



*Religion – Where Next?*



# *sfia*

*down to Earth*

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**10 St Martin's Close, London NW1 0HR**

**[editor@sofn.org.uk](mailto:editor@sofn.org.uk)**

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**Front cover image:** St Columbanus sets out in a boat. Anon. 15th Century. [commons.wikimedia.org](https://commons.wikimedia.org)

**Back cover image:** Study of Religions students engaging with the religious landscape of Glastonbury. Photograph by Denise Cush and permission from the students.

# *sfia*

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 humanity with its questing imagination and enabling dreams.

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

# Religion – Where Next?

One of the things that struck me about the July SOF Annual Conference on the theme of *Religion – Where Next?* was that ‘religion’ seems to be becoming an uncomfortable word. Two of the talks, published in this *Sofia*, are entitled ‘I’m not Religious but...’ and ‘I was Religious but now I’m...’ In the former, Denise Cush begins by referring to the claim (based on YouGov surveys) that now ‘the majority of people in Britain identify as non-religious’. She points out that people ticking ‘no religion’ are not necessarily atheist but ‘what “nones” seem to have in common is a dislike of the label “religious” and a rejection of external authorities and religious institutions.’ She goes on to describe her research into contemporary Pagans in Somerset.

As I suspected quite a few readers (including myself) might not know a lot about the goddess in contemporary Paganism, I asked Katy Jennison (a Pagan SOF member) to provide a brief introduction and am very grateful to her that she did so at short notice.

In his talk ‘I was Religious but now I’m...’ John Breadon describes a difficult personal journey out of a bleak-sounding Northern Irish Protestant childhood, a quest that is not yet over.

Andrew Brown in his talk on ‘The Freedom to be Tomorrow what we are not Today’ suggested that people need to be educated ‘consciously to surpass, twist and reinterpret our old religions.’ He agreed with Heidegger that *‘overcoming is worthy only when we think about incorporation...’* and with Jesus that: *‘Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.’* Andrew Brown did not go into detail about what they might come up with but for this approach he has ‘a real hope (if not much optimism) that it can help genuinely to free some men and women to be more fully alive, awake and present in this world than they might otherwise be.’

Another thing I wondered about in listening to these talks on *Religion – Where Next?* was religion (or whatever replaces it if ‘religion’ is regarded as a discredited term) becoming *privatised* – as Denise Cush puts it, ‘part of a “subjective turn” where the self is seen as the authority, where what matters is individual experience and personal feelings.’ On the one hand, this is a welcome emancipation from ‘priests in black gowns’ bossing us about and even hovering and frowning in our bedrooms.

On the other hand, is privatisation always a good thing? Lately, in some political rhetoric, ‘public’ has become a dirty word. But is ‘freedom to be’ *nothing but* a private matter and, if so, is it achievable? In order to be free don’t we need a good society – *polis* – and in order to be fully human don’t we need other people?

I was riveted by John Breadon’s talk about his painful personal quest for liberation and self-realisation. When he said that recently he has quite often felt ‘liminal terror’, I thought of this as a ‘crucifixion’, a ‘descent into hell’, a classic *katabasis* to release what was in prison and – maybe? – rise again: ‘he who went up is the same who went down to the lowest parts of the Earth’. Great myths, such as the Christ epic, can have deep personal resonance. But also political. I thought of the watchword of the women’s movement in the 1960s-70s: ‘the personal is political’. Liberation theology in other parts of the world is about liberation of a whole *people*, as well as personal liberation. Christ is to be found today in ‘the crucified people’ and their struggle to overcome their poverty and oppression is Christ ‘rising again’.

I think many, both old and young, in Britain today care very much about what is happening in our society and our world, but perhaps they don’t call that ‘religious’. It would be a shame if religion was wholly relegated to private life, as ‘spirituality’ or something, and lost the power to incorporate the treasures of wisdom and kindness buried in traditional stories that can enrich – save – our public life as well.

Finally, at the Conference I enjoyed Anna Sutcliffe’s insightful introduction to John Burnside’s poem ‘My Grandmother’s House’ and Helen Bellamy’s reading of it. Since supernatural stories and myths are poetic tales, I think the ability to read and listen to poetry is vital to our task.

The 2017 London SOF Day Conference entitled ‘In the Beginning was the Word’ – Religion as Poetry and Story? will take place on Saturday March 25<sup>th</sup> at St John’s Church, Waterloo Road, London SE1 8TY. Speakers are Salley Vickers, Mark Oakley and Dinah Livingstone. For more info and to download and print a booking form: [sofn.org.uk](http://sofn.org.uk) or contact [jseargeant3@gmail.com](mailto:jseargeant3@gmail.com) – John Seargeant (SOF), 61 Fordington Road, London N6 4TH. Please enclose sae for a leaflet with booking form.

# ‘I’m not religious, but...’

Denise Cush engages with the changing religious landscape in Britain.

In a lecture given at the British Academy in January 2016, Professor Linda Woodhead made the startling claim that as of December 2015, the majority of people in Britain now identify as ‘non-religious’ (Woodhead, 2016a). The claim was based on YouGov surveys in which 46% of respondents ticked ‘no religion’ and if ‘none stated’ were added to this, 50% was reached. With younger age groups, the proportion is larger, for example 60% of 18-24 year olds identified as having ‘no religion’. It is always sensible to be wary of statistics, but *British Social Attitudes* surveys in recent years have revealed a similar picture.

This appears to be a rapid change over the last 15 years since the time of the first national census (2001) to include a question on religion. Then, the surprise was the large number of people who identified as ‘Christian’ (71%) with ‘none’ being 16%. Ten years later, in the 2011 census, 59% identified as ‘Christian’, and 25% as ‘none’. Has the number of ‘non-religious’ people really doubled in the last four years? If so, why, and what does this signify?

There is obviously a difference between a census and a survey sample, and it often depends on how exactly questions are put, but whatever the exact figures, it is clear that, especially for younger people, as Professor Woodhead put it, ‘no religion is the new religion’.

This article looks at some trends in the changing religious landscape of Britain, including the increase of the ‘nones’, and suggests some explanations and possible responses of interest to readers of *Sofia* and those working in education. It draws upon the work of sociologists of religion such as Davie, Heelas and

Weller as well as Woodhead, research with young people such as that of Savage and Collins-Mayo and religious education research from such as Blaylock, Jackson, and Wallis, as well as my own research, particularly with young Pagans.

## The increased public visibility of ‘religion’

Many have commented on the way in which religion is increasingly present and discussed in the public realm. So much so that the current situation has been labelled as ‘post-secular’ (after Habermas), although this is not a term that the present writer is happy with, as it suggests that once-upon-a-time everyone was ‘religious’, then religion went away leaving a ‘secular’ society, and now religion is back again. The fact that in 2015 there was a Commission on religion and belief



in public life (CORAB 2015) is the latest evidence for this new interest, as is the inclusion of ‘mutual respect between those of different faiths and beliefs’ in the list of so-called ‘British Values’ identified by the Department for Education for inculcation in schools (DfE 2014). The Council of Europe included the importance of learning about religions in schools for the first time in 2002, and brought out recommendations in 2008 (Jackson, 2014). Important world events which contributed to this new awareness of the impact of religion might include 9/11 2001, the break up of the Soviet Union in 1989, and the Iranian revolution in 1979. Religion seems to be constantly in the news (not usually for positive reasons). The Equality Act 2010 included ‘religion or belief’ as one of the protected characteristics, and ‘religion’ seems to



have replaced 'ethnicity' in identity politics, for example Muslim/Hindu/Sikh rather than 'Asian'.

This high level of interest in 'religion' has coincided with the decreased practice of religion, creating a situation where, according to sociologists such as Davie and Dinham (see Dinham and Francis 2015), there is a general lack of 'religious literacy' just when it is needed, leading to a poor quality of public debate.

## Increasing diversity

Although still in small numbers compared to 'Christians' and 'nones', religions other than Christianity are increasing year on year. For example, in the 2001 census Muslims made up 2.8% of the population, in 2011 the figure was 4.8%. Among university students the figure is 9% Muslim (Weller, 2011). Awareness of major traditions such as Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Sikhism as well as Islam has been increased by religious education in community schools, which has been increasingly 'multifaith' since 1969, acknowledged in law in the 1988 Education Reform Act. Awareness of diversity internal to traditions is also growing, both from controversies between liberals and conservatives in Christianity and other traditions hitting the headlines, and from acknowledgement of internal diversity by religious education teachers who experienced the disjunction between textbook religion and lived religion in their classrooms (see Jackson, 1997) and by academics in Study of Religions.

## The loss of Christian monopoly

The influence of Christian churches and Christian influence on British cultural heritage should not be underestimated and both are still very important. However, as argued by Guest *et al.* (2012), Christianity has lost its monopoly. 'C of E' is no longer the default position. Woodhead's surveys (2016a) show that whereas 95% of people brought up as 'no religion' stay that way, only 40% of those brought up as Christian do. The chain of inheritance is becoming broken. Sociologist David Voas (2010) points out that even quite devout parents tend to think that they should not impose their views on their children, which may in part explain this. Another point made by Linda Woodhead is that in Britain the main churches seem to have become more conservative (more 'religious?') just when society in general is becoming more liberal, on issues such as gay marriage and assisted dying, and so are more out of step with the general public than the more liberal protestant churches in Scandinavian countries.

## 'Patchwork religiosity'

There also seems to have been an increase in people who draw upon multiple traditions for their personal spiritual development, a tendency called 'patchwork religiosity' by Lähnemann (2008). Some of these may come from mixed faith families (Arweck and Nesbitt, 2011), others chose their own mix, and are actually 'existentially interfaith' (Nesbitt, 2011). Research by student Lindsay Horler at Bath Spa University, attempting to discover the religious makeup of the student body, revealed great reluctance on the part of young people to identify with any of the 'boxes' into which religions are separated, but rather a significant number held a fluid position influenced by a variety of religious and non-religious worldviews. Other people find that a deep immersion in another faith enhances their original tradition – this is called 'transformation through encounter' by Tess Ward (2015).

As well as individuals drawing upon a variety of traditions, new hybrids are forming. One example would be the Forest Church movement. Although Bruce Stanley (2013) would reject the label 'hybrid', for the good reason that the movement is not about syncretism but about reconnecting with nature from within 'the Christ tradition', nevertheless some Forest Church groups draw upon Wicca, Druidry and other forms of Paganism in constructing their ceremonies.

