sfia

No. 137 September 2020

Patrick Hutchinson rescues a far-right disrupter of a Black Lives Matter demonstration in London.

Praise

down to Earth

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

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Copy deadline is **40 days** before the beginning of the month of publication. Contributions should preferably 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 are particularly 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 digital.imprint.co.uk

Website: sofn.org.uk/sofia/index.html
ISSN 1749-9062
© *Sofia* 2020

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Front cover image: Patrick Hutchinson rescues a far-right disrupter of a Black Lives Matter demonstration in London. mirror.co.uk
Back cover image: A small garden in Camden Town.

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.

Praise

'Praising, that's it!' says in the poet Rainer Maria Rilke in one of his Sonnets to Orpheus. Reading or listening to the media you might think 'Blaming, that's it!' Bad news is more newsworthy than good news. But there is so much to praise, so many extraordinary and ordinary kind people, so much beauty on Earth. So the title of this *Sofia* is *Praise*.

Our first article, by Alison McRobb, is on music and singing. She has suffered from group singing being banned during the lockdown and had to go out into an empty field to sing her favourite hymns alone on Easter Day. She says: 'I'll sing as I love.' The postponed SOF London on music will take place next year.

Vicar Tony Windross, who has a 'non-realist' view of God, writes about liturgy as 'Cosmic Gratitude'. In 'Mary's Touch', Grenville Gilbert describes a loving and loved woman who died during the lockdown without her friends being able to say goodbye.

Dave Francis, Deputy Chair of the Religious Education Council, writes about the struggle to broaden the school curriculum from 'Religious Instruction' to 'Religion and Worldviews'. He asks: 'When a young person successfully completes their eleven years of compulsory school religious education, what will there be in their knowledge and understanding of the world and themselves that will be worthy of *praise*?'

Martyn Crucefix revisits Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus,* written in three weeks in a 'savage creative storm'. We also have Crucefix's own poem 'Skype' and St Francis of Assisi's *Canticle of the Creatures.*

This will be a short editorial because I offer some thoughts on praise in my article on page 16. There are the usual reviews, John Pearson's *As I Please* column, this time on 'Plague – 2020 Style' and the Letters to the Editor. Please continue to write in to inform, dispute (or praise!).

Sonnet to Orpheus

Praising, that's it! He was called to praise
and emerged from the silence of a stone
like an ore. O his heart – a temporary press
for man's everlasting wine.

Nor does his voice grow choked with dust
once it is seized by the god-like example.
All becomes vineyard, all becomes juice
in his southern land, so ripe and sensual.

Even from tombs where kings have decayed
nothing gives the lie to his praising.
Nor can the gods cause any shadow to fall.

He is the one, he is the constant herald
who – even far through the doors of the dead –
holds a bowl of fruit, ripe for the praising.

Sonnet I:7 from *Sonnets to Orpheus* by Rainer Maria Rilke, translated by Martyn Crucefix.
Enitharmon Press (London 2012). Reprinted by kind permission of the publisher and translator.

I'll Sing as I Love

Alison McRobb asks why does singing matter?

'… the voice of prayer is never silent,
nor dies the strain of praise away.'

So Christians have sung in the beautiful evening hymn picturing the sun's rise and set over 'each continent and island.' But now, alarmingly it *has* died away – the praise – and not only from churches. Choirs, chorales, soloists, gigs – every voice raised in song has been silenced. Valiant attempts to keep melody alive by living-room Zoom have failed to synchronise and satisfy. A new concept, 'droplets', is employed in efforts to keep us fearful, tuneless, barely audible, mumbling behind a mask. And so this present reflection is destined to be very different from its drafted form a few months ago.

