

*sfia*

No. 125 September 2017



*Being Human*  
CONFERENCE ISSUE

# *sofia*

*down to Earth*

*Sofia* is published quarterly in March, June, September and December.

## JOIN SOF NETWORK or SUBSCRIBE TO THE MAGAZINE

*Sofia* comes free to Network members.

Subscription to the magazine alone costs £15 per year (4 issues).

New members and subscribers are welcome and details are available from the

### Membership Secretary:

**Richard Wood-Penn,**

**3 Glebe Road, Cogenhoe, Northampton, NN7 1NR**

[membership@sofn.org.uk](mailto:membership@sofn.org.uk)

Rates: Sponsor: £60; Individual member: £30; concessions: £20.

## OVERSEAS

Overseas readers can subscribe to *Sofia* by credit card on our website: [www.sofn.org.uk/pages/join.html](http://www.sofn.org.uk/pages/join.html)

US readers may pay membership or magazine subscriptions by check in dollars payable to: **John J. Klopacz** and marked 'for *Sofia*' at prices obtainable from him. His address is: **John J. Klopacz, 50 Samoset Street, San Francisco, CA 94110-5346.**

**Tel. 415-647-3258**

[jklopacz@well.com](mailto:jklopacz@well.com)

## CONTRIBUTIONS

Contributions to the magazine are welcome. Please submit unpublished articles that have not been submitted elsewhere, or if previously published, please state where and when.

Proposals can be discussed with the Editor. Books for review, reviews, articles (which may be edited for publication) and poems should be sent to:

**The Editor: Dinah Livingstone**

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

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

Copy deadline is **40 days** before the beginning of the month of publication. Contributions should be emailed to the Editor or posted as typewritten script. Contributions express the individual writer's opinion. They do not necessarily represent the views of the Editor, the Trustees or SOF Network. Letters to the Editor are welcome and should be emailed or posted to the Editor at the address above.

*The Editor would like to thank Alison McRobb for proof-reading each issue of Sofia.*

## ADVERTISING

To advertise in *Sofia* contact the Editor. Rates are: £132 full page. £72 half page. £42 quarter page. £28 1/8th of a page.

*Sofia* is typeset in-house and printed in England by [imprint.co.uk/digital](http://imprint.co.uk/digital)

**Website: [www.sofn.org.uk](http://www.sofn.org.uk)**

ISSN 1749-9062

© *Sofia* 2017

# Contents

## Editorial

3 *Being Human*

## Articles

4 *Campaigning for Being Human* by Richy Thompson

9 *Believing in Being Human* by Abby Day

14 *Being Human: Moving beyond Identity Politics* by Dilwar Hussain

## Poetry

19 Two London Poems: *At the School Gates* and *A Londoner* by Dinah Livingstone

26 *Messenger* by Kathryn Southworth

## Reviews

21 **Theology:** David Paterson reviews *Religion and Atheism: Beyond the Divide*, edited by Anthony Carroll and Richard Norman

22 **Theology/Poetry:** Tony Windross reviews *The Making of Humanity: Poetic Vision and Kindness* by Dinah Livingstone

23 **Church:** David Lee reviews *That Was the Church that Was: How the Church of England Lost the English People* by Andrew Brown and Linda Woodhead

24 **Poetry:** Kathryn Southworth reviews *European Hours: Collected Poems* by Anthony Rudolf

25 **Novel:** Frank Walker reviews *The Kingdom* by Emmanuel Carrere

## Regulars and Occasionals

20 *Revisiting:* Oliver Essame revisits *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley

27 *As I Please:* John Pearson goes on a Mini Grand Tour

**Front cover image:** Man diving from the rebuilt Mostar Bridge. Photo: Predrag Zvijerac. [bbc.co.uk](http://bbc.co.uk)

**Back cover image:** *The Kiss* by Gustav Klimt (1908) Österreichische Galerie Belvedere.

# *sofia*

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.

# Being Human

Like this year's SOF Conference, this conference issue of *Sofia* is called *Being Human*. It starts with shortened versions of the talks given by our three main speakers, who approached the theme from different angles.

Richy Thompson, Director of Public Affairs and Policy at Humanists UK, kicked off by giving us some demographics and discussing some campaigns that Humanists UK are currently engaged in.

Next, Abby Day told us that most people in Britain are now human-centred, even if they describe themselves as 'Christian' on the census. She talked about her research with the people she called 'Generation A', the 'army' of about 70,000 laywomen volunteers who keep the Church of England going, and who are now growing old and dying out. This, she said, would have serious consequences for the Church's future functioning. These are the 'excellent women' who populate novelist Barbara Pym's social comedies.

Dilwar Hussain spoke of the battle going on within Islam between extremist, as well as oppressive, tendencies and more humane ones. There are those who want to integrate into British society and those who want to attack it. He was strongly on the side of integration. Islam can be extremely oppressive to women, in some countries (among other things), killing them for making love with an unapproved partner. This killing is actually also ordered in the Mosaic Law (Deut 22:22-24). Even in Britain, Sharia councils discriminate against women in divorce and child custody cases. In this context, Dilwar mentioned some Muslim women scholars who are struggling for change, and the strength and good sense of Muhammad's first wife Khadija.

'In my exchanges every land shall walk.' It is this idea of the city that terrorists recently attacked, with fear and loathing, in London, Manchester and Barcelona. City where so many with different histories, poetries, music, food (often delicious!), enjoy their everyday lives in common. Common humanity. Rather than being a threat, all these differences are the city's pride and joy, its wealth of people. At the vigil after the London attacks, 'speaking as a proud and patriotic British Muslim,' London mayor Sadiq Khan said: 'Our unity and love for one another will always be stronger than hate from the extremists... This is our city, these are our values. This is our way of life, London will never be

broken by terrorists.' After the Manchester attack, the We Love Manchester Emergency Fund raised £2m in 24 hours for the victims' families. There have also been huge demonstrations of solidarity and civic love in Barcelona. As they say in Catalan: '*T'estimem, Barcelona!*' For love isn't just a private matter, but builder of cities, 'both heart in heart and hand in hand'. That is being human.

Computer expert Oliver Essame's input into the Conference was focused on artificial intelligence and how far robots can 'become human'. For this *Sofia* he revisits Mary Shelley's Gothic novel *Frankenstein* and discusses some of the issues raised in it. I am hoping that this *Revisiting* will be the first of a series in a new *Sofia* column. So if you would like to 'revisit' a novel, poem or other literary work you consider important, please submit your thoughts for this new column. Send about 700 words to [editor@sofn.org.uk](mailto:editor@sofn.org.uk). I hope people will be willing to have a go.

Please note that we now have a new SOF Membership Secretary, Richard Wood-Penn. For anyone wanting to join SOF Network or subscribe to *Sofia*, he is the person to contact (see inside front cover). His address is: Membership Secretary: Richard Wood-Penn, 3 Glebe Road, Cogenhoe, Northampton, NN7 1NR. Email: [membership@sofn.org.uk](mailto:membership@sofn.org.uk)

I'd like to thank Richard's predecessor David Lambourn for always being so meticulous, helpful and jolly in the job.

## Note on the Front Cover

Built in 1566, the bridge over the River Neretva in the Bosnian city of Mostar, linking the Croat side to the Muslim side of the city, was blown up in 1993 during the civil war. The hump-backed bridge was rebuilt in 2004 and the traditional annual diving competition from the top of the arch (39ft 5in) was resumed. It is watched with excitement by people on both riverbanks, Christians and Muslims. *Sofia's* front cover picture shows a diver from the bridge and spectators on both banks.

# Campaigning for Being Human

Richy Thompson gives some figures and discusses campaigns that Humanists UK are currently engaged in.

Humanists UK, the organisation for whom I work, campaign on a wide range of issues, from an end to state funding for faith schools, to legal recognition for assisted dying, to removal of bishops from the House of Lords. Many of these goals seem quite far away, but at the same time the UK population is becoming less and less religious. This talk will explore where these countervailing trends might be going, and what it all means for the future of 'being human'.

## Some demographics

Society is changing (see figure 1 on facing page.). The latest British Social Attitudes Survey (BSAS) gives 53% of the population as belonging to no religion, 15% as Anglican, 9% as Catholic and 4% as Muslim. The proportion of the population that is Catholic or of non-Catholic/Anglican Christian faith has remained fairly constant over the last 33 years, with declines in religiosity amongst the native population being cancelled out by immigration. Meanwhile the proportion of the population that is of non-Christian faith has grown, albeit only to a still quite small proportion, from about 2% to about 6% of the population.

The Church of England, however, has collapsed (see figure 2 on facing page). It has declined from about 40% the year BSAS started, 1983 (coincidentally the year before the Sea of Faith was formed), to 15% today. The non-religious population, conversely, has capitalised, growing from 31% to 53%.

If you break the figures down by age, you find that every generation is less religious than the previous one. While just 24% of the over-75s are of no religion, that jumps to 63% amongst 18-24s. The proportion who are Anglicans runs from 38% amongst the over-75s to just 4.5%

amongst those aged 18-24. The Catholic figures are fairly consistent across age ranges, whereas for Muslims the proportion runs from 0.3% amongst the over-75s to 6% amongst 18-24 year olds.

In other words: in our lifetimes we are seeing a total collapse of the Church of England in our society, with its adherents moving to no religion. This is the largest single demographic shift going on in the UK today, much bigger in absolute terms than anything related to ethnicity or age. And research shows that this happens because for every non-religious person who becomes religious, there are 26 who go in the other direction.

And the collapse of Anglicanism leads to bizarre situations like that, for the first time, in 2015, there are now more children doing collective worship every day in state-funded Church of England schools, than there are Anglicans on the pews on any given week. This is a staggering state of affairs, and while support is presently riding high within Government for Church schools, it cannot be a sustainable picture (see figure 3 on facing page).

## What is happening

I believe that, at least since it was created, we have been remodelling our society along the lines of the harm principle, a principle created by John Stuart Mill, in *On Liberty* (1859):

The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.

This appears to have occurred through a series of revolutions in our social laws. If you look back at social progress over the 20<sup>th</sup> century, you can see

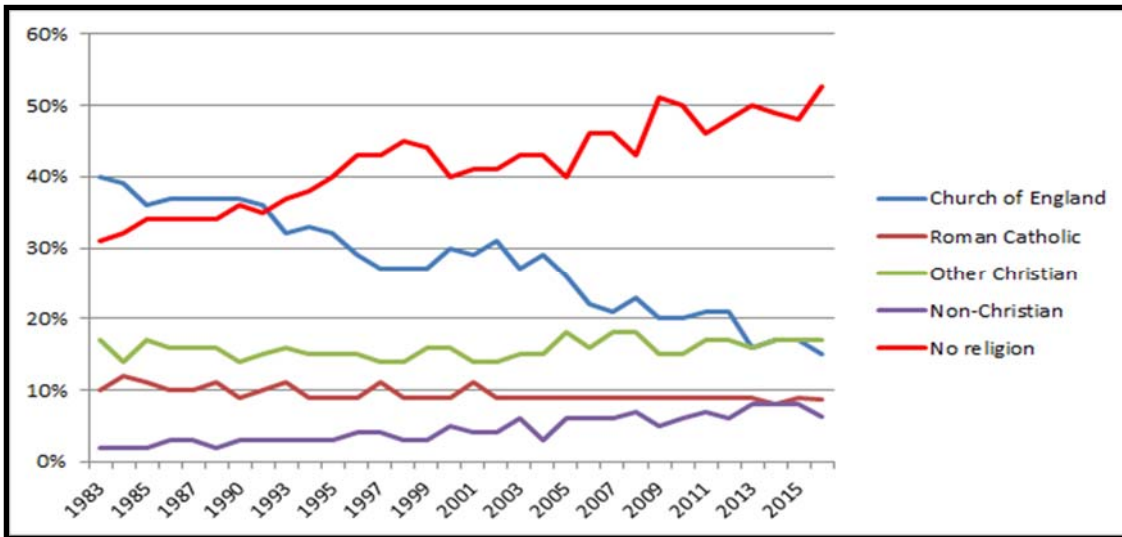


Figure 1. Five-year average British Social Attitudes Survey responses to question about religious belonging.

