martyn Crucefix

Daodejing by Laozi, versions by Martyn Crucefix, published by Enitharmon Press (London 2016), is reviewed on page 26. The poem from its chapter 10, 'Resistance', is reprinted here by kind permission of the publisher.

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News from Don Cupitt

May I report some bits of news about my doings?

On Friday 22 July, a family member will drive me across so that I can join the Conference between about 1.30 and 4.30 pm and at least greet some old friends.

Peter Armstrong, who was the producer of the 1984 TV series, has begun filming with me again. He has in mind a slightly refurbished and extended 'second edition' of the old series, a project in which the BBC has expressed interest. But if that doesn't happen, Peter's new film will in any case be put up on the internet, and made available to the SOF websites.

Members may not know about a two hour interview with me on my life and thought, which can be found by Googling 'Alan Macfarlane Interviews', or sms.cam.ac.uk. It's part of a Cambridge project to create a record of the University's intellectual life, and is the best thing of its kind that I have done. It prompted Peter Armstrong to work on a new Episode 7 to add to his earlier work.

Yours ever
Don Cupitt
Cambridge

SOF Sift

A column in which Network members think out loud about SOF and their own quest.

*Michael Hell
Birmingham*

From the time we came to England in 1937, my mother was determined that we should grow up in the religion of the land. So we attended church regularly and read the Bible, practices which were reinforced at my schools. At university, I flirted briefly with Roman Catholicism, but, when Archbishop Roberts SJ told my best friend that he must love the Church of England better before converting, I stayed with the familiar.

With my wife, my religion was Eucharist-based until the change in order required an amount of standing that she could not manage and the boys required ferrying to cycling on a Sunday morning. After she died 20 years ago, I went back to regular church attendance, mostly early Communion and once a week said Evensong. I also started my continuing learning of the Alexander Technique. The release of my body tension released my mind to ask questions about the religion that I had accepted in the traditional way. The first question was the need for abject Confession at the start of every service: there wasn't time to sin so much between Sunday and Wednesday! Learning Non-Violent Communication taught me the importance of not judging and being kind to oneself.

The real bombshell was a footnote in one of Karen Armstrong's books: 'Of course, God is a construct of the human imagination'. I struggled with this for a long time. It is one thing to read about the word 'God' as just a symbol for the sum of our sacred aspirations and another to accept that there is nothing 'out there', especially when some people have such a vivid experience of the reality of God.

It was easier to understand that Jesus was a man. He did say some strange things about sheep and goats and everlasting fire, and his emphasis on forgiveness reflected the domination structure of the society of recent millennia. Moreover, I came to see that the main focus of our attention should be now, the present moment. So I wrote a new version of the Lord's Prayer to reflect my understanding. This, with



the reasoning behind it, was printed in *Progressive Voices*, issue 2 (Sept 2012).

This version worked quite well for a time. I was not happy addressing 'our heavenly Father', and friends objected to the retention of the petitionary form. But I thought that both could be accepted as metaphorical, as Marcus Borg suggests. I went on reading and listening. I was very struck by Gretta Vosper's determination to use language that reflects our contemporary world view. The result was sadly uninspiring: lots of words, and no connection with the familiar liturgy. Cranmer was a genius with words, as the new Prayer Book shows.

However, I was really shaken by the reaction of my youngest son to the Midnight Service two Christmases ago. He appeared suddenly at my side and afterwards said that he had felt he had been visiting a foreign land. I realised that Gretta was right. It is not good enough to say that the meaning can be taught: it needs to make immediate sense to any incomer.

So I cast about for a word that could be used as the symbol for the sum of our sacred aspirations. The word that came to me was 'Love', a short word that would fit wherever we say 'God' or 'Lord'. I am not saying 'God is Love', but that love is the human drive that makes us want to make life more wonderful for others as for ourselves. I have accepted the volitional 'May we...', though it has old associations with asking permission at school. The new version, which makes clear our responsibility for making heaven on earth, reads:

All embracing Love, we bless you within and without and around us. May we work for justice and harmony in this world. May we have today sufficient bread to nourish body and soul. When we stray from your way, may we remember you and turn back, and love our neighbour as ourselves. May we not be tested, but kept safe from harm. Amen.