Some of us are luckier in our locations than others, should we be minded to deny the 'science' in favour of faith, health and live music. On a warm and sunny Easter Sunday, shut out of church, I was off early walking (allowed) on trodden paths alongside vast barley fields, where everywhere the Earth's message was: 'Now the green blade riseth'. Beside a stream lined with newly leaved oaks I checked that not even a dog-walker was about, sang the triumphant Easter hymns to the blackbirds, and walked on. Now (well) over 70 and classified as 'vulnerable', this was officially my sole outing of the day – a rule I have never adhered to, because here in fresh Suffolk it makes no sense.

People are often keen to establish a 'religious' person's theological position. Somewhere I encountered 'Anglo-choral' – yes, that's me! Chants and worship songs, Scottish psalmody, musical meditations – those I've encountered the world over. But Tallis, Byrd, *Mag* and *Nunc,* the whole Anglican choral tradition discovered in my twenties – with those, in my book, nothing can compete. The Cantilena Singers sang Stanford's *'Justorum animae'* gloriously at my husband's funeral, but sadly not the other day for my fellow chorister, similarly bereaved. That funeral, attended by a tiny 'distanced' number in the village churchyard was, by decree, denied music.

Why does it matter, this singing? There are those, like Shakespeare's 'melancholy Jaques', who are labelled unmusical – often quite unfairly. Any musical efforts of his were unkindly expected to produce 'discord in the spheres'. But the human urge to sing is arguably more deeply embedded even than communication in the speaking voice alone. So the concept of cosmic harmony can appear quite naturally in religious thought as praise, with the 'radiant orbs'

'for ever singing as they shine,
the hand that made us is divine.'

In some religious traditions silence is the ideal, and musical expression in song proscribed as inimical to true worship. Even when allowed, the 'dangers' of singing have been the reason for many musical souls to have been denied expression. It takes a Hildegard of Bingen to power a way through that particular prejudice, letting the pure voice rise high in praise, and a female voice at that. At its worst, repression of singing can leave all pretence of rationality behind. The other day I happened on a gloomy film, 'Timbuktu', which depicted heart-rendingly the hatred of singing in cruel regimes. The Isil leader, who had banned all music in the city, did not understand the local African language. His henchmen, goons who were sent out to keep the citizens in fear, had detected and reported a source of singing in an upper room in a quiet alley. On pressing for details, the chief was told the song was discovered to be 'praising God and the Prophet'. Did that make a difference to the verdict? No, judgement was swift. The singer admitted her 'crime' (40 lashes) and to having understood that singing contravened the regulations (additional 40 lashes). The viewer was spared none of the agony, at the the height of which the victim broke into defiant, passionate song.

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Cantilena Singers East Cambridgeshire Chamber Choir.
Photo:cantilenasingers.org.

Less extreme, but still disturbing, is the suspicion with which some of my fellow Scots have traditionally regarded music, vocal and instrumental. My first private student, an impressive ex-London policemen, then psychiatric nurse, called Hugh (Uisdean on his native Isle of Skye) needed a Scottish Higher in English to be accepted as an ordinand by the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, which is considerably 'freer' than the better known 'Wee Frees'. How this was achieved – my introduction to English as a Second Language with a Gaelic speaker – is a whole other story!

Still a graduate student myself, I shared a flat in a nice part of Glasgow with another girl, and here I was to tutor Hugh. The flat, however, formed the basement of the residence of Scotland's best loved soprano, who could distantly be heard above, practising or teaching at times during our lessons. This was obviously causing Hugh discomfort. We had a friendly discussion, therefore, about God and music, but he was not to be moved. There was too much danger of self-love in solo singing, even in church, and an organist on the 'kist o' whistles' could easily be 'worshipping the instrument'.