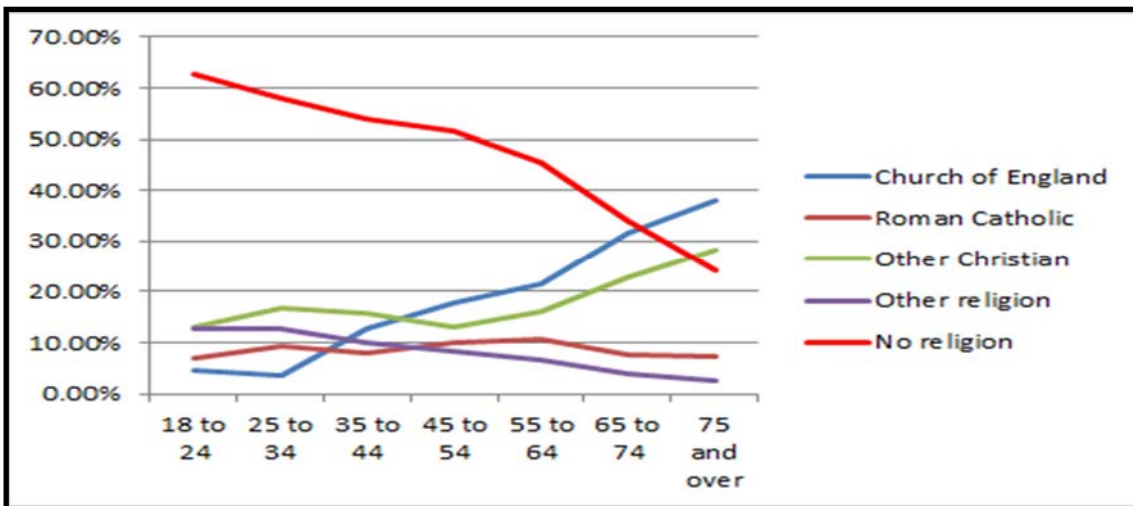


Figure 2. BSAS religious belonging by age.

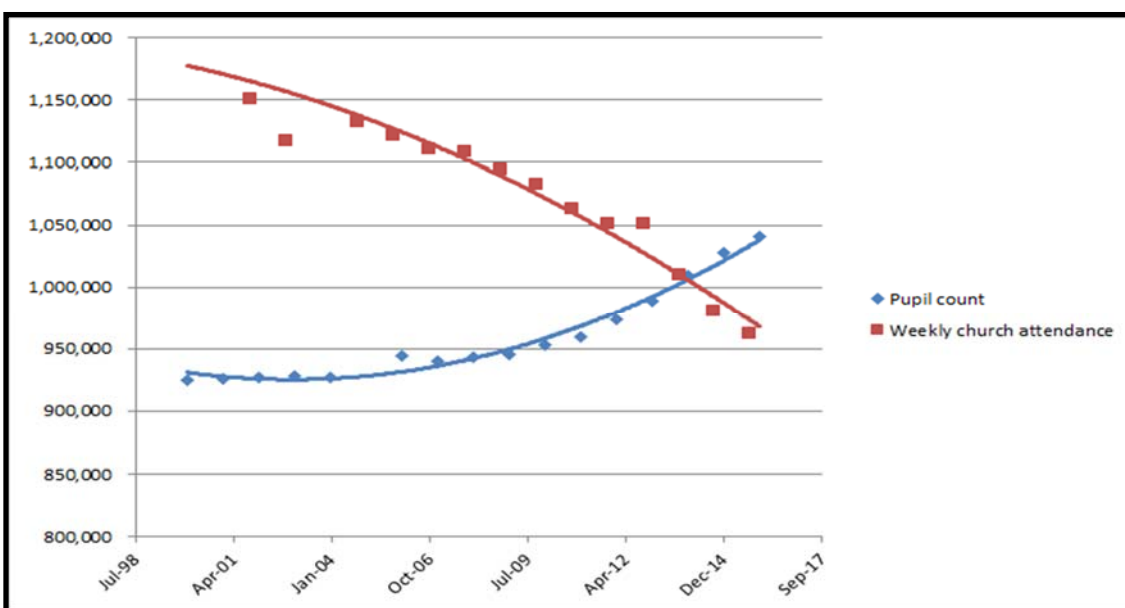


Figure 3. No. of pupils in Church of England state schools, versus average all-ages weekly attendance at Church of England churches.

these things go in fits and starts. Humanists UK is in the early stages of planning an event for later this year called *Recapturing the Spirit of '67*, celebrating fifty years since a number of landmark reforms like the legalisation of abortion, the decriminalisation of homosexuality, and the legalisation of the pill. 1967 was shortly followed by the first law on race relations, and followed by law bringing about general availability of divorce.

Another such year, I think, was 1998. It saw the Human Rights Act, the Good Friday Agreement, devolution, and the minimum wage. It was shortly followed by the removal of the hereditary peers from the House of Lords, the Freedom of Information Act, the end of section 28 and the equalisation of the age of consent, and equality laws on sexual orientation and religion or belief for the first time.

What are the equivalent debates today, and when might we next see such a revolution?

## Ethical debates today

Many of the equivalent debates today are amongst those that Humanists UK work on. I would identify:

- Assisted dying
- Abortion (still)
- Relationships and sex education
- Marriage laws
- Segregation in schools

On **assisted dying**, two legal cases are now under way, seeking to change the law. In 2012-15, a previous case was brought by Tony Nicklinson, who had locked-in syndrome. After he died, his case was taken over by Humanists UK patrons Jane Nicklinson, Tony's wife, and Paul Lamb, who is severely physically disabled following a road accident. Both Tony and Paul were, or are in Paul's case, in constant pain, and so both wanted the right to end their lives. They took a case to try to ensure that people who are terminally ill or incurably suffering can die at a time and manner of their choosing, provided they are of sound mind and have a settled wish to do so. They argued that the lack of such a right meant their human right to private life was infringed.

Unfortunately, however, their case was unsuccessful, as the Supreme Court ruled in 2014 that such a significant ethical issue should be one that Parliament first of all has a chance to decide upon.

In 2015 Parliament refused to make such a decision by rejecting a private member's bill brought on the matter by Rob Marris MP. As a result, the issue has turned back to the courts, and there are two cases before us, both taken by Humanists UK members. First, Noel Conway, who has motor neurone disease, is arguing that those who are terminally ill and have six months or fewer to live, should have such a right to die. And second, 'Omid T', who has multiple system atrophy, is looking to take a case for those who are not terminally ill but incurably suffering. Noel had his case heard in the High Court in late July, which Humanists UK intervened in, and so we are currently awaiting a verdict in his claim before proceeding to Omid's. It seems probable that regardless of the outcome, both cases will make their way to the Supreme Court.

Parliament, it seems, has no attitude to address assisted dying, following the 2015 defeat. But that is not true when it comes to **abortion**. In June, the Supreme Court ruled in the so-called 'A and B' case that women from Northern Ireland are not being discriminated against by the NHS in England because the NHS doesn't offer them free access to abortion services, much as it does for women who are from Britain. Although this decision meant the UK Government had successfully defended the status quo, it led to political uproar, with Stella Creasy MP tabling an amendment to the Queen's Speech, looking to extend such free provision. With the Government fearing it was facing defeat, it decided to reverse its position, and extend free provision after all. The Scottish and Welsh Governments quickly followed suit. This has probably been the most significant development in access to abortion services for Irish women ever. Humanists UK intervened in the case and lobbied extensively for the amendment.

It is not the end of the matter, however, because it doesn't address the question of Northern Ireland women getting access to abortion facilities at home. There are currently

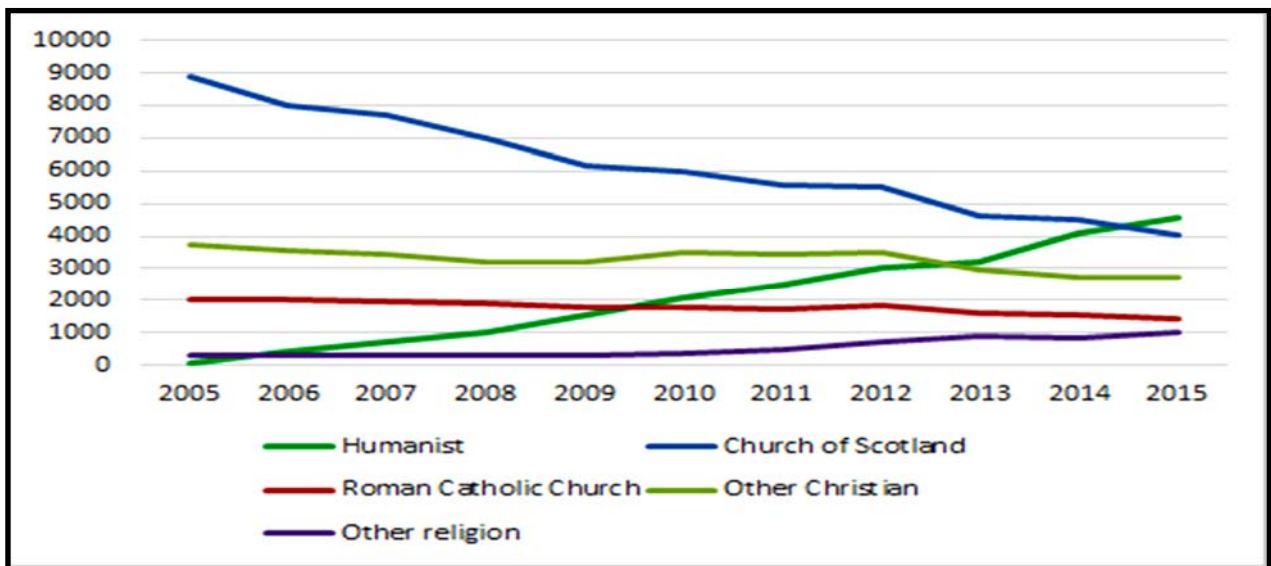


Figure 4. Humanist marriages in Scotland, by religion or belief.

two cases proceeding on this question, which Humanists UK is also intervening in. The first, called the ‘Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission’ case, seeks to enable women to be able to access an abortion when they have become pregnant due to sexual crime (specifically, rape and incest), or where there is a fatal foetal abnormality. The case was won in the High Court, but overturned in July in the Court of Appeal. It will now be heard by the Supreme Court in October.