## The 'nones'

Further research on those who identify as 'non-religious' reveals that the 'nones' are not necessarily atheists, especially of the vocal 'new atheist' tendency, and not necessarily anti-religion or even identifying with Humanism. Professor Woodhead's survey in 2013 revealed that 41% identified as atheist, 17% as theist, 11% preferred to say they were spiritual, and 25% engage in some form of spiritual practice in private. Interestingly, 100% were liberal on moral and



social issues, and 0% would look to religious leaders for guidance (2016b, 2016a). Simeon Wallis (2014) interviewed 23 secondary school students who ticked the 'no religion' box, and found that only 7/23 would call themselves atheist.

It seems that 'no-religion' covers many different perspectives, but what 'nones' seem to have in common is a dislike of the label 'religious', and a rejection of external authorities and religious institutions. Wallis's teenagers seemed to reject 'religion' because they thought of it as primarily about metaphysical truth claims, organisations, and acceptance of a whole 'package' of beliefs and values followed in strict obedience.

## A 'Spiritual Revolution'?

Research by Weller et al (2011) on religious identities of university students and staff revealed some interesting trends. Christians remained the largest group, a large minority at 44% students and 47% staff. 'No religion' was the second largest group at 31% students and 36% staff. Everything else is in single figures, but nonetheless significant. For students, the third largest group was Muslim (9%), then 'Spiritual' (5%). Other religions were mostly around 2%, with Pagans a slightly larger 2% than Buddhists, Hindus, or Jewish students. Among staff, the third largest group were 'Spiritual' at 4.5%, with Muslims fourth at 3%, Hindus fifth at 2% and other religions, including Pagans, at around 1%.

Heelas and Woodhead (2002, 2005) over a decade ago suggested that there is in progress a 'spiritual revolution' in which people are turning from 'religion' (defined as organised, objective truth, a deity 'out there') to 'spirituality' (defined as more personal, the divine within). This is part of a 'subjective turn' where the self is seen as the authority, where what matters is individual experience and personal feelings. Heelas and Woodhead (2005) engaged in fieldwork in the town of Kendall to see if there was empirical evidence for this claim, and found that both the 'religious' (in the sense of active churchgoers) and the 'spiritual' (those who attended things like meditation groups) were actually small minorities, but that whereas the former were declining the latter were growing. They wondered what the situation would be in 2035.

## Paganism as indicative of a changing religiosity

I became interested in studying contemporary Paganism in the 1980s, initially because of the presence of Pagan students at university and Pagan

children in schools, and the controversy over whether Halloween should be celebrated in schools. My continued exploration, particularly with 'teenage witches' and young Pagans (Cush 2007, 2010) as well as with adult Pagans (Cush ed. 2015; Cush, 2016) has led to an interest in Paganism not just in its own right, but as an example of a new way of being religious, which has similarities with Heelas and Woodhead's 'spiritual revolution'.

By contemporary Paganism, I mean a variety of groups and individuals united by seeing nature as sacred. The Pagan Federation defines a Pagan as one who follows a 'polytheistic or pantheistic nature-based religion'. My summary below applies more to Wiccans, Druids and followers of Goddess spirituality rather than Heathens, who are often trying to reconstruct ancient forms of paganism, and are thus more like traditional understandings of 'religion'.

Although there are some groups with leaders, contemporary Pagans mostly see the individual as the authority in religion. There is a tendency to be eclectic, drawing upon several traditions. I have heard several Pagans refer to 'karma', for example. Pagans are anti-dogmatic, and not very interested in systematic doctrines; rather, beliefs, values and identity are expressed in ritual/ceremony, story, poetry, and music. Ethics tend to the liberal, with the oft-quoted 'Wiccan Rede': 'an it harm none, do what thou wilt', which is not that different from St Augustine's 'love and do what thou wilt'. Where there are groups, these tend towards the network rather than 'organised religion' and the Goddess Temple in Glastonbury is one exception to the rule that sacred places tend not to be buildings. There are feminist and 'queer' influences, and women, and those who identify as LGBTIQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, intersex or queer), report feeling much more welcome than in the mainstream religious traditions. The divine, however conceived (deities, spirits, the Goddess, the life-force behind all things, that with which we are all one), is immanent in nature rather than transcendent. Most interesting for SOF is



the way that Pagan rituals, deities and stories may be adopted or invented to suit current purposes. Most Pagans are not concerned if some of their traditions are proved by historians to be of recent coinage. I puzzled over a new goddess, Nolava, in Glastonbury, until I worked out that this spelt Avalon backwards, and was a new way of referring to the spirit of the locality. The SOF Network retrospectively understands religious traditions as human creations, but contemporary Paganism seems to exemplify a *conscious* creation of religion by the creative human imagination.

## What about young people?

A survey of some recent research on young people and religion (taken mostly from Blaylock, Cush, Savage & Collins-Mayo, Wallis, and several authors in the Collins-Mayo and Pink Dandelion edited volume) revealed the following themes:

Young people who do identify with a named religious tradition consider it to be an important part of their identity, particularly if they are or perceive themselves to be a minority, such as young Muslims, Hindus, Pagans and Christians. Those whose parents or grandparents came from another country often seek to distinguish between what is merely 'cultural' from their family background from a purer version of the religion which can then either be enculturated into or used to critique what is seen as mainstream culture. One advantage that connection to a tradition provides is a vocabulary with which to talk about religious and spiritual matters.

The majority of non-aligned young people tend to be tolerant of religious diversity, respecting the rights of others to their beliefs. This is part of a commitment to individual choice. They tend to dislike the label 'religious', and associate 'religion' with organisations, authority and metaphysical truth claims. They may be indifferent to 'religion' but it does not mean that they are not deeply committed to their own values. Meanings tend to be located in family, friends, music and shared culture. They may not have an overarching worldview, either religious or secular, and on the whole are not on a spiritual quest. Savage and Collins-Mayo coined the term 'happy midi-narrative' to describe an approach to life which aims for happiness, for others as well as self, but which is somewhat lacking in resources if happiness is not forthcoming, with a tendency to blame themselves. Some answer questions about identity by rejecting the whole idea of a fixed identity. Compared for example with young Pagans, the non-aligned may lack a vocabulary with which to discuss religious and spiritual matters.

## Commentary

It seems that for many, and particularly young people, the term 'religion' has negative associations. It tends to be defined as propositional belief, blamed for wars, conflicts and illiberal stances. Linda Woodhead uses the phrase 'a toxic brand' (2016b). For many people, even if they are tolerant of the beliefs of others, 'religion is something that other people do' (Andrew Brown, 2016). According to Woodhead and Brown, the Church of England and other mainstream churches have widened the gap between themselves and the majority of people by becoming 'more religious' and alienating people by adhering to conservative moral and social values.

However, the move away from 'religion' is not altogether towards atheism or humanism. Those who identify as non-religious have a variety of beliefs and values, including even a minority who are theist. Some are putting together their own mix of 'personal religion' (Jackson, 2014), even if they do not want to call it 'religion', drawing upon a variety of sources. A significant minority would employ the label 'spiritual' to describe this position. The communications revolution has made a wealth of information available, and decades of interfaith dialogue have made some aware of the valuable resources in other peoples' traditions. Although some religious education in schools has reinforced the idea that 'religion' is about truth claims and something that other people do (which we respect but do not take seriously as an option for ourselves), elsewhere religious education has given young people a good grasp of the diversity of religious and non-religious worldviews and the opportunity to reflect on the relevance of the issues raised to developing their own perspectives and enhancing their own lives.

## Possible Responses

It may be that we need a replacement term for 'religion' given the negative associations of the word, or perhaps to 'reclaim' the word with a new understanding. Certainly it would help if it is understood that 'religion' is not centrally, or not only, about metaphysical truth claims, and can have valuable insights to share even if, as SOF might contend, it is a creation of the human imagination rather than 'literally' true. We need to recognise the importance of both the 'nones' and the new personal religiosity, both of which may well appreciate some of what SOF has to say about religion. For those remaining within Christian churches or other mainstream traditions, it is important that liberal as well as conservative viewpoints are heard if they want to connect with the majority of British people. If, as

commonly in SOF, religious and non-religious traditions are viewed as treasure chests of wisdom-resources, valuable even to those who do not subscribe to the metaphysical truth claims or want to identify with the labels, it is important that 'religious literacy' and the necessary vocabulary to discuss religious and spiritual matters is not lost along with religious identification. Religious education should focus on helping young people develop 'purposeful living' whether within or outwith religious traditions, as well as familiarising students with the vocabulary required to discuss religious matters. It should not be about reified 'religions' and learning about other people, or about debating issues in European

philosophy of religion, but become something wider that is about 'us' as well as 'them', practical living as well as ideas. Dave Francis has termed this wider quest for wisdom and good lives 'Sophology' (2013).

Finally, perhaps we should follow the example of some contemporary Pagans, and not just understand religions of the past as human creations, but become actively engaged in consciously creating the 'religion' of the future.

Denise Cush is Professor of Religion and Education, Academic Associate, Bath Spa University.

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# The Neo-Pagan Goddess

Katy Jennison gives a brief introduction to the place of the Goddess in contemporary Paganism.

One factor propelling the growth of contemporary Paganism is dissatisfaction with the almost-exclusive maleness of the deities of mainstream religions. The many branches of neo-Paganism all offer at least one Goddess, usually but not always accompanied by at least one God. This is a very brief and necessarily incomplete overview.

*Sofia* readers will understand that to any individual Pagan 'the Goddess' may be a personification, a metaphor, a symbol, an archetype, or an independent supernatural entity, or all of these at different times. Some Pagans are polytheists; some visualise a Divine pair, a Goddess and a God, with many different names. In some traditions 'all the gods are one God and all the goddesses are one Goddess': all the different deities are aspects of a single Deity. And some (particularly numerous in the USA) are exclusively Goddess-worshipping and do not acknowledge any male deity. *Sofia* readers will also appreciate that not all the diverse branches of this neo-Pagan tree live together in perfect amity and mutual respect.

The image of a Goddess has run through Western European culture, from the Renaissance to the Romantic poets. Gardnerian Wicca, which has a co-equal Goddess and God, was introduced in England by Gerald Gardner in *Witchcraft Today* (1954) and *The Meaning of Witchcraft* (1959), and spearheaded both the public awareness and the spread of contemporary Paganism. Gardner's personification of the Goddess echoes that of Robert Graves in *The White Goddess* (1948), which in turn draws upon the Romantic poets and upon twentieth-century archaeo-

logical discoveries (see Ronald Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon* (1999), chapter 2).

This Goddess, in Wicca and its derivatives, is frequently perceived as a Triple Goddess, and combines some of the imagined characteristics of a Goddess of the Moon, sometimes called Diana, with those of a great Earth Mother and with the Crone, who may be called Hecate. Wicca has spread within Britain, north America, and Europe, and as it has

developed and been adapted by many people, including Alex Sanders (1926-1988) in Britain and Raymond Buckland, Starhawk and others in the USA, adherents have found different names for their Goddess, sometimes from antiquity, sometimes using names of local deities, sometimes simply calling her 'the Lady' or 'the Goddess'. She is

invoked by the priestess during Wiccan ceremonies in a rite called 'Drawing down the Moon'.