Pauline Pearson reviews *Is a Radical Church Possible?*

by Adrian Alker

Christian Alternative Books (Alresford 2016). 168 pages. £12.99

Adrian Alker begins his book with an introduction and an explanation. He explains that he grew to faith in a liberal, questioning church. His history is of questioning doctrine, taking the modern world seriously, and a commitment to serving the poor and disadvantaged. He has recently retired, and wants to share his thinking about being a Christian and being 'church'. The eleven chapters of the book are organised into two groups: 'Being Honest about Jesus', and 'Being Honest about the Church'. Each chapter includes some questions for discussion and material for further reading.

In the first set of chapters Alker begins by looking at the way Jesus is portrayed in literature and art – the human and historic aspects of Jesus against the iconic Christ. He goes on to consider the perspectives of the gospel writers in their accounts of Jesus' early life, arguing that the wider concerns these reflect are of value, although they undermine a single 'true' Christmas story. In a third chapter he looks at the adult Jesus, his prophetic commitment to the fulfilment of the Torah; his opposition to the religious leaders of his day; the importance of his own experience of God, and the imminence of God's kingdom; his reputation as a healer; and his inclusion of the broken and shunned. He asks his readers to consider which elements of Jesus' life appear to be factual, and which may be metaphorical or legendary, and suggests that Jesus was radical in his consistent proclamation of an alternative to the Empire of Rome. From here he goes on to address the death and resurrection of Jesus, examining key ideas about atonement, and looking at some debates about the resurrection: the historical 'truths' in the gospel accounts, the meaning of Jesus' resurrection for life after death, and the overall significance of resurrection. In the final chapter of this group, Alker discusses the gap between academic scholarship and the everyday life of the church, and suggests that in a new millennium, the two need bringing together in a radical retelling of the story of Jesus, and a fresh understanding of God.

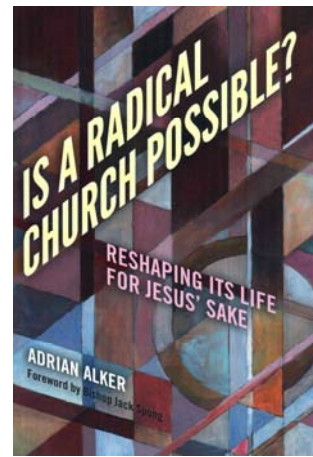
The second group of chapters are grouped around 'Being Honest about the Church'. Alker begins by sketching the changing shape of the church through his own experiences. He highlights numerical decline, the impact of modernism, the questions of SOF about the whole religious enterprise – and God – as a social construction, and the desire of traditionalists for a safe anchorage. Alongside this he places the

church's record in social action, as a community espousing kingdom values, the continuing value given to spirituality, impulses of faith, and authenticity.

He goes on to explore the bible – its ubiquity and its usefulness. Next he considers 'Spirited Worship', where silence and awe combine with fellowship, and attenders are not made to feel guilty or trapped into straightjacketing orthodoxy. Chapter nine considers the shape of the church, contrasting the current hierarchical model with 'round table' communities of radical inclusion, and asserting that the church 'does not exist to grow!' Alker addresses benchmarks for passionate people following the Way and suggests that as well as showing love and compassion, they fight against injustice in the world, and care for the natural world. Finally he examines the 'individual journey into the mystery of God'. He suggests that 'boundaries between theism, agnosticism and non-theism are often wafer-thin'. In a postscript – in answer to the question of his title – he concludes affirmatively but says: 'Listen deeply to the world and make sure you are answering the questions people are asking, not the ones you want to answer.'

Alker says that his readers will have to judge 'whether or not I would have been better tending my plants at the bottom of the garden after thirty five years of ministry'. My answer is no. However, an important question for potential readers might be who is he intending to share his thinking with? My guess is that he envisages a readership of people engaged in ministry, who might need their thinking nudged into a new place. Whilst the book is well worth exploring, I think that little in it will come as news to anyone trained for ministry in the past decade or so. The accessible writing style and thought-provoking questions mean that it may be better suited as a challenging resource for discussion by lay people who want to go beyond passive attention to sermons and grapple with what their faith means in the 21st century, and in their day-to-day life.