In contrast, Sir Billy Connolly, whose first career, following a shipyard apprenticeship, was as a respected folksinger, hilariously recalls his primary teacher's efforts with 'musical appreciation'– 'You Connolly, appreciate!' – and her less than appreciated persistence with the 'step we gaily' progress to Marie's Wedding. Long before today's ludicrous appearance of supposedly Gaelic names for every train station on one's train journey north, there was a nostalgic revival of interest in everything Highland, so Connolly and I, and maybe even Nicola, were introduced to Gaelic melodies in class, some very beautiful despite the impenetrable orthography of that language. Scottishness has influenced Christian hymnography too – though I find it difficult to sing John Bell's 'Will you come and follow me?' to the romantic wooing tune of Kelvingrove, where 'the midnight fairies glide', or they did when we oldies were nippers. His hymn 'Spirit of God' to 'Speed Bonny Boat' can have intrusive secular associations as well; but John deserves respect for his lifetime of musical and pastoral engagement in Scotland. He can take credit for a popular shift from the traditions of Presbyterianism, where the eerie intonation of the precentor and the congregational groaning of Hugh's psalms can shut off a musical Christian soul from any vision of angelic choirs.

On the secular side no discussion of singing could decently omit the phenomenon of Gareth Malone, he of the boyish but currently bearded face and the seldom dampened enthusiasm for getting people off their bottoms, on their feet and using their God-given voices. Choices of songs tackled by his pop-up choirs, and arrangements thereof, may not be to everyone's taste, but his commitment and professionalism have been infectious and we can hope that the results will be lasting.

I share his passion. My case for 'everyone singing' is simple: singing is good for every aspect of a person, even if one rejects the clichéd 'body, mind, spirit' division. Almost everyone can sing in some way. Singing is known to aid sufferers from stammering and aphasia. Singing needs controlled breathing, and almost everyone benefits from such exercises. A lot of muscles are involved in efficient breathing, yet this form of exercise is often neglected by those who 'can't sing'. Watch people at big events in churches and cathedrals. They fiddle with their hymn sheets, some of them manage to move their lips, but few are really singing. It's easy to tell: they aren't breathing in a way that's needed to produce sounds. Some footballers and the Royal Family (along with the Prommers on the Last Nights of our history) are inspiring exceptions. You can be sure the Prince of Wales will really be singing.

When people say they 'can't sing', they are usually expressing fear. They have been shamed and told to shut up, like Jaques. They know what professional songsters sound like and they can't do that, won't ever be able to. Suppose we took that attitude to driving. Learning involves some discipline, some co-ordination, and a desire to 'pass'. Most people who really try manage in time. We are not talking about Formula 1. True, people who sing badly, too loudly, drunkenly or inappropriately can be embarrassing, but that does not cancel singing out as a viable form of self-expression, especially when that 'blest pair of sirens Voice and Verse' are employed together.

I've always tried with people who 'can't sing' or are 'tone deaf' to prove them wrong. Most admit they do quite well in the shower, aided by the steamy atmosphere. That negative idea might have been established very early by a teacher silencing a 'groaner' – for such I would cheerfully supply a millstone. Any early years teacher will agree that you don't get a class to sing tunefully together till around 7 years, and the 'ear' develops at different stages with different children. I am lucky to have a grand-daughter who was tuneful by 5; I was unlucky to have a rather deaf colleague who sat next to me at morning assemblies and sang well but just half a tone 'out'!

So much for the act of singing, what of the song? Milton is right of course that

> '...God doth not need
> either man's work or his own gifts'.

And that obviously would include our musical praise. Thoughtful Christians with their respect for 'concord of sweet sounds' have always been aware of this fine line. The excesses of the Book of Revelation are just that: extravaganzas of Holy holy holy, which give choral voice to the saints' love for God but are not 'necessary'. Church choir members following lines about 'singing for evermore' in heaven are usually concentrating on their notes, not stopping to consider how easy it is to ridicule this concept. The Christian church, however, has ample biblical backing for worship in song, as had Jesus and his followers in the tradition of Israel's temple worship, which 'sings the songs of Sion/ By the streams of Babylon'.