Originally stemming from Wicca but developing independently since the 1970s is the strand of Paganism often called Goddess spirituality. At one end of its range are groups which give primacy to the Goddess but also acknowledge a male deity, and welcome men as well as women as both members and priests. At the opposite end are Dianic groups, which do not recognise any male deity, insist upon exclusive, female-only covens, and follow a separatist-feminist philosophy: the best known is the Susan B. Anthony coven, founded by the Hungarian-American Zsuzsanna Budapest, who in 2012 courted controversy by excluding trans women from her coven. This is a riposte to male-dominated religion taken to its logical extreme, but it mirrors controversies over



Rainbow over Glastonbury Tor

women and trans-gender priests within the Christian church, and separation of the sexes in other religions. In Britain, the prime mover of a gentler version of the Goddess movement was Asphodel Long (1921-2005), with her book *In a Chariot Drawn by Lions: the Search for the Female in Deity* (1992).

Neo-Pagan illustrations of the Goddess have a regrettable tendency towards youthful, willowy, long-haired women with serene expressions in flowing robes in a sunlit or moonlit glade, accompanied by friendly animals. Less often, she is a serene Mother-figure: Pagan artists usually avoid anything too reminiscent of the Christian mother-and-child image. And occasionally she is an elegant white-haired Crone, with an equally serene expression and an air of cosmic wisdom, and perhaps an owl.

People tend to visualise their deities in the image of their ideal selves, or perhaps their ideal mothers or sisters or their ideal lovers or wives. The Goddess, for many Pagans, symbolises qualities which are perceived as lacking in most monotheistic male deities, such as overt sexuality, physical beauty, and kindness and joyfulness as opposed to severity and retribution. Other Pagans see a danger in attributing only sweetness and light to one's deities, and acknowledge other aspects such as implacability and destruction.

Today, while there are still many initiatory Wiccan groups following the original blueprints of Gardner, Sanders or Buckland, there are also many self-generated groups which incorporate some aspects of Wicca along with practices derived from other spiritual paths or created spontaneously, and there are very many solitary practitioners who do the same. And while Wicca and its many derivatives make up a significant part of Paganism today, contemporary Pagan Druidry is also important, especially in Britain, and draws on Celtic traditions and Celtic deities. Heathen or Asatru groups, in Britain and in Western Europe, follow Norse deities. There are Hellenic reconstructionists who honour the ancient Greek Gods, and there are many followers of shamanistic and magical traditions with their own approaches to deity.

Thus the Goddess has nearly as many names and aspects as there are neo-Pagans who follow her. She is being restored to the centre of contemporary religious practice, affirming and empowering women: a balance is being redressed.

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Katy Jennison is a SOF member living in Witney, Oxfordshire; she has been a Pagan for the past 35 years.

## The Freedom to be Tomorrow what we are not Today – becoming Free Spirits and Archaeologists of Morning

This was the title of Andrew Brown's talk at the SOF Annual conference. He sent this Abstract with a link to his complete script on his blogsite.

In my talk I ask whether 'Religion – Where Next?' (the conference theme) was the right question and that perhaps a better one might be 'Religion – Where Right Now?' I begin by suggesting that, rather than overcoming our past religion/s in a strong fashion (replacing it/them with new strong religious ideas and practices), we might do better to employ Gianni Vattimo's 'weak thought' (*il pensiero debole*), which uses more subtle and creative ways consciously to surpass, twist, and reinterpret our inherited religion/s. I then turn to who is to do this kind of 'weak thinking' and argue that the primary task we face is not to create any kind of new religion but to create and form new, liberal religious subjects. I suggest that one way this task can be achieved is by combining the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's therapeutic idea of how a 'free-spirit' is made with the poet Charles Olson's self-description as 'Archaeologist of Morning'. When combined I suggest that they might help free some men and women to be more fully alive, awake and present in this world than they might otherwise be and so become people 'without a position', ever open to what Henry David Thoreau calls the 'newer testament – the Gospel according to this moment'.

<http://andrewjbrown.blogspot.co.uk/2016/07/the-freedom-to-be-tomorrow-what-we-are.html>

# I was Religious but now I'm ...

John Breadon describes a difficult journey that is not yet over.

It won't take you long to spot that a great deal of this paper sounds suspiciously like fillet of Cupitt reheated. True enough. I owe much to Don's work, make no mistake. I've been reading him since I was 20 and I've just turned 43. My address, like myself, is a work in progress. I'm still in the early stages of reassessing the Christian faith as I've only just recently, 'officially' at least, left. Over the past three to four years a rupture has taken place in my psychological and spiritual life. The headline is: John has left the priesthood. But I know I've left so much more than this. My belief in anything superior to the passing show of nature has collapsed. I am a thoroughgoing creature of this world now, and this world is more than enough. But this is not to say I'm finding the transition from heaven to humanism easy. For one thing, who are my spiritual friends and comrades now? There is much in popular, contemporary 'New Atheism' that wearies me. But yet I cannot proceed any longer with what I now call 'refined religion', attempting to sift the good from the bad. Involving myself in this process of differentiation is something I simply no longer want to do.

My paper, like my life, aims at delineating the whole and not just a part. Our emotional as well as our intellectual energies matter, for they both influence the choices we make, the sort of people we turn out. At times over the past three years I have felt, much more often than I would have liked, what I can only name as liminal terror. As we are creatures composed of historical strata like the Earth itself, many of the fault lines that have broken to the surface recently have their origins way back. But in terms of remembered time, since leaving my 30s and

entering my 40s, my emotional life has been in fairly consistent tumult. How, I ask myself, can I live well – as I stagger or dash, I'm not sure which, towards my 50<sup>th</sup> year? The three sections of my address are as follows. (1) The imagination and white martyrdom; (2). Losing my (refined) religion; (3) Whispering to the bull.

## 1. The imagination and white martyrdom

A potted biography up until about my 28<sup>th</sup> year. I was born in Co. Down, Northern Ireland in 1973, and

baptised in Bangor Parish Church – though my early Christian formation was according to the theology and rites of the Methodist church. Bangor Parish Church stands on the ground of one of Ireland's great monastic centres. Such was its importance that when the *Mappa Mundi* was created in about 1300 Bangor was one of only two places in the whole of Ireland (ancient Hibernia on the map), Dublin being the other. One of the many spiritual



St Columbanus

travelling companions in my life is Saint Columbanus, who lived in the seventh century and established a network of monasteries in Gaul. He spent a few years at Bangor Abbey before setting off to shake up Roman Christianity. A recent biographer of the saint says this about him:

*[a] temperamentally volatile itinerant Irishman – typically Irish – a handsome man with a poetic temperament, volcanic temper and a mind rigorous in pursuit of intellectual satisfaction.* (Carol Richards, *Columbanus: Poet, Preacher, Statesman, Saint*, 2010)



Well, I've got to model myself after someone! There were very few books in my childhood home and even fewer family holidays. Love was rather scarce too. My emotional gaps and vulnerabilities were surely created in this tense and rather unhappy family home. But, *nil desperandum*, there was plenty of Christianity and church-going to distract me from my home worries. Christianity, or at least our peculiar Northern Irish Methodist version of it, was my family's sole self-transcending narrative or mythos. The faith I was born into was of course itself subject to centuries of secularisation. Irish Methodism of the 1980s was a long way from the fervent, intense, Christocentric faith of the Wesleys. I had no great piety forced upon me at home, neither did I receive any significant spiritual nurture at church. Basically, children weren't taken terribly seriously in the 1970s and 1980s – at least not in the small seaside towns of Ulster I grew up in. Besides religion, to be honest, there wasn't a great deal to do, though we never went as far as locking up the playground swings on Sunday. As well-behaved teenagers are wont to do in the North of Ireland, I passed briefly through the shadowy valley of evangelicalism. I remember telling my agnostic brother-in-law when I was about fifteen that he couldn't be sure of his salvation unless he was born again. How I wince to remember such things now.

Turning sixteen, I found myself at a decent grammar school having risen as high academically as my Secondary Modern would permit. It was during the sixth form that I fell deeply in love with books. How I lusted after the light green spines of Penguin's Twentieth Century Classic range! I adored all the classics I studied then – *Hamlet*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Wuthering Heights* and *Waiting for Godot* amongst them. Replacing religion with art is a tempting possibility for many of us – Matthew Arnold thought it likely. Since my A-Levels I've conducted many an intense relationship with fiction and poetry.

The great text behind the classics encountered in my sixth form, and without which full understanding of them would be impossible, is of course the Bible. It's an issue of real importance for us at this conference: once a text has got under your skin, once you start seeing your own life interpreted through its symbols and stories, can it ever really be removed? So my dilemma as I seek to become post-Christian is this: I may have rejected the church and her doctrines but does this mean I'm cut off from her scriptures as well? I hope not. The church may not quite be as open and polyphonic as I would like it to be, but the Bible surely is.

Back to Columbanus and the seventh century. He set sail from Bangor in a small boat with a few of his

brothers from the Abbey with nothing to protect him but his wit, his faith and his intelligence. In Celtic Christianity there are three types of martyrdom. The red sort – dying for your faith, the green – going out into the barren places to be alone with God – and then there is the white. This is the one that speaks most to me. White martyrdom for Columbanus and his men meant leaving the safety of home for God knows where – and they did so in a small insubstantial boat. Like Columbanus I left the North of Ireland in a boat (albeit a well-equipped ferry) not knowing what to expect from the little university town of St Andrews where I was headed. As it turned out providence was kind to me. My white martyrdom turned out to be nothing of the sort. I spent four blissful years at St Andrew's. At St Mary's, the theology faculty, I came into contact with Dr. Daphne Hampson, amongst many other fine teachers. She taught me that theology could be a personally risky as well as an endlessly creative venture. The heretical company I kept didn't please everyone though – especially my co-religionists in the Christian Union. As members of the decidedly heterodox Anglican Society we were thought to be a louche bunch of post-Christian, Jung-loving, crypto-Buddhists.

After St Andrews came a spell as a postgraduate at Birmingham. Two of the three writers I focused on – Dennis Potter and Jeanette Winterson – were, like me, raised as conservative Christians. Around the time when I should have been completing my thesis I found myself training for the priesthood at Westcott House in Cambridge. Let me jump to the ordination service itself at Lichfield Cathedral and one vivid memory from that day. Bishop Mike Burke, the suffragan bishop of Wolverhampton, as he was leading us through the oath of canonical obedience looked at me and said, 'Can I just check you've not got your fingers crossed behind your back?'