The second, called ‘JR76’, is due before the Belfast High Court the same month, and focuses on a mother being prosecuted for procuring abortion pills for her daughter. The grounds at stake are whether abortion should be legal after consensual sex involving a minor, and whether a prosecution can be brought where it is only possible to do so through a breach of doctor-patient confidentiality. Cases of the nature of these two, seeking to extend the range of circumstances in which abortion is legal in Northern Ireland, have not occurred in the past, and reflect a more confident and organised pro-choice movement.

Turning to **relationships and sex education**, in the past, it has not been the case that the subject has been compulsory in UK schools. But earlier this year, following pressure from backbench MPs, the Government in England committed to just that, bringing forth an amendment in April

to its own Children and Social Work Act to bring about the change. This, again, is significant progress, after seven years of prevarication or opposition on the matter. A consultation on guidance to go alongside it is due in the autumn. However, concerns remain around the fact that the content of the curriculum still won’t be compulsory, so some schools – particularly religious schools – may ignore the guidance.

At present, **humanist marriages** are not legally recognised in the UK, except in Scotland (see figure 4 above). Humanist marriages are bespoke, non-religious marriages that are fully personalised to the deepest-held beliefs and wishes of the couple involved, and conducted by a humanist celebrant who shares the couple’s beliefs. Currently, in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, a couple wishing to have a humanist wedding ceremony must also have a separate civil registration in order to get legal recognition for their marriage.

In 2005 the Scottish Registrar General extended such recognition after concluding that for human rights reasons, existing law must be reinterpreted to do just that. Since then humanist marriages have exploded in number, from 82 in the first year to over 4,500 in 2015. Meanwhile Church of Scotland marriages have collapsed, from around 9,000 to about 4,000. In other words, it is clear there is a demand for them.

In England and Wales, the Government gave itself the power to extend legal recognition to humanist marriages as part of the 2013 Same-Sex Marriage Act, but chose not to do so, and has been prevaricating on the question since. Meanwhile, this year, a couple in Northern Ireland, supported by Humanists UK, decided to take a legal case to secure recognition for their humanist marriage there. They took the case on human rights grounds, arguing they are being discriminated against because of their humanist beliefs. The case proceeded at breakneck speed, so as to be heard before the couple's wedding date. From getting permission for a hearing in the High Court to being heard took just 19 days. Another 14 days later, the decision was handed down that the couple had won their case, meaning humanist marriages gained legal recognition. However, that same day the decision was appealed, meaning that the couple were back in the Court of Appeal nine days later. By this point it was three days before the couple's scheduled marriage, so the judges decided to find a loophole to enable this couple to have their legal humanist wedding ceremony, while staying the wider decision until a further hearing in September. In other words, one legal humanist wedding has now happened in Northern Ireland – but whether there are any more remains to be seen!

Not everything, however, is progressing in the right direction. This is particularly true when it comes to **'faith' schools**. In late 2016, the UK Government announced it wants to lift the cap on admissions to all new English state religious schools, which has existed since 2007. The cap has said that at least half of places at such schools must be open to all, regardless of religion and belief. It has had a clear impact on increasing religious, ethnic, and social diversity within schools. However, it has been opposed by the Catholic Education Service, who claim that the cap breaks canon law, in spite of ample evidence that other Catholic schools in other countries have no problem with similarly open admissions. The Government consulted on the lifting of the cap last year, but has yet to make a firm decision to do it.

Similarly, progress has been slow in tackling illegal religious schools. Humanists UK has been working in particular with ex-Charedi Jewish men from Stamford Hill in Hackney, who in spite of

being third or fourth generation Londoners, spoke no English until leaving their communities as young men. This is because after boys have their *bar mitzvah* at the age of 13, they are confined to illegal *yeshivas*, which don't even meet the minimum standards for a private school; they are crammed 50 to a room, and study nothing but the Talmud and the Torah, from 8 am to 10 pm. In spite of widespread awareness of this issue – Humanists UK has a list of about 25 of these schools – the authorities have still failed to shut them down. Ofsted now says that it has insufficient powers to effectively do so. The Government consulted on giving Ofsted more powers in this area of out-of-school settings in early 2016, but things stalled in the face of opposition from the Church of England, who had spurious concerns about the regulation of Sunday Schools.

Particularly in education, religious groups are extremely powerful. The Church of England is the ninth biggest charitable foundation in the world, but on top of that it runs a quarter of all state schools. The Catholic Church runs another ten percent. This makes issues around discrimination in education, in particular, very hard to tackle.

## Where to from here?

Given all the above, it seems we might be going through a revolution in social rules right now. But the demographic trends outlined at the start surely must mean another one is coming. Education is the hardest to get at, but this, too, must eventually be recognised as an area needing reform, as we continue to reassemble society along the lines of what John Stuart Mill wanted to see.

That is the future of being human in the UK, at least, and of Humanism. On all of these things, it is a matter of when, not if. Our job as campaigners is to make sure that change happens as smoothly and as quickly as possible.

---

Richy Thompson is Director of Public Affairs and Policy, Humanists UK



# Believing in Being Human

Abby Day says most people in Britain are now human-centred, while ‘Generation A’, the many laywomen volunteers who keep the Church of England going, are dying out.

The nature of religious affiliation in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century is becoming increasingly complex and important. Is it acceptable for a woman to cover her whole body and face with a veil? Should we allow Church of England schools to discriminate on the basis of religion? What is the definition and nature of religious ‘extremism’?

These are questions which are debated widely today and whose outcome will shape the nature of our society. Britain is formally a religious country in a way that many modern states are not. There is a willingness to countenance religious involvement in the machinery of government: the Church of England is represented by a number of its bishops in the House of Lords; many children are refused entry to popular Church of England schools because their parents do not attend church (or refuse to attend to get their card stamped every Sunday in order to qualify: Starbucks loyalty system without the good coffee). The Head of State is also the Head of the Church of England. And yet, Britain is often described as a secular country.

The term ‘secular’ might for many people be associated with the mission of the National Secular Society, which is overtly atheistic rather than merely opposed to giving religion a public role. For example, the society maintains that ‘supernaturalism is based upon ignorance and assails it as the historic enemy of progress’; see <http://www.secularism.org.uk/generalprinciples.html>). They neglect the many atheists or otherwise non-religious people who believe in ghosts – particularly the spirits of their deceased relatives.

But, what are ‘we’ as a society, and what do ‘we’ believe in nowadays?

## Understanding belief

Every ten years a national census is taken, asking people questions about their age, jobs, gender, where they live and so on. In 2001, for the first time in England and Wales a question asked people to name their religion. (There had been such questions before on the Northern Ireland and Scottish versions.) In response, 71.9 per cent said ‘Christian’. Sixteen per cent stated that they had no religion. This category included agnostics, atheists, heathens and Jedi Knights. Six per cent identified themselves as members of other religions, the largest single group being Muslims at three per cent, and all others accounting for less than one per cent each. The remainder chose not to answer the question.

The high percentage of Christians may seem surprising, considering that less than three per cent of the population attends church on an average Sunday. That number has been declining markedly during the last 50 years. Further, the age of church-goers is much older than the general population. All other forms of Christian public participation – from baptisms to confirmations, weddings and funerals – are decreasing. Those data suggest that the UK is an increasingly secular country.

Many scholars within the field of Religious Studies and Theology would, however, disagree. They argue that religion is not disappearing but simply changing and retreating from the public sphere. Those theorists, like many philosophers before them, believe that religion has an *a priori* existence and cannot be reduced to anything else: it is and always will be inherently part of human existence. They describe the gap between private religious belief and public observance as ‘believing without belonging’. Sometimes, they

say, this religious impulse may not appear in the form of institutionalised religion, but rather as personal spirituality.

My doctoral research at the University of Lancaster concluded that when people affiliate to Christianity, most do so only when asked on an official form and then they do it mainly for ethnic or familial associations. So, when people in the UK claim they are 'Christian' many may be saying they are 'White English'.

As always, the debate is shaped by methods of data collection. My research probed religious belief without asking overtly religious questions. My questions were influenced by philosophical, theological and sociological theories about the nature of belief and religion, particularly questions provoked by Aristotle, Aquinas, Hume, Marx, Weber and Durkheim. Through semi-structured interviews with people from a variety of ages and backgrounds, I asked what they believed in. Here's an excerpt from an interview I had with a 15-year-old student. I'll call him Jordan (not his real name):

*Abby:* What do you believe in?

*Jordan:* Nowt.

*Abby:* Sorry?

*Jordan:* I don't believe in owt. I don't believe in any religions.

*Abby:* You don't believe in any religions.

*Jordan:* No. I'm Christian but I don't believe in owt.

This apparent contradiction between 'Christian' and 'belief' ran through many of my interviews. What I discovered was that Jordan and many other people may not believe in religion but they do believe in 'owt'. My other questions provoked those beliefs – about morality, about what was important to them, how life began, how it might end, what, if anything, life means to them, what frightened or delighted them and where those beliefs came from. Few people mentioned a god or any religion. Young, old, rich, poor, most people's sense of meaning in life was attached to the people with whom they had important relationships: their families, partners, friends, lovers. From them, people developed their morality, reinforced by schools, life experience and wider society. It was to their loved ones – not a god – they turned when they were afraid,

and it was from them they derived contentment and joy.

One surprising finding was how frequently people described supernatural experience – even self-declared atheists see ghosts, and many non-religious people experience 'life after death' through sensing the presence of a deceased relative. Here, my research conflicts with other scholars who defend enduring religiosity or 'common religion' by citing surveys where people say that they believe in such things as life-after-death. It also challenges hard-line definitions of atheists as people who only believe in that which can be empirically proven.

What those definitions and surveys do not reveal is what such phenomena and concepts mean to people. I discovered through an open-ended, conversational method that such concepts could mean pre-destination ('we can't change fate') or random events ('bad luck') or self-determination ('I am master of my destiny'). I also discovered that experiencing transient supernatural phenomena is ubiquitous and unrelated to beliefs in religion or spirituality. What was important to many people was their belief that inexplicable events will one day be explained by science; meanwhile, power, agency and authority remained for them firmly located in the human and secular.

## Believing in belonging

My thesis, 'believing-in-belonging', argued that human relationships can be the main sites for people to source and experience emotion, morality and 'transcendence'. A minority in my study (and, I would argue, in Britain) are faithful, adherent, theocentric Christians whose religious beliefs play an important part in their lives. The majority are anthropocentric, locating meaning, power and authority in themselves and other humans.