Dr Pauline Pearson is Professor in Nursing at the University of Northumbria and a non-stipendiary minister in the Church of England.



reviews

Valerie Clark reviews
Foxes Have Holes
*Christian Reflections on Britain's
Housing Need*

edited by Andrew Francis

Ekklesia (London 2016) Pbk. 138 pages. £11.99.

'Now is the time' was the call and mood of the launch of this book at Manchester Cathedral on 14 April. We were addressed by three of the authors of chapters as well as by Ekklesia staff. I was inspired by their combined determination to try to address the housing problem.

The Bishop of Manchester, David Walker, spoke first about a sense of belonging (chapter 1). He said that, ideally, a home ought to be exclusively ours – no hot-bedding as some migrant workers experience – and available to us when we need it – so no bed and breakfast accommodation, either, where people have to leave every morning. He wanted people to have security and protection – to know their possessions will be there on return and that they will not be harassed by landlords. A home should be affordable – a major theme of the whole book – and sustainable, able to provide what people need for themselves and their families even if one bedroom is not occupied every night.

Next to speak was Helen Woolley (chapter 6), an architect based in Sheffield, who grew up in Bournville, Birmingham. She described the benefits for workers of that village built for them by the Quaker, George Cadbury: a village green, a brook of water, good housing with a garden. She said that good quality housing and connected private and public green spaces were also evident in Saltaire (Titus Salt) and Port Sunlight (Lever Brothers). The Garden City Movement (Ebenezer Howard) carried forward these ideals in Letchworth, Welwyn, Telford and Milton Keynes. She bemoaned the modernist approach of building tower blocks which isolate people, have unused public green spaces, while children living on higher floors do not go out to play. She recognised the very real conflict between maintaining the Green Belt while new housing demand grows.

Last to speak was the book's editor, Andrew Francis, who outlined the vision for action of the final chapter. He called for a national consensus on housing which includes a commitment to provide safe, affordable, secure and accessible housing for all, as well as a recognition that we need a mix of housing – council provided, housing associations, private

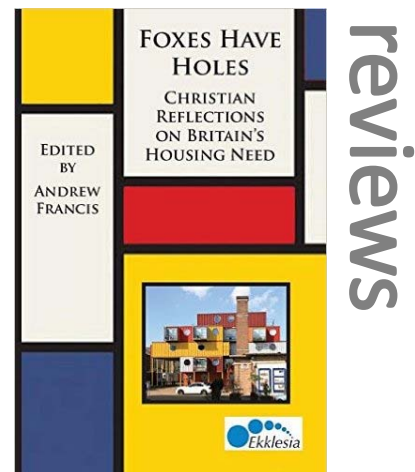
rental and home-ownership. He called for a tax to be levied on owners who leave expensive properties empty, particularly in London, and so hyper-inflate all other properties in the area –

including those at the lower end. He criticised the government's 'affordable' purchase price figures (£450,000 in London and £250,000 elsewhere) as unrealistic, which many authors reiterate throughout the book. His last action point, entitled 'A challenge to the churches', reminds us that as churchgoers we are probably securely housed in a dwelling of our choice, either as owner-occupier or tenant, and he asked us to become aware of the housing situation in our own area and to support grass-roots organisations.

I was motivated to read the whole book but particularly enjoyed these three chapters. I also enjoyed 'A history of British Housing Development' (chapter 2), which describes the development of tenements in Scotland and terraced housing in England because great numbers of people needed to live near their work. I discovered more about squatting (p20), and learnt about hutting (p23) mouseholing (p24) Housing Action Trusts (p29) and 'gentrification' (p31). There are also good chapters describing the changing role of the local authority, the development of housing associations, the changing city landscape and Scottish rural housing.

This is an important and well constructed book, which encourages Christians to work with people of other faiths, as well as no religious belief, to address these housing issues adequately. It is up to date and talks about the awful housing problems that we *now* have, especially in our cities. Christian communities are challenged to look around them more carefully, to use their buildings more adventurously, to work with others more frequently and, probably – although it is not stated – to be grateful for the housing situation that we are in.

Valerie Clark has served on SOF's steering committee and conference-organising groups. She now lives in Manchester and currently is co-clerk of her local Quaker Meeting.