## 2. Losing my (refined) religion

As the dust begins to settle on my decision to leave the priesthood and the Church, I discern two related yet separate strands. One is related to my complete loss of faith in those big theological non-negotiables – especially belief in a real God. The other strand, of more recent provenance, relates to my rather sudden estrangement from the Church of England itself. What do I mean by 'refined religion'? For some 23 years liberal or progressive Anglicanism was my brand of refined religion. It gave me all I could ask from a community – fellowship, intellectual refreshment, spiritual encouragement and challenge. I've taken the phrase 'refined religion' from Philip Kitcher's book *After Faith: The Case for Secular Humanism*. In it Kitcher dissects the mental gymnastics that liberals

put themselves through to make religion acceptable to the modern soul. So what happened?

Liberal Anglicanism – since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century if not earlier – has been very adept at reducing Christianity to ethics, though without ever going the whole hog and completely internalising its theology of God (only a few radicals have tried to do this!). Up until the mid-1980s the C of E was doing a pretty good job of secularising itself. To give myself the necessary intellectual heft I marinated myself in many of the works of key liberal theologians. A partial list runs something as follows: Schleiermacher, F.D. Maurice, Hensley Henson, Paul Tillich, John Robinson, Alex Vidler, John Macquarrie, John Spong, Maurice Wiles, Harry Williams, Don Cupitt, and Richard Holloway. To these men I must add the work of many feminist and liberation theologians including Dorothee Sölle, Carter Heyward and Rosemary Radford Ruether.

But as conservative theologians have long pointed out, shaving away more and more of God's transcendence eventually leaves one, at best, with a rather vague and, to me, a rather powerless Tillichian Ground of Being. Over recent years I've found it harder and harder to keep faith with such a divine homunculus. Clearly, many highly intelligent, humanistic theologians, such as John Caputo and Graham Ward, would disagree with me. But no matter how spirited or imaginative or intellectually nimble their theologies might be, I now find them irritatingly imprecise in language and fundamentally untruthful.

This is fighting talk, I know, but let me try and explain to you what I mean by looking briefly at Caputo's own recently published spiritual autobiography, *Hoping against Hope: Confessions of a Postmodern Pilgrim*. I simplify, but Caputo holds out the hope – or as he would put it, the impossible hope – of being both a modern person and a person of faith. What he means by 'person of faith' is far from straightforward, but it most certainly isn't someone who believes six impossible things before breakfast. In prose that can turn from clear to obscure in the blink of an eye he presents his case for holding on, albeit with a weak grip, to God talk. Here I make what might well be the most important point of my address. Do some of us hang on to the ghost of the Judeo-Christian God largely out of nostalgia – or perhaps out of some subterranean feeling of disloyalty? Caputo loves to bend and play and recycle language as all postmodernists do and so he never settles on one expression for long. He styles his theological project one moment as a completion of Bonhoeffer's 'religionless Christianity', the next as 'religion without religion'. Or perhaps it's better

described as a 'theology of nihilism' or 'faith in the unconditional' or the 'mysticism of the rose'. Or if none of these shoes fit, try this one: 'becoming religious is a matter of learning how to smile'. At one point he imagines a lost ancient scripture in dialogue form. To the question 'what is the resurrection of the dead?' the answer comes back:

*A newborn baby, a new morning, another day, more time, a recovery from mortal threat, a remission, a repetition, making a leap when it is impossible to move an inch, a comeback, a second chance, a new ...*

And when I reach passages like this I'm very near the book-throwing stage:

*The proper way to speak of God is to say not that God exists, but that God insists, while we are called upon to make up the difference. We are asked to pick up where God leaves off, to fill up the existence that is lacking in the insistence of God. God insists, but the weight of God's existence falls on us.*

I think that my feel and touch for existence – which is rooted in, I hope, deep attention to the glorious and inglorious swerves of the quotidian – is pretty much the same as Caputo's. But the line that separates us is this: I believe that open-minded and open-hearted humanism can do justice to the gift and grace of everyday life, Caputo does not. In many ways liberal postmodern theology is simply refined religion taken to the max – its refusal to decide, to remain with endlessly open possibilities forever. For years I lived and thought like this. And then one day, quite recently, it all felt rather absurd to keep on doing so. A mysterious package arrived one day and in it was Occam's razor; I felt I had to start putting it to some use.

So, am I now, as I stand before you today, somewhat bereft of community, narrative, ritual and life-enhancing spiritual practice? In many ways, yes, of course I am! So what exists out there which will help me not just 'go on' – Beckett style – but to 'go on' well? There is the Sunday Assembly movement. I recently had my first experience of this a few weeks ago in Reading. It was jolly and fun and the people were mostly kind and clever and good company. But it was based too much around loud music for me. And there were a few too many middle-aged folk living it up as old teenagers. Or what about Mark Green's largely US-based humanistic-atheistic paganism? Here I think there is more to explore and develop. And when I move to Chester in the next few weeks I'll certainly be looking into what sort of pagan groups populate the North West. But I suspect that

atheist pagans may be as scarce on the ground as atheist Christians.

The community I currently feel most at home in is humanistic psychotherapy. About three years ago I came within an inch of a full mental collapse. I can't lay all that was wrong with me at that time at religion's door, but it surely played a part in creating the many splits in my identity that left my psyche dangerously fragmented. After more than a decade of therapy study and many years in the client's chair, I finally feel like I'm on the road to healing. Brian Thorne, a former professor of counselling at UEA, has probably done more than anyone to promote Carl Rodger's Person-Centred Therapy in England. At the end of his book *The Mystical Power of Person-Centred Therapy* he lists some key ethical and spiritual maxims that have guided his work and practice. They've become, of late, something of an alternative creed for me.

- *Be open to the world both inner and outer. Embrace and seek new experience, new ways of seeking and being.*
- *Tell it the way it is. Reject hypocrisy, deceit and double talk. Be open about your relationships and sexuality.*
- *Do not live in a compartmentalised world. Strive for a wholeness of life.*
- *Seek new forms of closeness, of intimacy and shared purpose. Seek new forms of communication both verbal and non-verbal.*
- *Welcome risk-taking so that you may be vitally alive as you face change which is the only certainty of life.*
- *Care for others with a gentle, subtle, non-moralistic, non-judgemental caring.*



### 3. Whispering to the bull

My last and longest quotation is taken from a short story by the American writer Flannery O'Connor. O'Connor was a Roman Catholic but she lived all her life in the company of Protestant fundamentalists in the American Deep South. She completed the trinity of writers I studied for my PhD. The extract I'm going to share with you is taken from one of her finest stories, *Greenleaf*. It is a tale about a vain woman's obsession with a bull. For O'Connor, who was God intoxicated, everything that lives and moves possesses great sacramental power. It can carry, in

miniature, all of God's love and judgement.

*She remained perfectly still, not in fright, but in a freezing unbelief. She stared at the violent black streak bounding toward her as if she had no sense of distance, as if she could not decide at once what his intention was, and the bull had buried his head in her lap, like a wild tormented lover, before her expression changed. One of his horns sank until it pierced her heart and the other curved around her side and held her in an unbreakable grip. She continued to stare straight ahead but the entire scene in front of her changed – the tree line was a dark wound in a world that was nothing but sky – and she had the look of a person whose sight has been suddenly restored but who finds the light unbearable. Mr Greenleaf was running toward her from the side with his gun raised and she saw him coming though she was not looking in his direction. She saw him approaching on the outside of some invisible circle, the tree line gaping behind him and nothing under his feet. He shot the bull four times through the eye. She did not hear the shots but she felt the quake in the huge body as it sank, pulling her forward on its head, so that she seemed, when Mr. Greenleaf reached her, to be bent over whispering some last discovery into the animal's ear.*

I love this brutal and brilliant story now in a wholly non-religious way. One of the attractions of religion is partly in the hope that at some point the Mystery (capital M) of the universe will be disclosed to us. We want nothing more than for someone to come along and whisper the answer to IT ALL into our ears. But my reading is not a comforting one, alas. We cannot outrun forever life's relentless, pitiless bulls: evil happens, disasters strike, we are betrayed and let down, we watch everything we love fade and disappear. But though we are suspended in an unthinking void, this Earth can still be a home to us; we can still find in each other, and in the love we rightly owe ourselves, what we need to utter at least a few ecstatic Yeses to all that comes our way.

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John Breadon is a former divinity teacher and assistant chaplain at Eton College.



# Disestablishment

As the Church in Wales prepares to celebrate its centenary, David Lee tells the story of how it came about.

When the Liberal Party swept into power at the General Election in 1911 it was determined to achieve its long-held policy to destroy the Anglican Church in Wales. The method to be used was by an Act of Parliament which would separate the four Welsh dioceses from the Established Church of England – this was called Disestablishment. And to confiscate the property and financial assets of the Church – this was called Disendowment. However its attempts to do this were prevented at that time by the Conservative peers and the bishops in the House of Lords.

The outbreak of war in 1914 changed the situation. The Parliament Act of that year provided that at a time of national emergency a Bill which has passed through the House of Commons could be presented to the King for Royal Assent without going through the House of Lords. This gave the government the opportunity it wanted and the Welsh Church Act became law. Had it been put into effect then it would have effectively shut down the Church in Wales as a viable institution – its assets lost and its ministry unsustainable. But that didn't happen. The Suspensory Act 1914 provided that the Welsh Church Act should not take effect until after the war. This gave the defenders of the Church the opportunity to work for a softening of the Act if it could not get it repealed.

While the battles raged on the Western front another battle was being waged in the corridors of power at Westminster. It was a time of secret negotiations, of promises made and promises broken, of deals and compromises, and much tension and anxiety. At this time the young men of Wales were being called to the colours and sent to the trenches of the Western front. There they had a sense of brotherhood which overcame all social prejudices and attitudes. Chapel boys and church boys found themselves to be comrades in arms against a terrible enemy. The religious disputes at home faded into insignificance. Many of the letters which were sent home from the front reflected a changing attitude towards the Established Church. Another factor here was the recognition of the heroic pastoral work of military chaplains like 'Woodbine Willy', most of whom were priests of the Church of England. Meanwhile at home there was a change of heart among the Nonconformist churches, who were shocked to learn that the millions of pounds to be taken from the Church in Wales was to be given for secular rather than religious uses.



St Asaph Cathedral

This change of mood affected the attitude of the public in Wales and especially members of the Nonconformist churches and their leaders who had previously been supporters of the policy of the Liberal Party. It also influenced the Welsh members of parliament and made possible the Welsh Church Amending Act of 1919. The Liberals resisted this change as long as possible, but by then as they were in a coalition government with the Conservative Party their position was not so strong and they finally they gave way. So when the Welsh Church Act was eventually put into effect in 1920 the church was disestablished but, except for all the assets it had acquired before 1662, much had been saved amounting to an income of £48,000 a year.