At the end of each interview I asked people what they had said (or, in the case of young people, what they would have said) in answer to the census question and why. Like the census, my study found most people said 'Christian'. About half of these Christians would be ones whom I would term faithful Christian adherents. They

may not always go to church, but most would like to. In our interviews, their faith was embedded in their answers: God is important to them and the source of all love and goodness in the world; Jesus is a friend; they will reunite with their loved ones in heaven. Most other 'Christians' were ambivalent about a god who may or may not exist, but either way plays no part in their lives. Some were even openly hostile to religion. They explained they would say 'Christian' on the census because they were not members of another religion, such as Islam, or because they were baptised as a child. They often reinforced the idea of English cultural identity throughout our interview and frequently identified immigrants as the source of the country's problems. I argue that for them Christianity is a powerful marker of ethnic or familial identity.

Following the early 20<sup>th</sup> century sociologist Émile Durkheim, this is a functionalist interpretation of religion. He proposed that while the forms of religion may change, becoming more complex over time, religion will always be with us due to its 'ever-present causes' and its continuing function of social stability. Durkheim rejected the idea that religion presupposes a belief in the supernatural or in divine beings. Religion, he argued, has been with us for as long as people have gathered in groups, because its source is the intensity of group activities. The feeling people sometimes have of 'something else' is, he argued, the overwhelming feeling of belonging to a group.

A few years after I completed that research, I returned to the field to revisit many of my participants. The 2011 census had just been taken, which would reveal that the number of people who selected 'Christian' dropped to 59 per cent; those selecting 'no religion' doubled. Other religions grew slightly. Reasons are undoubtedly complex, but I suggest had a good deal to do with Britain's aging profile where the older generation of Christians are dying out and the younger generation is less religious.

This thought led me to decide to research in depth that older, Christian generation, particularly their loyal cohort of women. Writing about the UK religious landscape in 1994, Davie (1994, 2)



Novelist Barbara Pym (1913-1980) wrote social comedies about 'Excellent Women'

made two statements that caught my imagination when I conducted my doctoral research:

The churches attract an audience which is disproportionately elderly, female and conservative [...] the nature of family life, including the traditional codes of morality, is altering rapidly [...] Changes in gender roles have, for better or for worse, penetrated the churches and influenced theological thinking.

The women of Generation A were in their sixties when she wrote, and were then witnessing the kinds of changes she was writing about.

In November 2015, launching a programme to reverse church decline, the Church of England director of finance, John Spence, said that the evidence for decline was 'indisputable' ([www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/21/justin-welby-church-england-new-synod](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/21/justin-welby-church-england-new-synod)):

Twenty years ago the demographics matched the population as a whole. Now we're 20 years older than the population. Unless we do something, the church will face a real crisis.

While I agree that the evidence is clear, I will be less optimistic that the church can reverse such a trend. In my research, the picture I create is one of an institution not simply divided by an age gap, but by significant values and practices.

## Loss of 'Generation A'

Many forms of research show that the Anglican Church faces a demographic time bomb as its last generation of active laywomen starts to die out. The prevalence of laywomen in mainstream Christian congregations is a widely accepted phenomenon that will cause little surprise amongst the research community or Christian adherents. What is surprising is that we know so little about them and therefore about how their beliefs, behaviours and patterns of religiosity can inform us about the character and changing nature of contemporary and future religion. This is the generation who have sometimes been seen to lead a parallel church. They attend the mainstream churches every Sunday, polish the brasses, organise fund-raisers, keep the church open on week-days, bake cakes and visit vulnerable people in their homes. Their often invisible labour not only populates the physical space of the church but helps ensure its continuity and enriches it.

The loss of these women, currently estimated to number in the region of 70,000, will have serious consequences for the Church's ability to function into the future, and for vulnerable people who depend on the Church for support, social engagement or simply company.

In *The Religious Lives of Older Laywomen: the last Active Anglican Generation*, I set out how the financial and social structures of the Church of England are kept afloat by a shrinking band of committed women who are now entering their eighties and nineties. Using the ethnographic method of participant observation and immersion, I worked closely with laywomen in

Britain while researching my book. Thanks to funding from the Economic and Research Council, I was able to enrich the story of those women through a study carried out, half-time, over two years. My objective was to begin by immersing myself in the daily routines of one mainstream Anglican church in southern England, where I would identify key themes. I would then elaborate and interrogate those themes by comparing them through study visits to other UK and international churches.

I found that their unpaid labour in cleaning, furnishing, catering, fundraising and supporting midweek services effectively keeps the church from collapse – but there is no evidence that they will be replaced by new generations.

These laywomen I identified as 'Generation A' – women born in the 1920s and 30s – are the generation and often the parents of the baby boomers who came of age in the 1960s, and thus

were the last generation whose values are centred on nation, family and God. Their devotion to organisations like the Church has in succeeding generations been surpassed by other forms of identification and activism, leaving the Church devoid of new recruits to form an active laity.

I have argued that the prognosis for the Church of England is grave. While elderly laywomen have never been given a formal voice or fully acknowledged by the Church, they are the heart, soul and driving organisational force in parishes everywhere. Their loss will be catastrophic.

Irrespective of one's religious viewpoint, it's impossible to deny the role the Church of England has played in providing informal social care, and a unique unconditional space for those



Church helper at St Mary the Virgin, Hayes

who often have nowhere else to go. As the Church itself vanishes through lack of organisational support, it's inevitable that addicted, homeless, bereaved or socially isolated people will lose out.

## Conclusion

The above discussion has summarised some of the evidence we have about religious affiliation in Britain today, and suggested different theoretical approaches which can help us interpret the data. I suggest that today the predominant belief system in the UK is 'believing in belonging' where religious belief serves to reinforce ethnic or familial identities. Whichever theory or argument we might eventually accept, the most important conclusion from my research is that we need to expand our understanding of the term 'belief' to incorporate not only faith and reason, but emotion and ideology as well.

---

Abby Day is Professor of Race, Faith and Culture in the Department of Sociology, Goldsmiths, University of London. She gratefully acknowledges funding from the AHRC and ESRC for this research.

## Further Reading

Bruce, S. (2002), *God is Dead: Secularization in the West*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Davie, G. (1994), *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Day, Abby, 2011. *Believing in Belonging: Belief and Social Identity in the Modern World*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Durkheim, Émile (1915) *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life: a Study in Religious Sociology*, translated by Joseph Ward Swain, London and New York: George Allen & Unwin and Macmillan.

Heelas, P. and Woodhead, L., with Seel, B., Szerszynski, B. and Tusting, K. (2005), *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Luckmann, T. (1967), *The Invisible Religion*, London: Collier-Macmillan.

Voas, D. & Bruce, S. (2004) 'The 2001 census and Christian identification in Britain', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 19(1): 23-8.



**NOW AVAILABLE ON DVD**

(at last)

Sea of Faith Network London Day Conference 2017

*In the Beginning was the Word:  
Religion as Poetry and Story?*

with Dinah Livingstone, Mark Oakley  
and Salley Vickers (read by Janet Seargeant)

Presented on four tracked, labelled and packaged DVDs for just £12.00 including P&P.

Pay to [chris.avis2@hotmail.com](mailto:chris.avis2@hotmail.com) via Paypal or send cheque payable to C. Avis to

37 Clifton Road, Exeter, Devon, EX1 2BN

*Don't forget your name and address!*

Current CD/DVD catalogue included with every order.

# Being Human: Moving beyond Identity Politics

Dilwar Hussain advocates a reform and renewal of Islam, re-reading the scriptures, emphasising modern social ethics and giving greater prominence to reason.

In this article a contextual approach, bringing together theology and sociology, is used to argue for more rooted and 'British' expressions of Islam. Interpreted and lived religion is viewed as a social construct, as much as it may help to understand the universe and its mysteries, and as much as at the core of that worldview a belief in the divine may well be an important aspect of faith for some.

Despite the positive contributions that Muslims have made and continue to make to Britain – think of the soldiers in both WW1 and WW2, doctors and nurses in the NHS, local shopkeepers, taxi drivers, curry house owners, etc. – in the current debate around Islam it is difficult to ignore the significant strains in relations between British Muslims and their neighbours that have emerged over the years. This is not least because of terrorism, but also a negative climate of opinion around migration, as well as anti-Muslim sentiment.

At times a binary vision of 'us' and 'them', separating out 'Muslims' and 'non-Muslims' emerges, articulated by Muslim spokespersons as well as actors in the wider public debate, and this plays out in the media and political discourse. What resources can be used to advance a more inclusive, human and pluralistic way of thinking about Islam in Britain, a British Islam?

## Challenges

To understand the challenge we face in doing this, we need to appreciate the defensive nature of some current Muslim discourses. Coming out of colonial rule (and reeling from the loss of the Ottoman Empire), many Muslim collective struggles of the mid-late 20<sup>th</sup> century, whilst emphasising national independence, were laced with anti-Western sentiment (because of their opposition to colonial rule). The development of new discourses and adaptation to the new

environment has been a slow process, and sometimes even a regressive process, with the politics of identity becoming rife in the second generation.

Given the times we live in, it is worth saying a little about the more extreme trend, although this is not the focus in this article. The Khawarij were an early extreme sect that emerged in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, soon after the death of Muhammad. They adopted the slogan 'no judgement except God's judgement' and declared all the rulers of their day to be outside the pale of Islam (*kuffar*). They also believed they had the duty to remove these rulers by force if necessary.

In modern times such groups have re-emerged and have argued that Muslims and non-Muslims should not mix, or that democracy cannot be reconciled with Islam, and that a violent clash between Islam and the West is inevitable. The Jihad movements of Egypt, for example, developed a systematic theology in the 1960s around the use of violence. Ayman Zawahiri (who later became a key figure in al-Qaida) emerged out of this context. In Saudi Arabia the traditionally apolitical thought of Salafism, which already had the hallmarks of conservative literalism, puritanism and elements of *takfir*, experienced a split between those that supported the regime and those who became increasingly critical of it (some arguing for a revolutionary change). Some of these, including Osama bin Laden, took on a more aggressive *jihadist* dimension.