Styles have changed and developed over millennia, and the literature of the rows and walkings-out and outrage over neglect of or additions to particular church music is fascinating, often shocking, 'Opera in church?' I remember a worthy retired organist expostulating, on hearing his former choir rehearsing a Haydn Mass. Bang up to date and practically on our doorstep we have the scandalous, to many, decision to disband Sheffield's existing cathedral choir, in the pursuit of a replacement version dedicated to 'diversity'.

The evidence for those who spread the gospel of Jesus, however, is that evangelism has been most effective worldwide where the words and music of praise have been adapted to accord with local musical traditions. To hear the Tamil congregation raise the roof in New Delhi's Cathedral of the Holy Spirit is unforgettable. The Hindi service which follows is more restrained, in an Anglican sort of way, but their hymn book is cleverly constructed, so I could decide to sing 'What a friend we have in Jesus' in English or turn a few pages and try it in Hindi. (I have never been up early enough on a Sunday to attend the English service!)

Back home in Suffolk I walked into the beautiful church of St Peter and Paul in Clare on the Sunday morning after the imposing locked gates were finally opened. The vicar was bustling about arranging a 'plague church' with some ladies, and obviously too busy to greet a visitor. I asked one of the ladies about the service and she said yes there was one, but would I please move back beyond some invisible line. 'Will we get to sing?' I asked, knowing the answer, which I got, and left. Closing the big wooden door I stood in the porch and sang Bunyan's great hymn, on the basis that 'one here will constant be'. Nothing to frighten the horses – nobody else was around, and after all, Bunyan did most of his preaching outside churches, when not imprisoned for such audacity. Finding a coffee at last at a stall in the Country Park, I was still humming 'to be a pilgrim' and was joined by the tea lady and a man on a chair. 'We sang that in assembly,' said the lady. The man said he'd been to church, at the nearby Clare Priory, with his wife. 'Did you sing there?' 'No, it was depressing, we were all told to sit on our own. Sing 'Amazing Grace?' So I did, as my coffee cooled.

Basavanna statue in Basava Kalyana , India. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basava

It's been witnessed that protests are often best conducted in song, and this one of mine concerns song – an urgent call that I would never have dreamed would one day be necessary. Nor did I ever envisage that my memory of playing the piano for SOF's rousing *'Die Gedanken sind frei'* would ever surface in furious indignation over the tyranny of 'droplets'.

In my current study of the medieval South Indian protest movement of the 'bhakti saints' in their opposition to restrictive Brahminism, one voice speaks particularly to our songless situation – that of Basavanna. (Not a household name perhaps, but he does have a statue in Southwark.) Standing for equality, social justice, the status of women – ideas that were just as important to him in the 12th century AD as to those who think they invented them yesterday, this poet gets as close as is possible to the singing voice of worship. He and his fellow poets in their *bhakti* (devotion) were one with the philosophers Śankara and Ramanuja in believing that singing opened the heart to God. Without pretending to know 'anything like time-beats and metre, nor the arithmetic of strings and drums, I don't know the count of iamb or dactyl', Basavanna sings to his 'only one God, my Lord of the meeting rivers.' Says A.K. Ramanujan: 'It is not even he that sings: the Lord sings through him.'

I hope Cantilena will soon be singing once more, though the future for our hundreds of choirs is not bright. What a moment it will be, however, if we can end our concert with Finzi's irrepressible soaring up the scale in 'My spirit sang all day'. Unless we raise our voices now, for our music and our whole culture, the *kairos* might pass. Then there will be no more singing, no lungful of robust breath, no perfect cadence, no smiling conviction, sacred or secular: 'Thou art my joy'. Till then, with Basavanna: 'I'll sing as I love'.

Alison McRobb is a former Chair of SOF, devoted to sound education in theology, particularly in Christian and Hindu traditions. Extras include choral singing, piano playing and painting.
Ed: Alison is also the invaluable proof reader of *Sofia.*

The SOF London conference on music, which had to be cancelled because of Covid 19, will take place next year. 2021.