The Welsh Church Act said nothing about the future role of the four Welsh dioceses after disestablishment. The Church in Wales, as we now have it, was the creation of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Randall Davidson, who released the Welsh bishops from their oaths of obedience and put in motion the consultations which resulted in the creation of the Church in Wales as an independent self-governing province of the world-wide Anglican Communion of Churches. The Church in Wales came into existence on 1<sup>st</sup> April 1920 with the completion of the Welsh Church Act of 1914 and the Amendment Act of 1919. On 1<sup>st</sup> June 1920 the great and good of the land assembled at St Asaph Cathedral to witness the Archbishop of Canterbury installing Bishop Alfred Edwards as the first Archbishop of Wales.

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David Lee was the industrial chaplain of the Abbey Steelworks, Port Talbot, from 1960 to 1970. He became the Rector of Merthyr Tydfil from 1970 to 1991. He was appointed Archdeacon of Llandaff and retired in 1997. He has been a supporter of the SOF network since reading Don Cupitt's book in 1984.

# Theological Reflection

## Religion as a Human Creation

### 4. Woman. Mary and the Divine Feminine

Dinah Livingstone ponders a classic Christian doctrine.

The Bible begins with the story of the Woman, Eve, causing humanity to be thrown out of Paradise. Though the Old Testament has stories of heroic women in the history of Israel, and gorgeously erotic poetry in which the woman has a strong voice, it also has plenty of wicked women, Jezebels and faithless women like the prophet Hosea's errant wife who becomes the type of the people of Israel. 'The feminine' remains a dangerous explosive force to be kept under control. In the book of Joshua Yahweh is a very male warrior God: 'Draw near and hear the words of Yahweh your God,' Joshua said. 'By this you shall know that among you is the living God who without fail will drive out from before you the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgasites, Amorites and Jebusites' (Joshua 3:9). The Israelites gain most of the land because 'Yahweh fought for Israel' and at one point even made the sun stand still for them (Josh 10: 12-14). When the children of Israel 'do evil in the sight of Yahweh' and worship Baal and Astarte, (Judges 3:13; 10:6) Yahweh's anger is kindled against them and he punishes them severely. Astarte (Ishtar) is the local great mother goddess whose cult Yahweh insists must be suppressed.

The God of the three Abrahamic religions remains very male, even though he 'evolves'. In Judaism and Islam God is one person, in classical Christianity the one God is a Trinity of three persons, Father Son and Spirit. In John's gospel the Son is the Word or Logos (masculine) whose antecedent in late Old Testament Wisdom literature (e.g. Proverbs 8) is the divine creative Wisdom (*chokmah* in Hebrew, *sofia* in Greek – both words are feminine). But whereas in the Old Testament, Wisdom is a created 'emanation' or *sephirah* from God, in John the masculine Logos *is* God. In some parts of the early church (such as the Syriac church) the Spirit was thought of as feminine (Hebrew *ruach* and cognate Syriac meaning spirit, wind, breath is feminine) but later changed to masculine to conform with the other churches.

Jesus addressed God as 'Father' and in his parable of the Prodigal Son there is a loving father but no mother. We don't know very much about Jesus' life but in the gospels (apart from his words on the cross

in John), whenever he encounters his mother he is off-hand or rude to her. However, he seems to have got on well with other women, Mary Magdalene, Mary and Martha of Bethany, the woman at the well, the Syro-Phoenician woman... Women were disciples, they preached the gospel and, it appears, presided over the Lord's Supper in house churches. But God and, of course, Jesus himself ('God the only-begotten Son' – *μονογενής θεός* –: *monogenes theos* – in John) remain male.

Those who presided over the Lord's Supper were not called priests in the New Testament but as the church hierarchy became more formalised and the Eucharist itself more cultic – embracing the idea of the ceremony as a 'sacrifice' – women were excluded, and banned as celebrants at the Council of Nicea (325). At the same time there was a sort of much-needed 'counter-revolution' to the male dominance of the Divine. The feminine principle snuck back in the figure of Mary the mother of Jesus. In Luke she is the first to proclaim the gospel when she is pregnant, visits her cousin Elizabeth and sings her *Magnificat*:

He has scattered the proud  
in the imagination of their hearts.  
He has put down the mighty from their seats:  
and lifted the lowly.  
He has filled the hungry with good things:  
and sent the rich empty away.

In John's gospel she stands at the foot of the cross and Jesus entrusts her to his beloved disciple. In Acts, after the departure of Jesus she is there in the Upper Room at Pentecost and receives the Holy Spirit with the apostles. Traditionally she then went to live at Ephesus with the apostle John (the beloved disciple) and it was from there she was taken up to heaven. Ephesus was the city with the magnificent temple to the great goddess Artemis. When Paul preached there the silversmiths rioted because he threatened their trade of making silver shrines for the goddess tourists (Acts 19). It was at the Council of Ephesus in 431 that Mary was declared *theotokos* – mother of God. Immediately after that, the basilica of St Mary Major in Rome was built under Pope Sixtus III (432-40) and

her cult grew, reaching a high point in the Middle Ages, when she was Queen of Heaven. The cathedral Notre Dame de Paris was built in the twelfth century. She had an important shrine at Walsingham; the English people were so devoted to her that England was called Mary's Dowry. They called many common flowers after her. The lady's bonnets (columbines) were splendid this year in the patch in front of my house.

Although the church taught that she was not divine but 'mother of God', she did become a kind of goddess for many Christians. In this roundabout way the feminine aspect of the Divine reasserted itself. Mary assumed some of the attributes of the Mother Goddess Astarte/Ishtar and also of the Ephesian goddess Artemis. The Greeks had many goddesses and, as it were, split the divine feminine into personifications of various aspects of it, for example, Gaia the Earth goddess, Aphrodite goddess of sex and love, Athena goddess of wisdom, Hera, wife of Zeus and goddess of marriage, and Artemis the virgin moon goddess, also goddess of hunting and woodland. The goddess Artemis points to the fact that being a mother is not the only thing a woman can do. Artemis was a huntress; like Artemis a friend of mine has no children – she is a head-hunter. But in a way it was a pity that Mary was venerated as a *virgin* mother, since normal mothers aren't virgins. This meant that although Mary was venerated as a woman, reasserting the divine feminine, she was a special case and 'purer' than ordinary women. (An earthier personification was Mother Nature as Dame Kind.) Nevertheless, later in Latin America Mary became identified with the indigenous Earth goddess Tonantzin as Our Lady of Guadalupe Tonantzin. Today her basilica in Mexico City is Our Lady's most popular shrine in all the world.

At the Protestant Reformation in Europe the feminine aspect of the divine was chucked out again. Mary was no longer Queen of Heaven or mediatrix – prayers were no longer addressed to her (or to other saints). Though the Church of England continued to sing Mary's *Magnificat* at Evensong, in 1562 Article 22 of its 39 Articles declared:

The Romish Doctrine concerning Purgatory, Pardons, Worshipping and Adoration, as well of Images as of Reliques, and also invocation of Saints, is a fond thing vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God.

The Reformation coincided with the thrusting rise of capitalism, originally in many ways a progressive force for individual liberty and technological advance,



Our Lady of Guadalupe Tonantzin

but today in its idolatrous (Mammon-worshipping), global form, colossal and out of control, a threat to the very survival of the Earth. In their traditions the indigenous peoples of the Americas respect and take more care of the Earth. Our Lady of Guadalupe Tonantzin as the Earth Mother goddess embodies those values. The Zapatistas in the Mexican Chiapas Jungle are mainly indigenous Mayan Indians and fighting to defend their ancestral environment. In what could be described as a Sofish attitude, Marcos, their leader (said to have been educated at the Sorbonne and probably no believer in the supernatural), welcomed the gift of a statue of her because of what she represents. Marcos relates that the Zapatistas held an assembly to decide what to do with the statue. 'The hundred-year-old Doña Herminia thinks that the Lady of Guadalupe will want to be with her sons and daughters wherever they are... "So I ask you, *madrecita* [little mother], if you agree to going where we go," she asks, addressing the image that is in front of the assembly. The Virgin doesn't answer, her dark gaze keeps on looking down.' A vote is taken and they decide that the statue will go with them wherever they go. 'After the assembly there will be a dance. A marimba and the dark-skinned image will preside over the party.'

On November 21 1950 Pope Pius XII declared as an infallible dogma that Mary 'having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory'. This story of Mary's Assumption into heaven was an ancient tradition but now for the first time declared to be an infallible dogma. That





Tonantzin

caused massive cognitive dissonance among the faithful and incredulous derision elsewhere. Nevertheless, one thing the dogma is saying is that a woman's body matters and can be glorified as much as a man's. For in fact, Mary's 'Assumption' was exactly what the gospels and Acts say about Jesus at his Ascension, but at that time those writers believed that heaven was up in the sky. Very few people could possibly have believed that in 1950. It should have been a wake-up call to make believers realise that, like this story of Mary, stories in the New Testament about a supernatural realm in the sky are 'poetic tales'.

Though the Church of England does not teach the doctrine of the Assumption, in its current Calendar of Holy Days it celebrates the Blessed Virgin Mary on August 15 (the feast of the Assumption in the Catholic Church), as well as the Annunciation on March 25 and her Visit to Elizabeth on May 31. The Church of England is a broad church. At its 'higher' end Mary has come back in to a greater or lesser extent, but she is still excluded from the 'lower' end of the C of E and other Protestant churches, where the Divine remains strictly male; in the words of Luther's great battle hymn of the Reformation, *Ein feste Burg*: 'A mighty stronghold is our God, a trusty shield and weapon.' In an interesting paradox it is the 'high' church, which may now include prayers to Mary, that is most strongly opposed to women ministers – priests or bishops, whom the Roman Catholic Church also bans. The 'low' church and other Protestant churches, who dismiss Mary as a 'Romish doctrine', welcome women ministers and some have done so for many years. Are these two complementary forms of nervousness of the feminine

Divine? I have seen a Protestant cringe with embarrassment if you call March 25 Lady Day. They may even shudder with horror with a stern 'Fear not Master Ridley' face, as if Queen Bloody Mary was back. And I have actually heard a man of the 'high-church' tendency say that women can't celebrate the Eucharist because they *bleed* and their menstrual blood might contaminate the blood of Christ in the cup.

If we think of theology as a sister art to poetry and supernatural stories as poetic visions concerning our own world and ourselves, then we can see that in our tradition the feminine aspect of the Divine has had a somewhat chequered career. In her article on page 9- Katy Jennison notes ways in which she appears as the Goddess in contemporary Paganism..