Aside from those often classified as politically extreme, a number of movements and networks (often apolitical) also operate in a climate that would be regarded as extreme along socially conservative lines – having attitudes towards gender equality or sexual orientation that may seem out of place in modern Britain (and of course other religious traditions may share some of these strands). Even some Sufis, often seen to

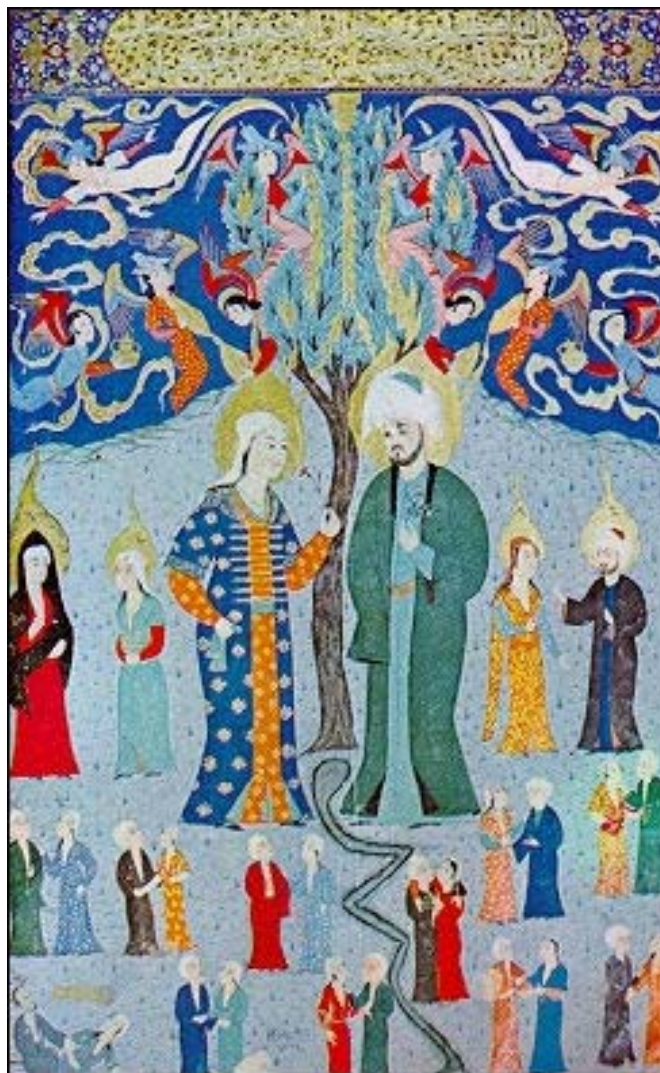
represent the more esoteric and spiritual dimension of Islam, have fallen in with extremism. Take for example the 500 or so Pakistani Ulama (scholars) who in 2011 praised Mumtaz Qadri for the assassination of Salman Taseer, the Governor of Punjab, for opposing Pakistan's blasphemy laws.

The British Muslim scene has been subject to all the waves of thought from the shores of the Muslim world, as summarised above. While much of this has been positive and healthy, some have emphasised separation, isolation and a distinct form of 'Muslim politics' or a guarded 'Muslim identity'. The Casey Review on integration (Casey, 2016) found that 55% of the general public agree that there is a fundamental clash between Islam and the values of British society and 46% of British Muslims feel that being a Muslim in Britain is difficult due to prejudice against Islam. At the same time the Citizenship Survey of 2007 offered hope, showing that Muslims score highly in their sense of belonging to the UK. Results of those responding 'Fairly strongly' and 'Very strongly' (to the question 'How strongly do you belong to Britain?') were quite similarly high across the board – Sikhs: 93%, Hindus: 89%, Muslims: 88%, Christians: 86% and Jews: 81%.

## Beyond 'us and them'

Looking at the emergence of Islam, one can see that Muhammad didn't isolate himself from the people around him. He was seen as an important, trusted member of his society. The verse of the *Qur'an*: 'The food of the people of the Book is lawful for you and your food is lawful for them' (*Qur'an*, 5:5) shows that the world-view of the early Muslim community was not one of separation but was very relaxed about social and cultural integration.

We can also find many examples of how Muhammad himself benefited from the support of other people, or was prepared to work with them, regardless of their religious or moral backgrounds. When the small band of his followers in Makkah faced severe treatment at the hands of the Quraish, it was to the Christian Negus of Abyssinia, Ashama bin Abjar, that the Prophet sent those who were able to leave. It was Waraqah ibn Naufal, a Christian monk and



Adam and Eve:

16th century Zubdat-al Tawarh manuscript in the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts, Istanbul,

cousin of Khadija (wife of Muhammad), who first explained the nature of revelation to them both, effectively becoming the first to practise exegesis (*tafsir*) of the *Qur'an*. One could argue that without such intimate trust, support and collaboration, Islam would never have survived as a religion.

A close look at the teachings of Islam reveal that the normative basis of human relations is meant to be about peace, co-operation and mutual learning: 'O people, we have created you from male and female and made you nations and tribes that you may come to know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of God is the most righteous of you. Indeed, God is Knowing and Aware' (*Qur'an*, 49:13). Yet it is clear that, for the reasons mentioned above, some Muslim discourses are in a very different place today.

The above resources are powerful to religiously conscious Muslims and they take the discussion in the right direction. But in my view there is a need to go further. And the reason for this is that solutions to the challenges of our time need to grapple not only with the mechanics of how things can be facilitated and done, but with the internal value base and framework of thought that has evolved.

Let us look at the issue of gender equality as an example. Over the last 10 or 15 years, a typical Muslim discourse has claimed that when you go back to the foundations of Islam you can find references that are emancipatory of women. Taking that point of view, some have argued that Islam has always had a positive approach towards gender equality, that the problem is cultural aberration or misinterpretation. Hence, once we are able to move away from traditional Muslim cultures, the problems will be resolved. I can understand the appeal of that at some level, but it is not enough.

By following that through one may achieve some results, but not resolve all the issues and difficulties. There are, for example, passages in the *Qur'an* that refer to differential inheritance for men and women, permission for polygamy and domestic violence (albeit in extreme and limited situations). These are in the text and a traditional *fiqh* approach cannot simply wish them away.

We need to remind ourselves that the corpus of *fiqh*, that developed around many different scholars, recorded in books over centuries, is essentially a human construct. It is the application of the human mind to what Muslims consider to be divine wisdom, to interpret and elaborate answers for a given human context. The outcome has to be human. This means that not only are laws allowed to change with time and place, they must. One cannot use generic ideas and concepts to create systems and laws that are designed to be eternal. For example, when it comes to the idea of 'justice' – the *Qur'an* talks generally about the concept and appeals to the human yearning for justice. It doesn't create an elaborate legal construct around the notion of justice. It leaves human beings to do that (in an evolving way) and reminds us that God has given us a mind, so that we can find our own solutions.

## Looking ahead: new vistas

An interesting approach to circumvent this is found in the works of a range of different thinkers who, over the last century, have been at pains to emphasise the *tawhidic* integrity of the *Qur'an* – i.e. that the *Qur'an* must be read as a whole for it to be really understood, and a piecemeal approach that uses a single verse (or even a small cluster of verses) to derive a law departs from the ethos of the tradition. Examples of such individuals include Hamiduddin Farahi (d. 1930), Nasr Abu Zayd (d. 2010), Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988) and Amina Wadud.

Rahman presented a particularly interesting tool for deriving the ethical principles that one should work with. His double movement theory of hermeneutics involves looking at the text to take into account the social specificities of the time of early Islam and to extract general ethical principles. One can then apply the general principles to a given situation today, again taking into account the social conditions of our time, to reach new specific responses. This is a way of bridging the contextual distance between 'then' and 'now'. Imam al-Shafi'i (d. 820), the great jurist accredited with the early codification of legal principles in Sunni Islam, famously felt the need to re-write sections of his *fiqh* works when he travelled from Iraq to Egypt. This is because a key principle in *fiqh* states that the '*fatwa* changes depending on the time and place'.

An important arena of development amongst reformers is the growing body of Islamic feminist critique of patriarchy in Muslim history. Scholars such as Riffat Hassan, Fatima Mernissi (1992), Amina Wadud (1999), Mir-Hosseini (2000) and Asma Barlas (2002), have argued for a re-reading of Islamic sources to create a more equal understanding of gender roles in Islam. Wadud argues that while Muslims have conventionally rejected priesthood, in the name of eradicating any barriers between humanity and God, the default position is that men have often become an intermediary between God and women. It is only by rebalancing this relationship so that men and women have equal access to God, she argues, can a true and deep sense of *tauhid* (monotheism) be practised.

Where traditional thinkers see mainly the mandates and limits set by the text, reformist





Muslim women hold hands on Westminster Bridge to protest against the Muslim terror attack and remember the victims.  
 Photo: *Independent* 26<sup>th</sup> March 2017

thinkers tend to see the text as indicating a direction of travel that is to be unpacked, honed and developed by every generation in an exciting project of discovery. Abdolkarim Soroush or Abdullahi an-Naim, for example, argue that the Human Rights paradigm represents a well of human wisdom that the Sharia needs to take into consideration if it is to speak seriously to the human condition of our time.

A contextual approach to Islam in the West would build a stronger synergy with the norms of a Western environment, while at the same time critiquing a universalism that creates a homogenised brand of literal and ‘true’ Islam that aims to stand above cultural contexts. Religion cannot be observed as an abstract set of values devoid of location and lived culture; it is necessarily practised and given life through a cultural prism. The lived religion of Islam has always existed as an interpreted phenomenon (rather than in its abstract, essential form). An extreme neglect of local customs, cultures and traditions (often due to a stream of foreign funding in the modern

British setting) can lead to a sterile and globalised ‘fast-food’ brand of religion that is neither tasteful nor nourishing for the soul.

I like to think of the context at two distinct levels: the deep context – the history and philosophy that operates within any given society – and the everyday context, the lived culture, the things that make each country or nation subtly different from others.

Muslims once drew upon the heritage of Greek philosophers, they learnt from Byzantium, China, India and Persia and this thirst for knowledge allowed early Muslim culture to blossom into a world civilisation that gave humanity so much in mathematics, philosophy, science and other branches of knowledge. Even as far as England, the impact of Arabic numerals and words such as sugar, cotton, canon and alcohol (taken from Arabic) persist. So if we have learnt in the past, why not now? Why not draw upon the European heritage of Descartes, Locke, Kant, or the more recent philosophers of our age? It is only when we draw deeply from the

intellectual heritage of our context that we can allow Islam to grow an indigenous flavour.

A British Islam cannot be a 'government controlled Islam', as the development of a wholesome citizen involves the ability to hold power accountable, and in a secular society the boundary between state and religion should be respected. Nor is it just a liberal vision of Islam either. For example, Muslims could just as easily draw upon Strauss or MacIntyre to influence a conservative tradition, as they could draw upon Locke or Rawls for a more liberal one.

Either way, one would hope that Muslims can quickly begin to see beyond their own needs, concerns and plight to look for the common good. We were not placed on this Earth to merely look after ourselves. Even in the face of persecution and enmity, the task is to be of benefit to people around us; to bring peace to others, not hatred and anger, and definitely not violence. The *Qur'an* declares, '...let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just: that is closest to piety...' (*Qur'an*, 5:8). Muhammad also taught, 'Shall I tell you of something that is better than fasting, prayer and charity? It is mending discord between people. Beware of hatred – it strips you of your religion.'

## Conclusion

A post-colonial suspicion of the West along with religious puritanism has meant that a minority of Muslims' attitudes towards social engagement and even civic participation has been coloured by a sense of 'otherness' aimed at the very place they have made their homes. Along with anti-Muslim prejudice and anti-immigrant sentiment, again a minority phenomenon, this cocktail breeds narratives of separation and alienation that have the potential to exacerbate a binary division of 'us and them'. But this is only one possible future and there are ways of diffusing these narratives and taking different paths.

One such path, when looking at Islamic thought, is to dig deep into Muslim tradition and find inclusive and open resources that are already present and well acknowledged. They can facilitate and foster an attitude of co-operation and co-existence that, at a pragmatic level can be very important, and can lead to a common (albeit

weak) sense of shared belonging and values and thus an aspiration for the common good.