Cosmic Gratitude

Tony Windross describes his approach to liturgy.

I can't live with it, and I can't live without it.' Such is the verdict of many people upon traditional religious belief.' These are the opening words of *Taking Leave of God,* published 40 years ago this year, which marked the end of Don Cupitt's career in the Church of England, and sowed the seeds for the eventual development of the *Sea of Faith* (SOF) network. Exactly 10 years later, in 1990, Nicky Gumbel took over the running of the *Alpha Course* that had been part of the life of the parish church of Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB) since 1977, and developed it into a global brand. Gumbel's books fly off the shelves in vast quantities (with his *Questions of Life* notching up over a million copies), whilst Don Cupitt's book sales are a few thousand at most.

In numerical terms, SOF and *Alpha* are light years apart. One struggles for members. The other is a booming, slick, multi-million pound operation. *Alpha* is at the very heart of the Church of England (two thirds of parishes run *Alpha* courses), with many bishops (including the current Archbishop of Canterbury) being themselves graduates of the course, and enthusiastic proponents of it. One is eminently respectable (even *de rigeur*, in populist church circles), the other not to be spoken of in polite ecclesiastical society. And because the theology of each is diametrically opposed to the other, it's no surprise that the members of one are rarely neutral about the ideas of the other. On a personal level I have to confess to an almost visceral hatred of *Alpha* – despite (maybe because of?) its undoubted success. All that confident teaching, all those pre-packaged answers to life's difficult questions, all those certainties (and all against a background of such perfect dentistry).

Is this sour grapes? Is it sheer envy? Is it because their approach to religion is in demand, and the one I'm involved in most certainly isn't? It's never possible to be entirely free of personal agendas and prejudices, but this is surely about something more. With that 'something more' getting to the very heart of the non-realist project that burst (or maybe tiptoed?) onto the scene 40 years ago. And perhaps finding clearest expression in different understandings of (and approaches to) worship.

Lots of people claim to be '*spiritual but not religious*', and whilst that can mean a whole host of things, it often seems to amount to something along the lines of 'I'm sensitive, but don't go to church'. How much (and what sort of) spiritual activity people who self-describe in this way actually engage in, is a matter of conjecture. But there are also plenty (albeit diminishing numbers) of people who don't have such an apparent aversion to churches, and regularly attend one – because to them/us, being both spiritual *and* religious really *matters*. *Why* and *how* it matters is hard (maybe impossible?) to say – in the same way that it's hard (maybe impossible?) to say why a sonnet or a symphony or a sunset 'matters'. But matter it does – which is why we keep turning up on a Sunday.

And of course, when we go to church – we worship. We confess, we praise, we give thanks. And we do all that through the medium of liturgy, which is what gives the different kinds of collective worship their particular character. Public worship needs liturgy, in the same way that games need rules. Liturgy is what provides structure to such occasions, and whilst it can range from very tight to very loose, it's got to be there, somehow, in some form or another.

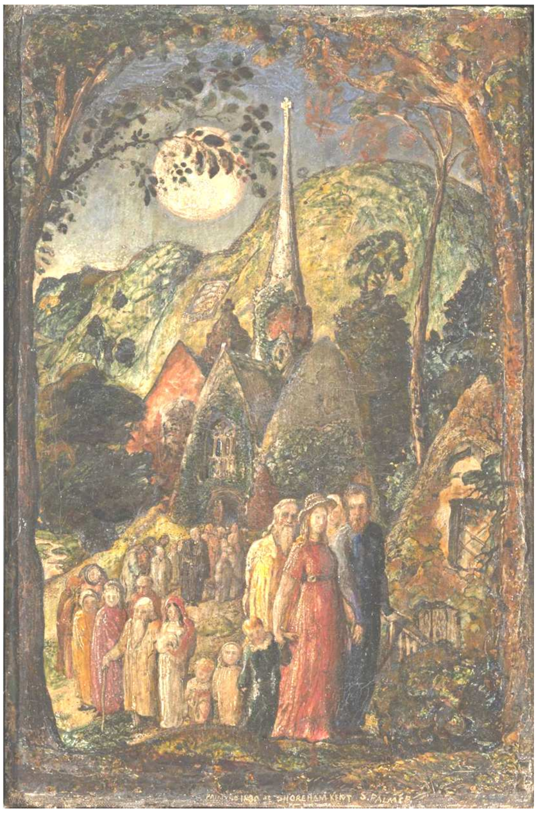
It would be astonishing if the kind of liturgy that appealed to HTB enthusiasts also appealed to SOF types – given that each group has such a radically different understanding of God (with the SOF group itself being far more heterogeneous than homogeneous). And what mystifies (or appals) many church members who wouldn't necessarily identify with the HTB movement, is the way that members of SOF are also sometimes active members of congregations (even, on occasion, their vicars!)