The two most urgent matters for 'the feminine' in our society today are the position of women and the care of the Earth. Women have never been 'granted' liberation and inclusion in society but have had to fight for it. They were not even automatically included in working class struggles. For example, one of the Chartist demands in 1848 was for 'universal manhood suffrage' – not womanhood. Suffragettes had to fight for the vote and working women to fight for better conditions, as in the Bryant and May match girls' strike of 1888 and many other battles since then. Further demands for women's rights and recognition were made in 'the second feminist wave' of the 1960s-1970s with its watchword 'the personal is political' and media outlets such as *Spare Rib* magazine and Virago publishers. Gains have been got but the struggle continues to this day, with women still on average earning less than men and with lower or no occupational pensions, more open to abuse in zero hours contracts and less visible in top jobs. They suffer far worse in Islamic countries.

The demand for women to have an equal place in society with men is not because women are 'nicer' than men – witness the extreme bitchiness of one of the women contenders in the recent Tory leadership contest – but because they are equally human, and a society that excludes half the human race is both unrepresentative and vitally impoverished. Likewise women have had to fight for their position in the church and here too it is not only a question of women having the right to make their voices heard and to occupy leadership positions, but the church itself is impoverished if it excludes half of humanity in this way.

With the dire warnings of climate change it is increasingly vital to respect and take care of the Earth. We can learn from indigenous cultures which honour the Earth as our mother and have even adopted

aspects of 'the divine feminine' from Christianity, such as Our Lady of Guadalupe Tonantzin. Triumphalist mega-capitalism dismisses a cult like this as 'backward, primitive folk culture' but could learn from its wisdom (and, incidentally *mestizaje*, that is mixing and holding fast to what is good from different cultures).

Some writers on ecology call the Earth Gaia, the Greek primal mother goddess. In his book *Coming Back to Earth: From Gods, to God to Gaia* Lloyd Geering bravely introduces a goddess into a low-church tradition but (perhaps because she is unfamiliar?) he slips up with the howler that Gaia was Zeus's wife. In fact, Gaia was his granny, a much older goddess, anarchic and very promiscuous, having children by parthenogenesis and by numerous lovers, including her grandson Zeus. She personifies the Earth and Nature as superabundant and careless. As Tennyson puts in in his *In Memoriam*:

So careful of the type? but no.  
From scarpéd cliff and quarried stone  
She cries, 'A thousand types are gone...

For humanity to take care of the Earth and survive, it must summon all its feminine and masculine potential (individual men and women possess both in varying degrees). We need good sense, awareness, care and strong political action.

Another feminine figure in the New Testament, the bride of Christ (who is the church in Ephesians and other epistles), remains rather shadowy as a personification. (In the sublime love poetry of a mystic like John of the Cross, in which the woman is the main speaker, the bride is not the church but the individual soul.) It is only in the book of Revelation that the bride of the Lamb appears in a dazzling poetic vision, dressed for her wedding day (uniting the male and female human form divine), *coming down to Earth* as the beautiful city, the New Jerusalem, the Reign of Kindness. We will say more about this in our next and final reflection in this series, to be published in Advent with the provisional title 'O Come.'

*Sofia* welcomes comment and debate.  
Please send your letters to:

***Sofia* Editor:**

***Dinah Livingstone,***

***10 St Martin's Close, London NW1 0HR***

### 'Fellow Feeling & Loving Kindness' by Penny Mawdsley

I can identify with a lot in this article. The author writes how she admires kind, compassionate people but feels held back from being so. I can identify with her reasons. It sounds lovely to be all caring and sharing but not many people can pull it off. The writer William Hazlitt writes a very funny piece, It's about life in his village (where he had a hut he used to hang out in if he got fed up with London). He explains in his words – this is my paraphrase – that if you do something kind and helpful for someone who already despises you, then they will be even more rude and obnoxious to you, to show that they 'labour under no uneasy sense of obligation'.

When I read that it explained so much and identified a puzzle in my own life. What a brilliant insight! Anyway even I know that being grateful can get wearing. I expect even the Syrian refugees get bored of having to be grateful. I've had an experience recently where I kindly and generously

lent someone  
some money  
(hey baby, isn't I  
kind to you!). I  
could afford it  
and it wasn't  
any trouble. But  
when payback  
time came, week after week went by and I  
had to get a bit heavy and ended up feeling like  
Shylock the Jew. It wasn't as if I needed the money  
but somehow not being paid back mattered, and felt  
as if the other person would get one over on me if I  
didn't get it back. It soured the relationship so what  
price kindness?



Also as someone taught as a kid about how you must give up your money for Jesus, yes, I share the author's dislike for Jesus going on about the poor etc. like they are the cool ones. Anyway, how can you give up your money before you've made any? And how much is 'too much' anyway? It seems to me Jesus never preached directly to the poor whoever they are, he's telling his listeners to give up their money to the poor so obviously he was talking to the middle class to relay on to the poor. Since I've come to live here I've met 'the poor' and they are not some heterogeneous mass, they're individuals.

*Jane Baker  
Bristol.*

## Tony Windross reviews *Sermons from Suffolk*

by Stephen Mitchell

Little Ark Publications (Peterborough 2016). Pbk. 114 pages. £14.99.

My association with *Sea of Faith* began in 1988 (just 4 years after Don Cupitt's eponymous book and television series), at the very first Conference – which was when I first came across Stephen Mitchell. Ever since, he (together with the other network founder-members, Ronald Pearse and David Paterson) has been part of a triumvirate (or trinity?) that meant faith became (and remains) a real possibility for me.

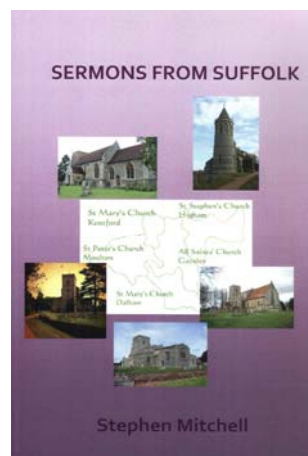
During his 37 years in ministry, Stephen has never shied away from controversy, and was one of those mercilessly pilloried over his part in Joan Bakewell's 1992 *Heart of the Matter* programme on the Resurrection. The response of the Church was in effect to ask 'how dare these people understand such things differently? How dare they struggle for a new way of thinking that might stand some slight chance of resonating with where thoughtful, late 20<sup>th</sup> century people actually are?'

He remained unbowed, and continued to speak and write in the clear and illuminating style that is a hallmark of this book of sermons. The 24 examples here, span some 14 years, and show the depth of his theology – as well as his familiarity with contemporary culture. Sermons, by definition, are for hearing – and often don't translate well to the page. But these do, with all manner of topical references enlivening the serious theological underpinning.

Stephen is clearly a gifted preacher, and it's an enormous pity that his voice will no longer echo down the naves of the five ancient Suffolk churches which he has served for the last 14 years. This excellent collection means, however, that it will at least be available to a rather wider (and maybe more appreciative?) audience. And that's important – as there are precious few people speaking from a *Sea of Faith* perspective (however understood) in a way that is as accessible. Or indeed, as audible. Because the reality is that such a perspective is never actually heard at all in pretty well any church you care to name. Instead of intelligent reflections on faith, the congregations are fed banal pap – with the most thriving churches tending to be where uncritical banality has been elevated to the status of an art form.

The Church of England is under all sorts of pressures – from those who think sexuality is the only

thing worth making a fuss about; from declining congregations – and therefore declining finances; from creeping (maybe galloping) irrelevance; and from those (like Stephen) who persist in thinking that Christianity might still have something to offer a postmodern age.



reviews

His determination not to abandon the Church to the clammy hands of the 'true-believers' (with their arm-waving certainties) has demanded a lot, and the pressure has sometimes shown. Don Cupitt felt no longer able to continue being a regular communicant, but Stephen has managed to hang on in there, tolerated even to the extent of being appointed a rural dean!

Over the years the Church has made considerable efforts to keep his particular brand of thoughtful religion at bay, and he bears some of the scars as a result. But he remained undaunted – and survived until retirement. But his leaving parish ministry means that the non-realist C of E vicar has moved from being an endangered species – to an effectively extinct one. There didn't used to be many – now they are can probably be counted on the fingers of one hand – and it's getting a bit lonely! New recruits are invariably from the evangelical wing – who regard non-realism as the devil's work. They see their job as primarily to peddle certainty, and to offer clear and definite answers to the questions that have perplexed humanity forever.

The result is that (in general terms) their message is seized upon with gratitude by the fearful – and given a wide berth by the thoughtful. This book shows that things don't have to be like that – even though they usually are. Ten years have elapsed since Stephen's previous adventure in print (the splendid *God in the Bath* which itself appeared ten years after his powerful *Agenda for Faith*.) It is to be hoped that the opportunities for reflection, provided by retirement, mean we will not have to wait quite so long for his next instalment.

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Tony Windross is Rector of the Week St Mary Circle of Churches in Cornwall, and Rural Dean of Stratton.



## Bobbie Stephens-Wright reviews

### *Reasons to Stay Alive*

by Matt Haig

Canongate (Edinburgh 2015). PBk.272 pages. £3.85.

I consider myself very fortunate recently, when on visiting a very small bookshop in Whitby North Yorkshire I came across this book. Perhaps it struck a chord at a particularly difficult and sad period. One might think that a book about depression would not be the requisite tonic but, in my case, it was exactly that. Someone with the courage to write about the very important subject of depression not just, as Matt Haig points out, 'feeling a bit sad'. His use of language to describe the various manifestations of his condition was hilarious; I couldn't put the book down and laughed out loud at his descriptions.

Many years ago I suffered a very severe bout of depression which later I would come across in many other people and describe it to them as 'the dark night of the soul'. There was no doubt that the phrase conveyed rather well that I knew where they were in their tormented state, and that they could recover. I could empathise entirely with the inability to concentrate, the confusion, the fear of impending doom and the loss of meaning.

For sure, Haig is right to point out that at its worst you wish that you had any other affliction or physical pain for, just as the mind is infinite, so too are its torments infinite. Perhaps the positive outcome is that when it lifts, you realise that you are changed forever and that you wouldn't wish the condition on your worst enemy.

It is good that Haig, an exceptional writer, already had an editor who would support the 'genre straddling nature' of the book. It is indeed a memoir of his battle with severe depression but can also serve as a self-help book or an overview. There are actually few self-help books that I would read or recommend but this little book has the power to give hope to so many people who have struggled through and grappled with depression.

Haig points out that our minds are unique and therefore go wrong in unique ways. He separates depression, anxiety and the feature of agoraphobia, while noting that these three can all appear at one time as features of this debilitating illness. Haig adds to this panic disorder and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), while noting that all of these features can be experienced in different ways.