However, a much deeper engagement with the social, cultural and intellectual fabric of society is also possible. By adopting an approach of reform and renewal that can read the scripture in a more holistic yet contextually rooted manner, emphasising modern social ethics and cultural norms and giving greater prominence to reason, more organic interpretations can evolve that may well resonate more deeply with the needs of Muslim Britons.

Other pathways may well be available, but whichever is chosen, there is a need to leave behind the divisive discourses that split British citizens into opposite camps. The notions of 'us and them' are not defined by faith (or ethnicity) any longer. If any binary division were to exist, it would be about those who want us to live in perpetual conflict, animosity, mistrust and hatred; and those who want to build a healthy, integrated society, based on the values we share as human beings, in pursuit of a common good.

---

Dilwar Hussain is Chair of New Horizons in British Islam and Research Fellow at the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations, Coventry University. He sent this summary of the talk he gave to the 2017 SOF Annual Conference. It is a shortened and amended version of a paper appearing in *Crucible*.

## Bibliography

- Barlas, Asma (2002) *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Casey, Louise (2016), *The Casey Review: A review into opportunity and integration*. London: Department for Communities and Local Government.
- Lings, Martin (1991), *Muhammad: his life based on the earliest sources*. Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society.
- Mernissi, Fatima (1992), *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*. Perseus Books.
- Mir-Hosseini, Ziba (2000), *Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran*. London: IB Tauris.
- Rahman, Fazlur (1984), *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wadud, Amina (1999), *Qur'an and Woman: Re-Reading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*. Oxford: OUP.

# Two London Poems

by Dinah Livingstone

## At the School Gates

Towards 3.30 a crowd gathers,  
mothers – some have younger ones  
in pushchairs or kangarooed in slings  
with eyes alert and kicking legs –  
grandparents, aunts, childminders,  
many more fathers now – one jogs up  
from his elsewhere looking rather dazed.

Above the greetings, gossip,  
playdate arrangements, local politics,  
a large woman gives a music hall belly laugh.  
A graceful one in a hijab meets her friend,  
still spick and span in office clothes.  
Two scruffy grannies in low posh tones  
boast of their own with discreet rivalry.

Babble of English accented in a hundred  
different voices, the non-native speakers  
from many a mother tongue,  
this proper London mixture  
is here for a single purpose,  
all waiting for the iron gates to clang.

Then they surge in to get their children.  
In the playground each class has its spot,  
the little ones corralled by a picket fence.  
Enjoying rhythm, wordplay and fantastic tales,  
some are into insects,  
others preferring furry animals.

Among the juniors, rangy nine-year-olds  
from complex friendships, battles,  
sometimes barbaric games,  
may be reaching for reason and empathy  
with an urge to gather and sort out  
the world. They are the future.

## A Londoner

On the bus a laden old lady  
sat with her Jack Russell on her lap,  
who looked as English as the famous Nipper  
listening to His Master's Voice.  
'What's your dog's name?' I asked.  
'Archie,' which came as no surprise.  
Then she added: 'Archimedes.'

I do a double take.  
'Eureka!' She flashes me a smile  
alight with the intelligence  
of ancient Greece. Then I see her  
standing with her dog in Syracuse  
as that old mathematical philosopher  
streaks down the street.

---

Both poems are published in Dinah Livingstone's collection, *The Vision Splendid* (Katabasis, London 2014).

# Revisiting

Oliver Essame revisits *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley.

I read Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *Frankenstein* for the first time when I was a student. I knew the plot, of course, I had seen Boris Karloff in the 1931 film and Peter Cushing in the Hammer horror series of the 50s and 60s. But these were not 'films of the book'. The book was very different and I was disappointed. There was no mad scientist here, no monster made evil by the brain he was given, no electric storms to provide the life force, and no rioting villagers to burn the creature to death. Instead I was confronted by a multi-layered story – a Gothic thriller, a romance, a social commentary, a cautionary tale about the dangers of scientific experiment, and an exploration of what it means to be human – that has been seen as 'a message for our times' in every period since it was written 200 years ago, so I was intrigued to be asked to take a fresh look at it.

At the heart of the book is the moment when the young student Frankenstein reanimates the collection of body parts that he has fashioned into an enormous man. We are not told how he does this, indeed it is said that it is better that we do not know. The creation of the 'monster', the 'demon', the 'wretch', the 'fiend' – Frankenstein does not give him a name – is described in one short chapter. From the moment he is brought to life, Frankenstein cannot bring himself to look at the hideous thing he has made. He is so disturbed by what he has done that he tries to distance himself from his creation and take no responsibility for the consequences. The creature is abandoned, cast out to make his own way in the world. Eventually, Frankenstein is brought to realise that his creation will destroy him, his family and his friends, as he seeks revenge for being left on his own, without companionship and without empathy, condemned to a life of loneliness and the vilification of others.

The demon is at first an empty shell. He breathes, sees, hears and moves, but the brain he has been given brought with it no language and no memories, and his hands have no skills. However, he seems to be remarkably intelligent. Over a very few months he first learns how to survive and then, by secretly watching the De Lacey family, who are

kind, loving and generous in the face of misfortune, discovers what it means to be human. In a short time he is able to think, read and converse, but even though he can now express himself as well as any man and through his reading – he finds some



Boris Karloff as Frankenstein's monster in 1931 film

books in an abandoned portmanteau in the woods – has developed a deep understanding of the human condition, his repulsive appearance so shocks the De Lacey's when he reveals himself to them that he is forced to flee into the mountains.

The monster tracks down Frankenstein, in the process causing the death of two of his family circle, and, confronting him, demands that he make him a female companion. Frankenstein agrees at first but in the end is unable to do so for fear of the consequences. The monster wreaks a terrible revenge. By the time they both die in the frozen north, Frankenstein has lost his best friend, his wife and his father and the monster has been left to mourn the loss of his creator, 'the select specimen of all that is worthy of love and admiration among men'.

Frankenstein is a horrifying story, and while it is clearly a significant precursor to our modern science fiction and horror genres, it is also an examination of some profound questions about our responsibilities to each other and to the world in which we live. Shelley asked us to think carefully about what we are risking when we venture into the unknown and to cherish what we have. We are now witnessing the creation of machines designed to learn by watching us. We have been warned. It was not by chance that one of the books that the monster finds in that abandoned portmanteau in the woods was 'Paradise Lost'.

---

Oliver Essame is SOF Web Designer and Technical Consultant. It is hoped that this 'Revisiting' will be the first of a new regular feature. Readers are invited to submit to the Editor a 'Revisiting' (700 words) of a novel, poem or other literary work that has been important to them.

David Paterson reviews  
*Religion and Atheism:  
Beyond the Divide*

ed. Anthony Carroll and Richard Norman  
Routledge (London 2016) PBk. 278 pages. £20.99.

This collection of academic papers promises to be a very influential one. It originated in a meeting of the Interfaith Network and the British Humanist Association, and is compiled by two philosophers, one Christian and one Humanist. It's based on the perception that the gulf between 'religion and atheism' can and should be bridged by 'finding common ground'. In one of the papers, entitled 'Matters of Life and Death' Anna Strahan quotes from 'Sometimes' by the American poet Mary Oliver: 'Instructions for living a life:/ Pay attention/ Be astonished/ Tell about it.'

This is the 'common ground': not finding little overlaps, but contemplating the whole (I call it 'all-that-is'), putting the insights together not by rational analysis but by poetic insight. The opening chapter is a transcript of a conversation between Rowan Williams and Raymond Tallis. Deeply respecting each other's starting points, they use their differences to tease out some profound reflections: on the different modes of wakefulness in religion and science, for instance, that God is not a thing or agent among other things or agents; and 'when arguing a point remember what you are assuming'. Rowan introduces an eastern approach with a reference to the Hindu concept of Sat Chit Ananda (Being, Understanding, Bliss) and returns to it later in the context of Raymond's reflections on time, growth and eternity. Raymond sees philosophy and religion not about solving problems, but about creating question-and-answer pairs. The discussion is dense and far-reaching, and sets a high tone for the rest of the book.

And so to Part II: 'Knowledge and Language': Nick Spencer quotes Rowan (in 'The Edge of Words') on tight-corner apophaticism – religious people using the idea of 'mystery' to wriggle out of defining or proving their assertions. He quotes Ayer and Wittgenstein on 'God exists' being neither true nor false, and therefore meaningless, but also Ayer's later remark that logical positivism failed 'because it was mostly false'. Julian Baggini and Stephen Law insist on rationality; and the last three papers in this section explore the compatibility of science and religion from historical, philosophical and emotional perspectives.

In Part III 'Ethics and Values', Anthony Carroll (an Anglican priest) starts, not from God's existence, but from human experience: exploring 'pantheistic

humanism' – understanding the relational nature of God and the dimension of transcendence in the human person.

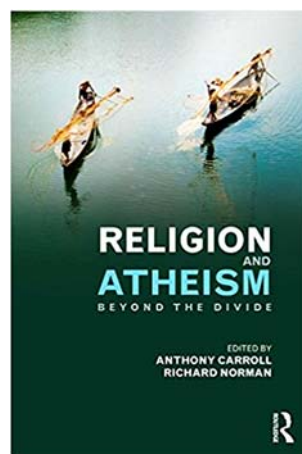
Then a professor of moral theology challenges the idea of any 'moral gap' between believers and non-believers: evolution and human flourishing is the basis, not divine command; and (from a Canon Theologian) the significance of the Axial Age in the history of the moral sense. The last three chapters in this section make considerable use of poetry (Frost, Kipling, a hymn, a psalm, Mary Oliver and, above all, William Blake) and I found them very inspiring.

Part IV 'Diversity and Dialogue' explores some practical implications of what has gone before. This nation is not 'Christian' or 'non-Christian'. Its chief characteristic is its pluralism – 'equal but different', says Lois Lee, and Dilwar Hussain explores this from a Muslim cultural perspective based on the *Qur'an*: many people set great importance to their beliefs, but belonging without believing is equally important. He quotes a Hadith (a story of the Prophet): 'What is better than prayer and charity? Mending discord between people.'

Then, in one of the most valuable chapters of them all, Ankur Barua takes us into the complex world of Indic intellectual traditions – so often neglected in the West – and explores Shankara, Ramanuja, Buddhism and the Charvakas. Andrew Copson's chapter which follows is practical and down to earth – an instruction manual for interreligious/non-religious dialogue.

Part V 'Continuing the Dialogue' is a perceptive summary of the previous chapters by the editors. 'In denying "God" non-religious people may be voicing similar concerns of those religious people who conceive religious language as analogically expressing the almost inexpressible'.

Particularly striking for Sea of Faith readers is the convergence with what we, under Don Cupitt's influence, have been saying for 30 years, yet the complete absence of any reference to Don or the Network. I think an interreligious/non-religious dialogue with the editors might be a good way to proceed further.



David Paterson is a retired vicar and SOF trustee.

Tony Windross reviews  
*The Making of Humanity*  
*Poetic Vision and Kindness*

by Dinah Livingstone

Katabasis (London 2017). Pbk. 140 pages. £10.