What do they/we think they're/we're doing, when it comes to worship? What (or who) are they/we worshipping? How can worship amount to anything other than a charade – if it's not addressed to a personal God? It's a fair question – and any answers are bound to be stumblingly hesitant. And that's because every attempt to describe the (purported) encounter with the divine is (in Val Webb's memorable phrase) '*like catching water in a net*'.

At the beginning of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein famously observed *'what can be said … can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence'* (and the book ends with almost identical words). So given the way religion is jam-packed with words (E M Forster's *'poor little talkative Christianity'*) the implication is that its subject matter is readily accessible. And this is where the HTB and

SOF understandings of/ approaches to God, come most obviously into conflict.

Those for whom God-talk is relatively unproblematic must find it impossible to understand why others retreat into parables, poetry and silence, in the face of the divine/the sacred. Or that many find it not just banal but positively *offensive* to personify and objectify God. It’s why we need recourse to metaphorical notions such as ‘feeling something in my heart’ (for which I was taken to task in a recent letter in *Sofia*, and about which I remain entirely unrepentant). Such language is obviously not intended to be taken literally – and is an attempt to express something which seems self-evident, but which itself cannot be ‘grounded’. It’s a *bottom-line moment*, when we *feel* something, and cannot prove or justify it with reference to anything else. Which means, it’s where I’m pitching my personal tent.



Coming from Evening Church by Samuel Palmer.
tate.org.uk

Worship is of this character – in that it’s grappling with/groping towards ‘stuff’ of the very deepest kind. Unless one is prepared to adopt the breezily-confident dismissal of religion of old-style Logical Positivism (or its New Atheism contemporary equivalent), any attempted engagement with ultimate reality (whatever that might amount to) is bound to be impossibly problematic. Liturgy involves just such an attempt, and whilst much of it does seem to be trying to say the unsayable, if approached in the way we might approach an opera or theatrical performance, it has the potential to transcend the limits of language. Not by giving information otherwise inaccessible to us, but by engaging and enriching us in the way any kind of art has the potential to do.

Worship can be seen as an expression of *Cosmic Gratitude*, and involves steeping ourselves in all sorts of symbols and scriptural stories, so as to allow them to shape our lives. It can never be a spectator sport, demands our entire attention, and depends on a sense of awe and wonder, a sense of our own finitude and transience, together with ongoing amazement that we exist at all. *Cosmic Gratitude* is our response to the sheer delight of being alive. A vivid awareness that it could so easily have been so different – such that we would not have come into being at all. And if we feel that – we’re bound to express it. Which is why Praise is at the heart of so many of the Psalms, finding liturgical form in the *Venite,* the *Te Deum,* the *Benedicite* and the *Jubilate,* which are the canticles of Anglican Morning Prayer.