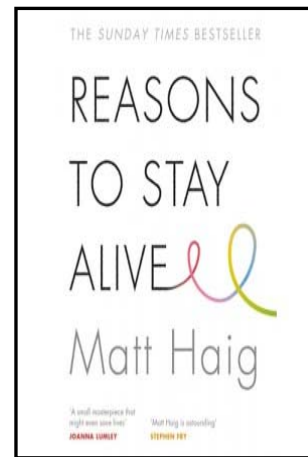
There are few sufferers who have not contemplated suicide, and of course, Haig is yet another. He makes the important point that depression is invisible, that even the most intense

emotions carrying on relentlessly inside cannot be seen from the outside. This is not just a matter of wacky moments, it is a very real and terrifying illness. One feels as though no-one else in the world can possibly have endured and re-emerged from the painful sensations that mark profound depression, and such was the experience of Haig.

Haig's recovery was not through pills or any other medical intervention although he is not anti-pills entirely, remarking that he knows that for some people pills can work. However, after some disorientating diazepam panic attacks, Haig decided that pills were not the answer for him. He feels that having experienced his pain without any form of 'anaesthetic' he became alert to the subtle upward or downward shifts in his mind. Haig notes that the things that really made him feel better were exercise, sunshine, sleep and intense conversation etc. He suggests that the alertness to his condition would have been entirely lost if he had taken pills.

To use Haig's own words this book attempts to tackle depression and anxiety head-on. He discovered that depression lied to him about the future, which prompted him to write about his experience. He believes that the oldest clichés remain the truest. Time heals. The tunnel does have a light at the end of it even if we can't see it.

Haig's words have given me hope and I have no doubt that they have inspired others. He is rather fond of straightforward lists, such as lists of things that have made him feel better and things that have made him feel worse. *Reasons to stay alive*. I could have negotiated the book without recourse to the lists. Nevertheless I would commend it to anyone who has suffered depression or anyone who has supported a loved one suffering from depression.




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Bobbie Stephens-Wright is a long-time member of SOF. She is currently working on prison reform. She lives in Morpeth, Northumberland.

David Hatton revisits

## *Good as New*

### *A Radical Retelling of the Scriptures*

by John Henson

O Books (Alresford 2004). PBk. 456 pages. £11.99.

Some people give priority to the King James Version of the Bible because of the excellence of its literature. I believe that the meaning of a text is more important than the fact that it is good literature. The purpose of reading the Bible is surely to consider its teachings and how or whether we should follow them. To clarify the text of the second part of Christian scriptures is what Henson sets out to do. Henson does not use the terms Old and New Testament but says: '[these terms] are rude to those of the Jewish faith and are misapplied. New covenant refers to a new relationship to God, not a collection of texts'.

Henson's version makes for much easier reading than the traditional text. For one thing, it is set in paragraphs instead of verses. But much more. His style of writing means both adults and children can pick it up and follow it like an ordinary book. Even if children are too young to understand everything, at least they will have started to get familiar with the text. This is because it is not a direct translation of the Greek but a switch into twenty-first century language and style of writing.

He includes the four gospels and adds Thomas. He includes most of the epistles but excludes those which many authorities consider are dubious: and also excludes Revelation. He disagrees with those who link Thomas with other Gnostic texts and thereby present it in a less intelligent way than he thinks it deserves. He admits to gently pressurising readers by pushing them in the direction of this intelligent reading.

In many places Henson changes the name of people and places. I find the change from 'scribes' to 'experts in the old books' and 'Pharisees' to 'the strict ones' is good. As he says, it saves some people from having to look up what those people were. But I don't like others. Mary Magdalene becomes Maggie, Peter becomes Rocky, Bethsaida becomes Fishtown. I think these changes are undesirable. There is nothing wrong with the traditional names, and the changes cause bewilderment in the minds of those who are familiar with those older names.

Sometimes he uses very contemporary phrases. In Thomas some folk are called 'Holy Joes'. In Matthew 3.16 instead of Herod being 'exceeding wroth' he

'went berserk'; in 5.13 instead of the salt losing its savour and being cast out it is 'the packet that goes past its sell-by date and has to be thrown out'.

Sometimes he softens phrases. In Luke 14.26 the need to hate one's family is changed to say they should put following Jesus before meeting the needs of family. Now that most people who live in a Christian culture don't believe in devils, a sensible change is from 'the devil-possessed' to 'the mentally ill'. And today when there is much discussion on same-sex orientation, he claims that what Paul had in his mind was not the issue of loving same-sex relationships but the callous exploitation associated with the sex-trade, and any ill treatment of one human being by another.

I like Henson's change of 'whereby we cry Abba, Father' to 'so that we can call God mum or dad'. I also like his version of Ephesians 6.13ff, which includes references to God's survival kit with its weatherproofs, hiking boots, first-aid pack, hard hat, handy knife and map. He expresses the quotations from Psalms in poetic form. Very appropriate, though his attempts at this aren't good.

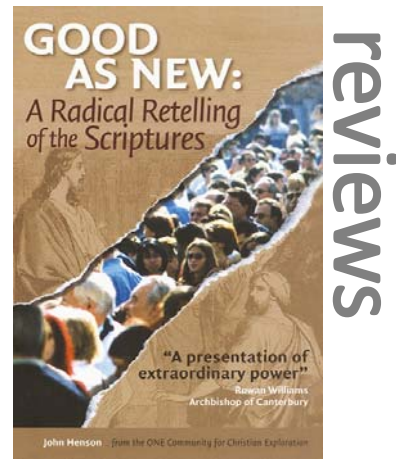
His comments on Luke 3.23ff are: 'The orthodox text has "Jesus being (as was supposed) the son of Joseph". The words in brackets are a later addition. The scriptural evidence for a virgin birth ranges between the minimal and nil. Everybody comes into the world as an act of God's spirit and has God for a parent.'

But if his was not a virgin birth, who was the father of Jesus? One early suggestion was that it was Panthera, a Roman soldier. But surely it was more likely to be Mary's partner Joseph.

To sum up, I found *Good as New* an interesting book which has prompted me to follow up a number of issues.

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David Hatton is a former lecturer on world religions with, he says, '97 years of life under my belt'.



reviews

## Kathleen McPhilemy reviews

### *Collected Poems*

by Carol Ann Duffy

Picador (London 2015). Hbk. 592 pages. £25.

The poetry of Carol Ann Duffy is a bit like Nelson's Column, so much a part of the landscape that it is hard to view it critically. If you are, as I am, an English teacher, you will be so familiar with certain poems or volumes that it becomes difficult not to reduce the poet to these accessible and much accessed works. The *Collected Poems* come as a reminder of what went before the Laureateship, or even before 'Poetry Live', the show where she and fellow poets presented their work to GCSE students up and down the country.

The two earliest collections, *Standing Female Nude* and *Selling Manhattan*, are a mixture of sometimes brash, sometimes very angry and sometimes perfectly realised poems. As well as recognising the old favourites, I was intrigued by others I did not know, for example, 'Oppenheim's Cup and Saucer' where I had to look up the title to get the full erotic charge. This is a witty poem, a quality less present in the later love poetry. The collections I have most enjoyed and which I would return to are *The Other Country* and *Meantime*, where I respond to feelings of displacement and loss and to her poetic skill. I also really like *The World's Wife*, which strikes me as a *tour de force*, ranging between satire, comedy and rage, but rage controlled by wit and art, as in 'Mrs Beast'.

One of the most noticeable characteristics of Duffy's work is its intertextuality. She has soaked up literature, particularly English poetry, like a sponge and it is impossible not to be aware of the echoes. In some of the earlier work, she sounds like Larkin:

One chair to sit in,  
a greasy dusk wrong side of the tracks,  
and watch the lodgers' lights come on in other rooms.  
(*Room*, p.224)

Elsewhere, there are flavours of Sylvia Plath, Angela Carter and even Jeanette Winterson. Sometimes, the technique is overt, as in 'The Love Poem', which starts with Shakespeare and ends with Shelley: 'the desire of the moth/ for the star'. Whereas the use of allusion is a common poetic technique and while it can be argued to be a way of speaking and preserving a shared tradition, for me this is something which Duffy sometimes overdoes. This quotation comes from *Rapture*, a collection which charts the story of a love affair. I have seen suggestions that the mysterious

beloved in this sequence is not a person but poetry itself. Fanciful perhaps, but it is well known that it was poetry which lured Duffy, aged 16, into her ten year relationship with Adrian

Henri: 'In the interval. I made quite sure he spotted me, /sweet sixteen, never been, babe, waif, and bought me a drink,/my first. You might ask why. Here's why. Poetry.' (*Little Red-cap*, p.229)

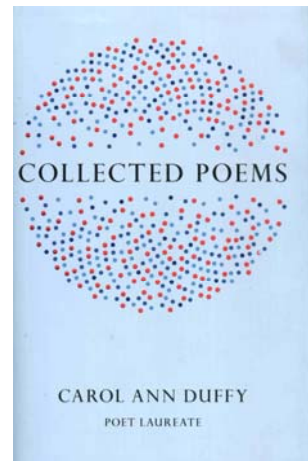
Herein lies one of the difficulties with Duffy's poetry, especially the later work. It is so aware of itself as poetry, of its craft and its position in the poetic tradition that the sense of individual urgency is submerged. Moreover, by the time we have reached *Feminine Gospels*, some of Duffy's stylistic mannerisms have become almost self-parody. Look out for: single words in lines, frequent caesura, aggressive internal rhyme, repetition of words and letters, refrain at the beginning or end of stanzas, not to mention the (often witty) inclusion of colloquial expressions or catchphrases. Perhaps it is inevitable that in a *Collected Poems* there will be redundancies.

Born and raised a Catholic, Duffy's anger against the Catholic Church is very evident in her early work: 'Miracles and shamrocks/ and transubstantiation are all my ass./ For Christ's sake, do not send your kids to Mass'. A better, and very creepy poem, which also condemns the repressiveness of the institution, is 'Confession' (p.189): 'C'mon/ out with them sins those little maggotty things/that wriggle in the soul...' However, although she uses the imagery and language of Catholicism throughout her work, she is not a religious poet and the driving force behind both these poems, as in many others, is childhood experience.

She is a poet who can do so many things: create characters, write love poetry, comic poetry, political poetry. Her best poems are witty, passionate and challenging. It may be the curse of the laureateship that it dilutes the poetic energy, so that poems like 'Mrs Scrooge' and 'Dorothy Wordsworth's Christmas Birthday' say all the right things but seem rather safe.

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Kathleen McPhilemy teaches English at Oxford FE College. Her poetry collections include *Witness to Magic*, *A Tented Peace* and *The Lion in the Forest*.