Martin Spence reviews

The Divide

Film by Katherine Round

2016. In UK cinemas from 22nd April 2016..

<http://thedividedocumentary.com/>

In 2009 Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett published *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*, setting out a closely-argued plea for public policy which directly addresses inequality. Packed with graphs* and statistics, the book challenges the dogma that deregulation and 'free' markets benefit everybody. Instead, it shows how these policies benefit the few at the expense of the many and that other countries, which tackle inequality directly, achieve prosperity on a much broader front.

Wilkinson and Pickett are epidemiologists, studying the social and institutional causes of disease and ill-health. For them, 'equality' is multidimensional, encompassing not just wealth and income, but physical and mental health, drug abuse, social mobility, obesity, violence and imprisonment. They treat 'standard of living' as just one element in the more significant category of 'quality of life'.

So far so good: *The Spirit Level* is a valuable and informative book. But is it possible, or desirable, to make a film based on a book of this sort? A watchable film that doesn't bore us to tears with worthy intentions and too many numbers? Surprisingly perhaps, the answer is 'Yes'.

The Divide, a documentary film by producer/director Katherine Round, is not 'the film of the book' but is definitely 'inspired' by the book. It doesn't reproduce the book's graphs and statistics, or its comparisons between more equal and less equal countries. Instead it does what film does best: it explores a single powerful theme through personal experiences and stories. Its theme is the human cost of inequality, and the countries chosen to illustrate it are the UK and USA, the countries that since Thatcher and Reagan have pioneered a neo-liberal 'economic experiment' in deregulation and free-market excess.

In the course of the film we get to know seven or eight key characters. Some are trying to get by on low-paid, part-time contracts, such as Janet who works for Walmart in the USA, or Rochelle who is a care assistant in north-east England. There is Keith, consumed with rage and violence as he serves a 25 year prison sentence in the USA for possessing a tiny amount of dope. There is Darren from Glasgow, born into a working class community racked by unemployment

and drugs: he's a poet, a rapper, highly talented, struggling with alcoholism.

But this isn't a film about poverty, it's a film about the costs of inequality. So

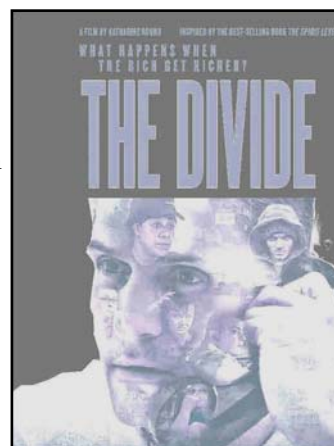
it also features the other victims: those with regular incomes, whose lives are blighted by terror of losing their jobs, their careers, or their nice houses. We meet Alden, a stressed-out psychologist who advises stressed-out executives how to cope with their stress. He's stuck on a middle-class treadmill, and he knows it. And we meet Jen, a mother and housewife trapped in an exclusive gated community with its own private pecking-order of wealth and status, where neighbours despise her and her kids have no friends.

Beautifully shot, nicely paced, always utterly respectful of its characters, *The Divide* shows how inequality corrodes all our lives. Those at the bottom suffer material poverty, ill-health and short lives. And at every step above there is fear: fear of losing a job, losing income, losing a home, losing status, and fear – often irrational, but nonetheless powerful – of violence from those at the bottom.

Astonishingly, this is not a depressing film. It shows some of its characters fighting back, taking a stand, which is great. But its most memorable moments are human moments – such as when Leah, bringing up a family on a part-time job at Kentucky Fried Chicken, is trying to talk to the filmmaker. Her kids are making a racket and she bellows: 'Shut up! Shut up now! Period!' Then she catches the camera's eye, grins, and bursts into rich, infectious laughter. Maybe that's one answer to inequality: simply to grin, to laugh, to assert the unanswerable equality of a shared moment of joy.

This is a golden time for documentary film, and *The Divide* is among the best. See it if you can.

* Some of the graphs and statistics from *The Spirit Level* are available online at www.equalitytrust.org.uk Click on 'Resources', then on 'The Spirit Level'.



reviews

Martin Spence used to be a full-time trade union negotiator, and now writes about history, politics and ideas.