But honesty demands that we also need to acknowledge the sheer elusiveness of the object of our worship, and unless we’re simply going to lapse into ‘reverent silence’ (the silence of what Kierkegaard called ‘the deeply kneeling man’) we need the insights of someone like R S Thomas, whose brutal reticence about the rigours of the religious journey make the gurning certainties of aggressive evangelicalism appear ever more shallow and ridiculous:

> *‘Why no! I never thought other than*
> *That God is that great absence*
> *In our lives, the empty silence*
> *Within, the place where we go*
> *Seeking, not in hope to*
> *Arrive or find. He keeps the interstices*
> *In our knowledge, the darkness*
> *Between stars. His are the echoes*
> *We follow, the footprints he has just*
> *Left’… ‘*

In his study of R S Thomas (*Poet of the Hidden God)*, D Z Phillips wrote ‘ “God” *is nearer “No one” than to “another person far more powerful than ourselves”*’. Which finds a ready echo in the words of the Romanian poet Paul Celan:

> *‘No one moulds us again out of earth and clay,*
> *no one conjures our dust.*
> *No one.*
>
> *Praised be your name, no one.*
> *For your sake*
> *we shall flower.*
> *Towards*
> *you.’*

Tony Windross is the Vicar of Pevensey, Sussex.

Mary's Touch

Grenville Gilbert

Mary breathed her last breath, whisperingly, at mid-afternoon. The big hand was on the nine and the little hand was between the three and the four. Her lungs had operated efficiently for most of her 85 years. Only the care assistant, with a mask across her face, noticed the stillness of her body. Loved ones had not been allowed to hold her hand, give her a hug or whisper final words of love into her ear because of an official Government ruling. The dying were clearly to be treated as dead bodies in advance of their actual death.

You were, however, allowed to wave outside of a closed window. Mary's emaciated body was taken to the chapel of rest. It was collected a few hours later for discreet disposal by understanding undertakers. They prepared Mary's body for burning. For statistical purposes, the cause of death was probably Coronavirus related, albeit Mary was never tested. Only 5 members of Mary's close family were allowed to be at the crematorium where they were spaced a couple of metres apart. Two of Mary's known favourite hymns were played but not sung; *All Things Bright and Beautiful* and *Morning has Broken*. The vicar wasn't from the town and hadn't known Mary.

The short service was soon over. In gaseous form, Mary later rose above the surrounding treetops, whilst her ashes were buried in the churchyard. The gases dissipated into the Earth's atmosphere. The Earth continued to spin with the other planets of the Milky Way, along with billions of stars in other far away galaxies. Mary, as we knew her form, is nowhere now. She touched so many lives. Yet, mention her name and she is straightway present through the spiritual power of love. It's just that we can't touch her anymore and that is so sad.

Grenville Gilbert lives in Ottery St Mary (Coleridge's birth place) and is involved in the church activities there, including a recent reading and recording of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.*

Skype

Over the patchwork levels of eastern England
that familiar image
of a banking Spitfire beyond their shoulders
between them it roars
as the war bound them sixty years together
loving to talk though struggling still
to unmute to get the camera going
yet it's better this way
since he sees who's talking more easily
he can be more involved
though sometimes the laptop screen
is angled so I catch only the crowns
of grey heads then a giant hand
reaches forward to re-adjust
re-appears holding *The Wiltshire Times*
its crashes and floods and marriages
and something else too blurred
even if the connection holds
but if it wavers faces split to stained glass
or cubist fragments or fairground mirrors
still talking blithely asking me still
if I can see these crocuses
the lawn in sunshine their bird table
where sparrows in pairs come for food and drink

Martyn Crucefix

The poem is reprinted from his collection *The Lovely Disciplines* (Seren, Bridgend, 2017) by kind permission of the author.

Free at last

Dave Francis discusses what we should teach our children about Religion and Worldviews.

When a young person successfully completes their eleven years of compulsory school religious education, what will there be in their knowledge and understanding of the world and themselves that will be worthy of *praise*? Will they be able better to navigate the multiple religious, philosophical and cultural streams that lie around and before them? What experiences and thoughts will they have encountered that make them more curious about life and, perhaps more importantly, motivate them to imagine and contribute to the creation of a better world for all?