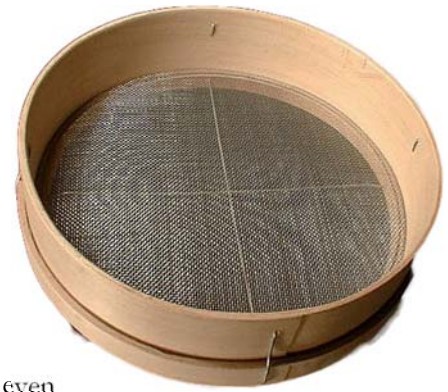
reviews



# SOF Sift

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

*Margaret Connolly, Llantwit Major, Wales*



Tuesday morning. No visitors yet to the Galilee Chapel at St Illtud's Church, where I am on my weekly Welcoming duty. Better do some cleaning. The Celtic Houelt Cross watches me serenely. Houelt king of Glwysin (modern Glamorgan) 'prepared this cross for the soul of Res his father' over a thousand years ago. Houelt, Res and St Illtud himself: they are all here with me as I mop.

We came to Llantwit Major, or Llanilltud Fawr, the Great Church of Illtud, six years ago, following my husband's desire to return to his native Wales. The move has also given me a new path, a turning of the old way, as all new paths are. Carved onto the Houelt cross is a labyrinth, a way to follow with twists and turns.

My journey began in a Methodist manse, the child and grandchild of ministers. An only child, I felt a bit special, since in a mining village, the Methodist church was more of the Establishment than the parish church, and so I grew up feeling myself to be part of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. A move to a middle class suburb at seven shocked me. No longer was I at the top of the tree socially and ecclesiastically. I was not 'a proper vicar's daughter.'

Going to university to study History, I failed to force myself to attend Methsoc, and joined the Anglican Society. Sung Evensong and the National Pilgrimage to Walsingham, a pleasant and familiar taste of once again being 'safe and superior'. I was confirmed, so I didn't have to pretend any more to be Church of England. Of course, it did not last. I had always loved to read Catholic death announcements, with their beautiful and romantic wording: 'Of your charity pray for the repose of the soul of Bridget Carney, who died fortified by the rites of our Holy Mother the Church.' Ah, lucky Bridget Carney. If I died, there would be nothing like that for me.

When I married a Catholic, it looked to me as if there was a chance! We attended the Children's Mass at a Dominican church, and were able to help by giving homilies and distributing Communion. I was happy to be part of the family there. However, my husband decided that public liturgy was not to his taste, and joined SOF, which met at Loughborough University. This didn't interest me much, as I was still enthusiastic about becoming a Catholic, which I eventually did. I found this experience such a let-

down. I did not even receive a certificate, never mind an invitation to spend a week at Castel Gondolfo, the papal summer residence! Yet there were things to admire: I loved the words of the Easter Vigil, and the dark church, and singing 'Christ our Light.' I was shocked when work colleagues seemed to expect me to have certain views if I was a Catholic. Belief had never played much part in my religious appreciation. I was amazed, too, when someone at Holy Cross said they actually believed in purgatory.

When we moved out of the city and I was working full time, we gave over going to church regularly, all our children now having been processed through the First Communion system. When I became a headmistress, I enjoyed taking assembly. I could be the minister and mother to all the strands of my community.

After we moved we paid a couple of taster visits to churches locally, but none seemed to be academically equal to our Dominican church. Shortly after this, there was a Flower Festival in the local Church in Wales Benefice. I attended a service at a small church, overlooking the sea. A quiet, holy place, with a kindly congregation who made me welcome. About the same time, a friend from the local History Society showed me the parish records in the church office in Llantwit Major, and while we were there, someone was hoovering the stairs and I said I wouldn't mind helping as a Welcomer too.

Sitting in the church each week, meeting visitors both to the church office and the newly opened Galilee Chapel, led to my becoming part of the church community, and acquiring jobs in the church. The Celtic stones seem to have absorbed a millennium of prayer and holiness, and I feel safe close to them. In the Cuthbert Compline we say:\*

Whoever has chosen  
To make the shelter of the Most High  
Their dwelling place  
Will stay in his over-shadowing.

Tomorrow I will light another candle for Houelt and Res and St Illtud, my friends.

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\*The quotation is taken from *Celtic Daily Prayer*, Collins 2005, page 35.

# The Only Way to Go

John Pearson recommends a bus ride.

After two recent sombre reflections, firstly on old age and then, though not necessarily connected, on death, let's get out and about again. Let's go by long distance bus.

A book I once bought, appropriately in an airport bookshop, was entitled *The Only Way to Go*, telling of the threat of death presented by air travel (sorry, more death). For me, long distance buses, specifically those operated by National Express, if not the only way to go, are a firm favourite. I have travelled thus, the Newcastle to London route and others, for forty years nearly ... and not just to save money (though that too, on occasion), sometimes because I needed to be in London at six o'clock in the morning. Sometimes, if a day bus, for the view along the way.

Let's join the varied crowd who will be our fellow passengers, either to London or to Newcastle.

Who are they nowadays? Much the same as ever. For some it is still a necessarily cheap way to travel, although for many students, once likely to half fill most buses, the new cheap alternative to the train is Megabus (the new 'National Express?'). Today we are more likely to be traveling alongside members of families, often African or Indian, migrating to or from the Capital. Single persons also abound, of every shape and size. Some, quiet and smartly dressed, may be travelling to a business meeting (as I have myself). Others, louder, may be *en route* to or from their holidays, complete with bright Hawaiian shirts or 'kiss me quick' hats. Others, clearly less fortunate, quite plainly dressed, draw no attention to themselves at all, perhaps deliberately avoiding it. Who knows how many fleeing villains I have shared bus space with, as well as the vast majority of innocent folk who just have a pressing need to get cheaply from A to B?

How do they behave nowadays? Much the same as ever. Some, in small groups start out, at midnight, still finishing boisterous conversations they began before rolling out of a pub, heading for the bus station, and looking set to talk all night, even after 'lights out'! Some, just minutes after their arrival, will have their special cushion out, perhaps a blanket too, real or improvised (their coat), and already be trying



to sleep. Others, if leaving Newcastle, stare vacantly out at the dark, or if leaving London at the sleeping Regency streets around Victoria, at the wide avenues of St John's Wood and then the suburbs beyond. Some try to read by the dull overhead lights or, nowadays, play computer games. After half an hour or so all perhaps will have 'dropped off' ... until the Service Station.

Only the buses and, arguably, the service stations have moved with the times. A part of me still yearns for the daytime double-deckers of the late 1970's, a crew member serving coffee and sandwiches as we sped along the M1. But the buses nowadays are still good, mostly brand new, reclining mock leather airline seats offering luxurious travel for a ticket costing a fraction of the train fare. The service stations have had a coat of paint or two since the late seventies when they and I first became acquainted.

Retail outlets and franchised coffee kiosks have changed name and style, but overall have remained much the same; lonely places for the single traveller, with no company except the other lonely guy, old or young, who has already bored you with his life story for the past three hours. At 3.00 in the morning only one coffee stall ('bouncy' barista, sleepy passengers) and the newsagents will be open, and it takes imagination to visualise the crowds at the fast food joints during the day, cold and shuttered as they are now. On a bad trip, running late, the driver gives you 15 minutes ... no time at all. On a fast run he allows you perhaps 50 minutes ... loo and a coffee, bliss!

Well there it is. Make of it as you will ... six hours or so of contented travel with a refreshing break half way, or six hours of living hell. For some of us it's still the only way to go.

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

## Epic

From stardust, to simple life, to sex and difference,  
then evolution led by love and death,  
an altered ape on Earth one day  
learned language, longing for so much,  
addressed deities, dreamed of paradise.  
Consciousness became conscience of shortfall,  
there being a battle between brutal thrust  
and fellow-feeling, friendly hobnobbing.  
Fathomless fears fostered gods,  
powers personified disposing of their fate;  
offering food to eat was Earth, their mother,  
their father the oh-fail-not fiery sun,  
and many more imagination shaped,  
then over-ruled them all with one supreme.  
They held to him to help deliver them  
from powerlessness and prayed for prosperous times.

A single supernatural source and mind  
enabled them to order all the world  
and, making him their model, make a self,  
to see themselves as each a single person,  
amid flux of feelings and phantasms to say 'I'.  
And when their god grew more gracious they began  
to imagine humanity might be gracious too,  
whole-hearted and healing like him they had created.  
But the glimpsed god-led goal eluded them,  
the ascent into the unseen was too steep, uncanny.  
Deity must come down and dwell on Earth.

His mother was Mary, a man was born  
without rank or riches in a rough condition.  
Kindness is coming to reign, he proclaimed to the people,  
the poor have a privileged place in this kingdom,  
heartily shall the hungry feast happy at my table,  
the meek, the merciful, the martyrs for justice.  
He clashed with clerics who called him a blasphemer,  
fought with Pharisees who found him a lawbreaker.  
His upside-down gospel upset Empire that killed him.

Then the man Jesus metamorphoses into mythical Christ,  
who goes down to the depths of darkness to overcome it,  
harrowing hell to hunt out the Devil:

*Thou art Doctor of Death, drink that thou madest.  
For I that am Lord of Life, love is my drink  
and for that drink today I died upon Earth.*

Enabling dream, drama and dreadful battle,  
now and not yet, needs action and vision.



Doctors of death to be daunted and thwarted,  
chancellors challenged who chivvy the poor,  
from their lap of luxury, lay burdens on others.

Christ, leading captivity captive, scales the heights,  
giver of gifts, true God and true man.  
He is seen before he ascends by some of his intimates.  
First Mary Magdalene meets him in the garden.  
When he breaks bread, this brings recognition.  
Be my body by one baked loaf shared,  
be of my blood in the bond of this wine,  
he cries as he christens re-crowned humankind,  
gathering together in goodwill and love  
fellow creatures accredited one Christ, one enterprise,  
hero of this history of our whole species.

He spreads his spirit spurting tongues of fire,  
working its wonders, the word that burns.  
Voice of the victims, the invisible who pay,  
of the resolute against wrongs, rising again.  
All who struggle for strength and strive to do good,  
all who love life and lead it generously,  
pouring out with passion a poem of being.

Bridegroom and bride are brought to bed,  
swooning sweetness of secret bliss.  
Primrose and Parliament Hill, St Pancras International,  
she shines as a city of social joys,  
where communal comfort and kindness reign,  
a human habitat, here on this planet.

*Dinah Livingstone*



Detail from *St Pancras at Sunset*, painting by John O'Connor, 1884.

'Epic' was read at the SOF Annual Conference and the Conference Chair asked for it to be printed in *Sofia*.

The poem is published in Dinah Livingstone's collection *The Vision Splendid* (Katabasis, London 2014).