Kathleen McPhilemy reviews

Daodejing

by Laozi, versions by Martyn Crucefix

Enitharmon Press (London 2016). Pbk. 112 pages. £9.99.

Having read and admired Martyn Crucefix' translation of Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*, I was intrigued by this volume but uncertain whether to approach it as a religious or a philosophical text or as a collection of poems. I also wondered how much I needed to know about Daoism and indeed how accessible this central text of Daoism could be to Western patterns of thought. In his introduction Crucefix encourages 'contemporary readers to approach them [the texts] in large part as language, I mean as poetry.' The *Daodejing*, also known as the *Tao te Ching*, is the central text of Taoism, whose origins can be traced back at least seven centuries BCE. In legend it is attributed to the sage, Laozi. Dao means the Way but its significance is more or less untranslatable and can only be approached through the intuition of metaphor, as in this text where recurrent images 'un-carved wood', water, way, path and direction attempt to convey what Dao is. According to the introduction, it is 'a mode of being that is all encompassing, a phenomenal, an existential primacy – perhaps akin to the Western idea of original chaos.' We might also link it to the Heideggerian concept of *Dasein* or perhaps to the Romantic notion of the sublime. Certainly, its attraction to the poet is its recognition that every form of words is limited and limiting, that words cannot express the inexpressible. This is the opening premise of the text:

*that the path I can put a name to
cannot take me the whole way*

'Nursery' (1)

Also in his introduction, Crucefix speaks of translating, but the title page refers to a 'version' rather than a translation. 'Versioning' provides the freedom to produce a text which can speak to our own time. If you glance at a page or two of the literal translations of the *Daodejing* you can see the Chinese characters with two or three possible English translations where varying combinations could lead to a range of very different 'versions'. This fluidity allows Crucefix to import his own references and to introduce his own oblique allusions to Western literature, thought and contemporary politics, e.g. 'they [leaders] like to say "we are all in this together"'. To criticise this approach as culturally imperialistic Westernisation is pointless; as Crucefix says, Westernisation is inevitable in any English version. He has taken the process one step further, using the *Daodejing* as the basis for creating his own 21st century text. Sometimes his allusions to

popular culture can be disconcerting, as with 'shiny happy people' in 'Adrift' (20); also jarring but perhaps inevitable in a text of this nature is the occasional cliché: 'the journey that lasts ten thousand miles/ begins with taking one initial step'. 'A Tender Sapling' (64). Major English poets lurk in the shadows. In 'Resistance' (chapter 10) he writes 'can you latch and unlatch the doors of perception', a clear reference to Blake and later, in 'Rituals' (38) we find:

*understand how it was after the way was lost
then virtue came and after virtue human kindness
after kindness codes of morality
after morality
our reliance on ritual...*

This again could be Blake or, behind Blake, Rousseau. Keats is another presence:

*the true teacher is like a poet
who has no self to speak of
using the self of others as his own*

'Dazed' (49)

In 'Dead Inflexibility' (chapter 25), there is a direct quotation 'irritable reaching'. These references to Keats' theory of Negative Capability, 'that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason' (letter to George and Thomas Keats, 1817) are unsurprising, because the Dao which Crucefix presents seems very close to Keats. Yet despite these familiarising comparisons, the text remains elusive and also contradictory, perhaps because 'without contraries there can be no progression' or perhaps because it is untranslatable.

The poems are very attractive and I enjoyed their clarity – limpidity derived from murkiness – 'Un-carved Wood' (15). Nevertheless, while I will value them as poetry, I will not become a convert. There are contradictions I cannot resolve such as the relationship between self-abnegation and good government and while the poems acknowledge violence they do not, in my view, accommodate it. I will stick with *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, another gnomic and often contradictory text, but, for me, more comprehensive.

Katherine McPhilemy's poetry collections include *The Lion in the Forest* (Katabasis, London 2004).