I have to admit to some trepidation as I approached this book. Not only is Dinah the editor of *Sofia*, but she's someone I've known and respected for a long time. How could I, in the circumstances, be even vaguely objective or critical about it? In addition, as the subtitle makes clear, its subject is *Poetic Vision and Kindness* – and I tend to struggle with poetry.

There's plenty of that here (especially Blake, Coleridge and Wordsworth) as you'd expect, given the subtitle. But it's poetry with a particular purpose – poetry in the service of 'the poetic vision'. Which turns out to be the Building of the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth.

Those for whom religious imagery is a turn-off will tend to steer well clear. And that's a pity, because they'd derive enormous benefit from it. As would (paradoxically) those who can't get enough religious imagery – but who take it all literally.

Dinah's twin targets are unimaginative literalism and unkindness – which often go together. And as she engages with biblical stories and Church liturgy, she shows that understanding them in a non-supernatural way is in no sense a diminishment.

'Where there is no vision, the people perish' – but that vision doesn't have to (and maybe shouldn't?) involve anything outside or beyond this life.

But simply 'having a vision' is never enough. It needs to be one suffused by kindness, by a respect for each and every human being – with the vision proffered by the neo-liberals having disastrous consequences for those even vaguely near the bottom of the heap.

The willing 'suspension of disbelief' is essential if we are to move beyond the woodenly banal. When we go to the theatre or cinema, we do so without hesitation. But when it comes to religion it's another story altogether (along the lines of 'if it's not factual, it's not real'). But why should those who can't take religion literally be made to feel second class citizens? (and why do those who *can*, get so cross with those who can't – and don't do the decent thing and simply walk away?)

If we are even to begin to do justice to the

awesome  
Mystery in  
which we are  
embedded –  
we need the  
help of artists  
of all kinds.  
People who  
offer an  
alternative  
perspective,  
people with a  
fresh 'take'  
on the world.

And I found it profoundly liberating to be led through passages from St Paul's Letters, St John's Gospel and the Book of Revelation – and shown how they could (should) be understood as poems.

As *'poetic visions'* – and not *'just poetry'*. Because the problem for many of those who take religion seriously, is that poetry doesn't seem a substantial enough basis for faith – maybe along the lines that *'poetry is just "stuff that's made up" – rather than a description of "what is"'. A real God needs to be grounded in reality. And reality is not something we can simply conjure up out of our imagination.*

'Poetic faith' involves the 'suspension of disbelief' – which means using our imagination. 'Is God real or not?' 'Is God just a *figment* of our imagination?' The words 'real' and 'just' are weasel words, freighted with all sorts of negativity. Maybe it comes down to the Humpty Dumpty question *'which is to be master?'*

However if meaning is use, and most people see the world in supernatural terms – 'the (normal) meaning' of religious words is bound to be supernatural. The religious perspective of those of us in SOF will surely always be that of a minority. But that shouldn't in any way exclude us from involvement in the churches, if that is what we find helpful.

And whether understood poetically or literally – 'the meaning' (in ethical terms) of religious texts is identical. What goes on inside people's heads as they work alongside one another for the Kingdom, is pretty irrelevant.

But if the supernatural is *not* part of the story – the onus is on us. It's our responsibility 'to *realise* on Earth what we imagined in a poetic vision'. The ethical buck stops here – the outworking of a vision brilliantly explored in this extraordinary book.

---

Tony Windross is the Vicar of Week St Mary, Holsworthy, Devon.



reviews

David Lee reviews

## *That Was the Church that Was How the Church of England Lost the English People*

by Andrew Brown and Linda Woodhead  
Bloomsbury Continuum ( London 2016) Pbk. 272 pages.  
£12.99.

Enthusiastic reviews and an arresting title caused me to open this book with a certain expectation. At the end I felt challenged to offer an alternative narrative. As a piece of journalism it is an easy and enjoyable read. It is full of gossipy news and wry comments which do much to illuminate the history of parts of the Church of England in the past three decades. But it seems to me that it does not bear the weight of the authors' conclusions.

They begin with a report of a conference at St George's House, Windsor Castle, in 1986 in which an elite group discussed the state of the Church of England then under the leadership of Robert Runcie. Things were not going well; the liberal views of Archbishop John Hapgood and Bishop David Jenkins were brushed aside. The focus was on the possibility of reunion with Rome and the problem of the campaign for women's ordination to the priesthood.

In the following chapters we have detailed descriptions of the weaknesses and mistakes of George Carey and Rowan Williams, in which the Church of England appeared to stumble from one disastrous decision to another all under the leadership of these two Archbishops of Canterbury. The impossibility of any reconciliation on sexuality, the ineffectiveness of the General Synod, the panicky formation of the Archbishop's Council, the rejection of Jeffrey John as a bishop, and so on, all resulted, they claim, in the widespread collapse of attendance at church throughout the land and the total loss of the status and power of the Established Church. The appointment of Justin Welby as Archbishop is damned with faint praise; we are meant to think that this is a case of 'too little too late'.

The authors' case that the history of the last three decades proves that the Church has lost the English People is problematic. In fact never since the 16<sup>th</sup> century has the Established Church been fully the religion of the English people, and since the 17<sup>th</sup> century it has not even attracted a majority of the English people... A longer view shows that there have been many times in the past when the moral failure and corrupt leadership of the church makes the last few decades look like a Vicarage tea party. While they

make much of the decline in numbers attending services in England, they give little attention to the increase in numbers in all the Cathedrals, in the Diocese of

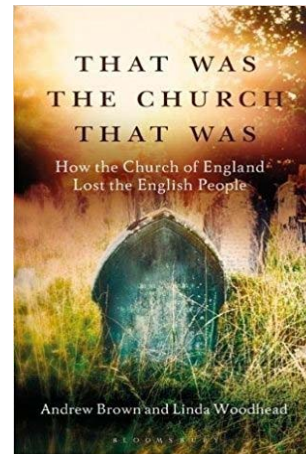
London, and elsewhere, nor to the fact that this decline is shared by most Christian denominations in the West, many with very different historical experiences from the Established Church.

An alternative narrative is not hard to tell. Throughout history the Christian Church shows the capacity to reinvent itself in every age. The present time may be another period of reinvention. The expression and form of Anglican Christianity which emerged in England in the religious and political turmoil of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, is a brand which has travelled over the world and thrived in all sorts of cultures and races. Catholic in its sacramental system and episcopal governance, but strangely relaxed and tolerant in its imposition of doctrine. That is because of the legacy and tradition of the Elizabethan Settlement, in which Queen Elizabeth 1 (1533-1603) attempted to unite the Christians of England by providing a new prayer book in 1559, and by saying that she did not want to 'open windows into men's souls'.

The Church of England is capable of holding together Christians of many kinds. Anglo-Catholics, Evangelicals, liberals and conservatives, all have found it possible to live together in the Anglican Communion of Churches throughout the world, not without some serious conflict and healthy theological disagreement. Maybe the future of the Church of England is not so doubtful. It is a going concern with some excellent examples of success. It encourages and sustains important new experiments in mission and evangelism, some of which look like succeeding. By comparison with many other denominations in England it is strong, although by comparison with provinces of the Anglican Communion around the world it is weak in numbers. Nevertheless, the Church of England remains strong in energy and zeal for the Gospel and its voice is still being heard.

---

David Lee is a retired cleric of the Church in Wales and an occasional contributor to *Sofia*.



reviews

Kathryn Southworth reviews

## *European Hours*

### *Collected Poems*

by Anthony Rudolf

Carcanet (Manchester 2017). Pbk 172 pages. £12.99.

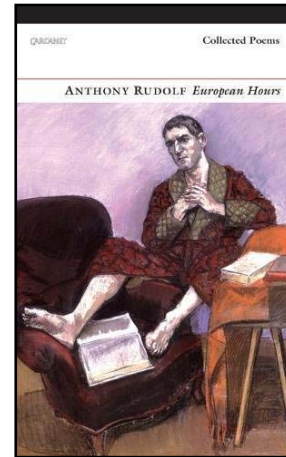
To read this book is to enter the mindset of a late 20<sup>th</sup> century European intellectual – enter but not quite inhabit. The eclecticism is as dazzling and tantalizing as some cabinet of curiosities, a miniature museum, whilst the compression, the minimalism of form and style is controlled and austere.

Anthony Rudolf is a writer and an enabler of writing – poet, critic, publisher, essayist, translator and writer of a trilogy of memoirs. This collection brings together four decades of poetry and a number of short prose pieces. It represents, as the publisher puts it, ‘a life’s work severely curated’. Indeed, the book is the verbal equivalent of an exhibition, a tribute to European culture and an analogue to the art of painting, to which Rudolf, partner of a painter, frequently alludes with some envy. In ‘You, Painting’ the poem is words, the ‘mind’s eye’, whilst the artist’s painting seems more profound: ‘water from/the well of presence’.

The title *European Hours* suggests not only time spent in Europe but, also, a religious discipline of ritual and prayer. Such double meaning is typical of Rudolf’s methodology, in which the Bible and his own Jewishness underlie contemporary culture – or are, perhaps, replaced by it. The book opens with ‘Invocations’, a bringing to mind of ‘ancestral Europe’ through its cities and precious objects, like the *azulejos* tiles of Lisbon, Paris’s ‘Raft of the Medusa’, the penitent Magdalen of Florence and Venice, where Henry James visited the Brownings. In a poem of the 1970s, ‘Chagall’, Rudolf describes the effect on him of a museum in Nice: ‘Horizon/of remembrance/vault of childhood: his images/strike home, /old stories well up’. Jacob and the angel, Adam and Eve are ‘clarified/in the burning/bush of memory’. Such images are fundamental and personally inscribed ‘like a rock water/is struck from’. In Prague, ‘dead centre’ of Europe, the poet is ‘alone on our roots’. In terms both of the Jewish Golem and the Christians’ Jesus, Kafka is the ‘stone which the builders rejected’, now ‘the cornerstone’ of modern thought.

Rudolf’s themes include, as one might expect from his Jewish background, memory and survival. Generally, though, his themes are not so easily abstracted from the poems as objects in themselves. Ted Hughes spoke of the ‘new geometry’ of each poem and this suggests well the stark and cerebral

craft of this parsimonious poetry. Influenced by second wave modernists, like the late Pound, Basil Bunting and Robert Creeley, they espouse the ‘objectivist’ aim to present ‘the thing in itself’ without extrapolation.



reviews

The early poems in particular, evoke silence, luminosity and liminality. Other poems are reminiscent of Wallace Stevens in their intellectual complexity and play on words. One of the more situated and accessible recounts the effort of reading Stevens in hospital (as one does!): ‘I read each phrase, each line, re-read/the one before, the next, one more/each time’, the ‘only way’ to read it. Interrupted by his fellow patients, Rudolf concludes, ‘It takes all sorts to unmake worlds’.