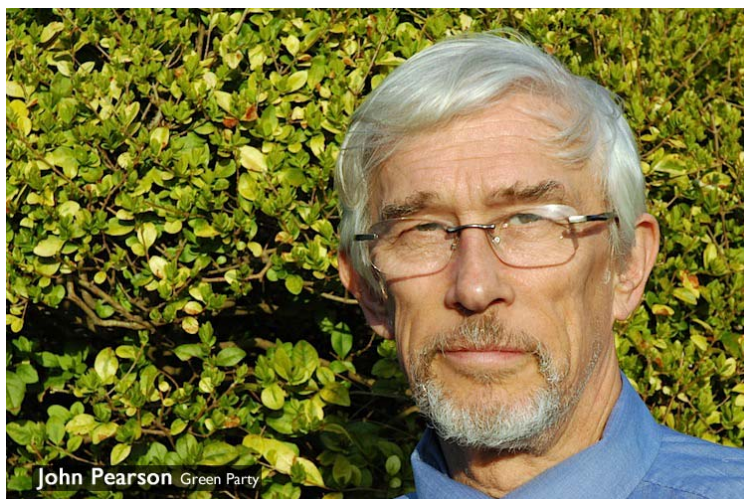


reviews

As I Please

Vote Catching

John Pearson goes out canvassing.



To win votes, the cynics say, be prepared to say anything and talk to anybody. The first I do not subscribe to, the second can prove only too true. It takes all sorts! I was once canvassing streets close to where I live when who should come to the door but a stocky man wearing heavy boots and a flowery summer dress (reminiscent of characters in Monty Python?). Neither of us commented on this. Instead, I calmly delivered my standard 'patter' and we chatted briefly about local issues before parting on the best of terms. Vote won?

All human life is out there, all potential supporters. You have to win votes. This does not involve telling people only what they want to hear, but you might select the parts of the Manifesto which may appeal most. In certain streets near home the indigenous inhabitants ask, very directly, 'If we vote for you will you send home all the *****?' (Bodes well for the Referendum, eh?). I sidestep the question, but still invite them to vote for me – ever the politician! My elder daughter Jenny, when 20 or so, stood as my fellow candidate (getting ten more votes than I). Faced with such trenchant views expressed by these tattooed Geordie housewives she could not answer, or cope, and so actually ran down the street in horror, to get away from it all.

Telling the truth can be nerve-wracking on occasion. Six years ago I stood for Parliament, which inevitably led to 'hustings'. At one such event, five of us were arrayed in front of Grey's Monument in central Newcastle. A question came from the crowd: 'What would your party do about Drugs?' Four of those present railed against the evils of the Drug Culture: 'Anyone found guilty of possession should be deported,' and so on. I dutifully proclaimed the policy in my National Manifesto: 'We would legalise all drugs...' WHAT? There was an outcry, above which I was barely heard as I apologetically explained the remainder '... thus immediately eliminating the present criminality. Addicts will be treated as patients and given help...' Thankfully, the questioning moved on.

Happily, such dramatic encounters are few and far between because, most of the time, nobody listens to you at all! This past week has seen standard door-to-

door calling, fighting to keep paperwork dry in rain, sleet and even snow (at the end of April). On the streets the perils are more subtle: a dog lurking behind a front door may rush at the letterbox the second you try to push a leaflet through.

My best memory of the campaign trail is of an instance which probably won no votes but, hopefully, gave support to a lonely resident in my ward, Mrs D we shall say. For security purposes, Official Policy dictates that we always canvass in pairs, and NEVER go inside a voter's house. I have broken both. I often canvass alone, as paired canvassers visit half as many homes in a night, of course, and I am a fairly confident soul. Occasionally a bedridden voter invites me in to talk to them. They look me over through the camera on their answerphone and if reassured by this they unlock the front door. One night Mrs D invited me in to talk to her husband and herself, and we chatted for ten minutes or so. It turned out that her husband had dementia and was all but insensible. Although his wife and I said little of consequence I realised that I might be the only moderately sane company she had had all week. I left feeling I had done a good deed for Mrs D, if not necessarily for the Party. So much for Policy.

My second best? Probably some 30 years ago when, on visiting the local Nurses' Home, I was enthusiastically invited into a flat in which all three girls had just bathed in preparation for their night on the town. Clothed in little more than their large woolly towels they had me stand nervously before them. 'Well then, persuade us to vote for you,' they said. I wonder if I did?

Dr John Pearson is a semi-retired lecturer at the University of Northumbria and the current chair of SOF Network.