The play with words and their interaction with things is realized engagingly in the poem ‘Ancient Beams’, in which the mid-life Rudolf enters into a dialogue with the beams of a thatched cottage, an image of support ‘as if I’m the wall/you, in your presence edge through’. He wishes he could see through himself the way the beam knows the wall it intersects, and see the world the way the beam does:

*Let me (truly like one of  
the beams) pray at my angle  
to the universe, that the truth  
shall ever be told aslant.*

If this reads like an Emily Dickinson mantra for creative writing teaching, so be it. Rudolf’s work is a tribute to writing and a vindication of it: the universe experienced and remade through language. In a tribute to Walter Benjamin, Rudolf invokes the elusive ‘all-poem’, to which writers aspire, in terms of the harmony the Messiah will reveal. Although such an absolute goal may be ever out of reach, as Rudolf says in ‘Zigzag’, a late poem based on his own courses, writing will always have its place: ‘Writing/is the most intense/reading of the world’.

---

Kathryn Southworth is the former Vice Principal of Newman University College, Birmingham. She now lives in London. Her poems have been published in various magazines and anthologies.



## Frank Walker reviews

### *The Kingdom*

by Emmanuel Carrere, translated from the French by John Lambert

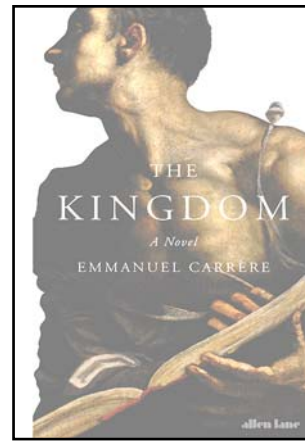
Allen Lane (London 2017). Hbk. 384 pages, £16.59.

Extraordinary and remarkable, this is the most interesting novel I have read for many years – absorbing, fascinating, challenging, infuriating, moving, utterly compelling. It defies categorisation: part autobiography, part account of the beginnings of Christianity by way of a study of St Paul and St Luke as writers – a treatment of Christianity like no other you have ever seen, with constant references to contemporary politics, psychology, psychotherapy, historical and literary excursions, philosophy, theology and pornography, all seen through the writer's own experience and personality. He admits that like many men he is into Internet pornography and finds there something beautiful. He is entirely honest and open with his wife about this.

His is a massive ego – but he disarmingly admits that, and understands the limitations and weaknesses of his own self-obsession. He is an immensely successful writer, of novels, biographies, and screenplays, also a film-director, often chosen as a judge at the international film festivals at Cannes and Venice. He is very rich and exults in his popularity and success as well as in his own keen intelligence. He is very much an alpha male, a big man who practises yoga and meditation as well as, significantly, martial arts. He stands on top, one of the powerful of this world – at the opposite extreme from the early Christians and the ideals upheld by Jesus. He has undergone psychotherapy throughout his adult life and continues to do so. As he confesses, he is well aware that from the standpoint of Jesus he is very far from the kingdom of God – in no way would he sell all that he has and give it to the poor.

Carrere grew up as a conventional French Catholic, after his first communion not very observant. However, he enjoyed a warm friendship with his godmother, an extremely devout woman who has written many of the modern hymns sung today in French Catholic churches. From her he has learned about the mystics and the practice of a devout life. Suddenly and unexpectedly in his early maturity he felt 'touched by grace' and underwent a conversion experience that changed his life. He married his then partner in the Catholic Church in Cairo, served by the priest through whom his conversion had been

channelled, and he had his two sons baptised. He now attends Mass daily, taking frequent communion. He undertook a devotional study of St



reviews

John's Gospel on which he meditated daily and filled 18 notebooks with his reflections on it. This intense belief and devotion continued for three years, then it disappeared. He was no longer able to believe. He no longer called himself a Catholic or a Christian, but an agnostic. He came to share Nietzsche's amazement at how people could still believe the impossibilities of official Christian doctrine.

Carrere is intrigued by extreme situations and by the challenge of opposites. He relishes – and is also disturbed by – the fact that he is so different from the first Christians to whom Paul wrote his letters. You do not have to be clever, wise or rich to become Christian, argued Paul. Very few of you are wise, powerful or noble. ('Not many wise' – what a good description that is of humanity in general.). Yet God has chosen what is weak and foolish in the world to shame the wise and the strong (the intellectual Greeks and the Romans whose empire dominates the world). Christians are, as it were, the refuse of the world, the off-scouring of all things. Yet God has chosen the things that are not, to bring to nothing the things that are. (What Paul writes is stunning, says Carrere. No one wrote anything like it before him, neither in Greek philosophy nor in the Bible.) Three hundred years after Paul's death, incredibly, this came to pass: the slaves (as Nietzsche would say) with their slave mentality and slave religion conquered the Empire.

Being Christian involves making historical and metaphysical claims that Carrere has repudiated as impossible. Yet there are other impossibilities in Christianity that are not purely intellectual, and of which Carrere is always uncomfortably aware. Christianity seeks a widening of human affection and sympathy that goes beyond anything usually thought to be reasonable. It stretches human sympathy and love to the uttermost, to breaking point. This element in Christianity haunts Carrere. He cannot free himself from it. Is it 'the kingdom'?

Embedded in the novel's narrative are two extreme stories. The first will appal everyone who reads it. Before a routine session with his psychoanalyst, Carrere reads a short article in the newspaper about a four-year old boy who went into hospital for a minor operation, but an accident with the anaesthetic left him blind, deaf and dumb for life. It is an unbearable story that forces all who read it to face the absolute horror, the unspeakable terror of a little boy who suddenly wakes up plunged for no reason he can possibly understand into eternal darkness that surely only kind and gentle death could assuage. During the session following his reading of this story Carrere weeps uncontrollably. He wants to believe in God, but how can he pray after that? There is no answer. The rest of the book may be seen as an attempt to come to terms with this horror.

A second extreme story concerns a murderer who came to fascinate Carrere. He writes an account of Jean-Claude Romand, who for fifteen years fraudulently posed as a doctor and ended by killing his wife, children, dog, and his parents, also unsuccessfully attempting suicide. Carrere writes the story of his life and holds the dossier relating to the murder investigation and trial. He visits him in prison. (Romand is a model prisoner, no threat). In prison Jean-Claude Romand found refuge in the love of Christ. 'It was for people like Romand that he had come: collaborators, tax-collectors, psychopaths, paedophiles, hit-and-run drivers, people who talk to themselves in the street, alcoholics, vagrants, skinheads capable of setting vagrants on fire, child abusers, abused children who abuse children in turn when they're adults.' Christ's customers are 'those who are hated and disdained, and who rightly hate and disdain themselves' (p.261).

At the conclusion of the book Carrere reluctantly accepts a challenge from a woman reader to take part in something he finds uncongenial, embarrassing, distasteful, not in character for him. (I will not give away the details of the surprising ending.) There is nothing intellectual here: it is something very simple, elemental, beyond intellect. It is as if the cruelly disfigured Christ frees himself from the cross of death and becomes the beautiful Shiva dancing the dance of life. It may be that Carrere has had a glimpse of the kingdom.

---

Frank Walker is a retired Unitarian Minister and Teacher whose last ministry was at Cambridge 1976/2000.

## Messenger

in trouble  
wrapped in the worry  
bubble

locked in  
the sleeping bag  
of you yourself

comes help  
to reassure  
to salve the sore  
come words to save

whatever muddle  
whatever harm may threat  
what duress  
within  
here's wisdom

cling  
to the witness  
of this wing  
this hinge  
opening to light

in the fearful night  
direction

in the featureless white  
of the arctic journey  
find yourself warm

through the wind's bite  
seek companion  
just out of sight

through the frozen waste  
find face

in your fall  
the rope  
holding fast

in hope  
in resolve  
to solve

to find answer  
as the dance  
finds the dancer.

*Kathryn Southworth*

# As I Please

## John Pearson goes on a Mini Grand Tour.

Following in the footsteps of both Shelley and Elizabeth Barrett Browning (married in our own home town) and countless others of course, we have just recently completed our own Grand Tour, taking in Paris, Genoa, Florence and Milan. The above travellers both died on Italian shores (or inland) in 1822 and 1861 respectively ... we were more fortunate, although the transition from the 16 degrees of Leicester at the end of this year's Conference to the 41 degree (C) roasting we got in Florence nearly saw us off (106 degrees in 'old money'). The transition was slowed by our decision to travel from London by Eurostar and then wend our way via a succession of trains, rather than by taking a plane. Instead of the view of sky and clouds offered by a 4 hour flight we were treated to a total of 27 hours of stunning scenery which included, going South, the Swiss Alps and, going North, the French.

Having gone via 'Interrail', traditionally the young person's way to travel on the cheap, it was perhaps appropriate that we stayed in hostels run by Hostelling International (equivalent of our own YHA) and so we did. These presented us with everything from a neat little 3<sup>rd</sup> floor room in Paris on the banks of a canal to a rather Spartan room in a villa some 5km out of Florence. This last could only be reached by a 0.7 km trudge along a dusty half-metalled road up through its wooded grounds ... picturesque indeed, but a long way from the bus-stop when pulling/ carrying a heavy case whose wheels were broken. The villa dated from the 16<sup>th</sup> century and sported a fine original frescoed ceiling in the large reception hall. Here the 'style' ended, for the bedrooms seemed more like something out of an Officers' Mess somewhere in the Tropics in WW2: functional steel bedsteads, heavy blankets, shuttered windows and no power sockets or en-suite. We got used to it.

In all three Italian cities we were treated to scores of ancient buildings, whether set out in the relatively broad avenues of Florence ('Firenze') and Milan, or in the intensely crowded narrow alleyways of downtown Genoa ('Genova'). At first we assumed the tenement-like housing, grand palaces and squares were 18<sup>th</sup> Century, based on Blenheim, Chatsworth and the like. Gradually, it dawned upon us that the latter were imitations of building styles seen by young men (and women) as they toured Classical parts in their own times. The huddled streets, palaces and public buildings of Genoa and Florence dated sometimes from the 13<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. In Genoa, as elsewhere, families live to this day in streets whose

opposing sides are so close that the occupants might touch hands – a thing only visible in Britain in The Shambles, in York. Drying washing hangs precariously on lines between high-up windows, just as it always has, presumably since time here began.

We saw splendid art work, as you might expect, much dating from the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries and ranging from the carefully curated collections of the Uffizi Museum and Duomo (cathedral) in Florence to paintings and sculptures in the many churches and monasteries in Genoa, less heralded but just as memorable. That which stood out was perhaps the church

of St Maria de Castello in Genoa where, in return for a shy smile given to the priest, we were treated to a long and detailed personal tour of every room (the guide must have unlocked at least a dozen doors especially). Here were secret treasures in a building now buried amongst the houses but which once had a clear view of the harbour.

One modern idea midst all of this seemed a nice touch, which could usefully be replicated elsewhere. In the Florence Duomo, where we saw Michelangelo's Pietà (in which the elderly sculptor depicts himself as Nicodemus), a number of statues are reproduced in cast stone or fibreglass, so that blind or visually impaired visitors might experience their beauty. On a more mundane note, Braille messages on the handrails at the head and foot of each stairway help the same visitors to locate themselves within the museum. How often does this



Florence Pietà, the dead Christ with the artist Michelangelo as Nicodemus (standing), Mary Magdalene and Mary his mother.



**Gustav Klimt: *The Kiss***