From the end of the 19th century and for the most of the 20th, the goals of religious education in British schools were explicitly connected with Christian morality. The subject was called 'Religious Instruction' and legally bound (as it still, anachronistically, is) with the school's duty to provide a daily act of collective worship. Together, Religious Instruction and Collective Worship comprised 'Religious Education', and it wasn't until 1988 that 'Religious Education' was identified as a separate subject that had to be included in the basic school curriculum.

Through the 1970s and 80s it became increasingly obvious that the religious demographic of the country was changing and that assumptions about the nature of Christian religious instruction in schools had to be challenged. In my lifetime, and perhaps yours, the subject has been through many iterations. In different school settings I have experienced Religious Instruction, Religious Knowledge, Religious Education, Religious Studies and even 'Divinity'. When I became Head of RE at Frome Community College, I changed the name to 'Religion and Philosophy' and since then I have advocated a change to 'Sophology' – the search for and study of purported wisdom.

I liked the latter term for several reasons, not least because it suggested that pupils undertaking the subject might gain in wisdom from a study of the world's treasury of belief, practice and experience. The word contains a harmonious combination of Greek words; the female 'Sophia' and the male 'Logos', thus inferring that wisdom can be found in experience, including, or perhaps especially, in women's experience, as well as in deep, analytic thought – stereotypically, and unfairly of course - considered a male characteristic. For me, it avoids the over-cognitive sound of 'Philosophy' while suggesting the status of an academic discipline – an 'ology'. Add to this, the prospect of children and young people investigating the world's great wisdom-traditions as well as developing their own ideas of what counts as 'wise' and you have the potential of a really engaging, relevant and worthwhile educational experience.

Nevertheless, the idea has been much mocked, particularly by those who noticed the rather obvious similarity to 'Sophistry' and the 'Sofology' of the furniture adverts. Although I haven't given up on Sophology (there is already an undergraduate course of study in Sophology at Loyola University, Chicago, and two RE Departments in English schools renamed themselves The Department of Sophology), there is now a new kid on the block that deserves attention.

I have now become a supporter of the suggestion to rename the subject 'Religion and Worldviews'. The term has been attracting a growing consensus within the RE world since it was first posited by Dr Joyce Miller, a member of the Commission on Religious Education (CoRE) that recommended it in its 2018 Report, 'Religion and Worldviews: the way forward'. The more I think about it the more I like it and here's why.

First, it doesn't abandon the word 'religion'. Although the very word is 'toxic' to many people, it seems important to me that there is something powerful in the human and public world represented by the word 'religion'; something that is not only worthy of study, but actually vital for individual, social and political well-being. We should be in no way embarrassed that religion simply *must* be studied if we are to gain anything other than a superficial understanding of the

Carrick-A-Rede Rope Bridge in Northern Ireland. Author photo.

world we inherit, interpret and fashion. But notice that the word is singular. It refers, not to any incitement to 'religious' activity of any kind nor as a spur for learners to 'become more religious'. Nor does it suggest a limit on the kinds of beliefs or practices that might come under its remit; rather, the word 'religion' quite simply marks out the territory for study and learning.

The second word in the title is 'and'. This too is important. The conjunction implies that something quite different is coming; complementary perhaps, but not the same. If you order fish and chips, as my friend Geoff Teece pointed out, you are expecting to get two different things where one is not a sub-set of the other. On reflection, therefore, my renaming of RE at Frome College as 'Religion and Philosophy' was not an entirely satisfactory solution, since the overlap between the two terms is significant. Similarly, the Welsh Government's current intention to change the name of RE to 'Religion, Values and Ethics' sets up an immediate confusion: what exactly is being studied and why are these three different things? A school subject like 'Design and Technology, however, passes the test, since there are clearly different aspects of human endeavour under investigation.

Which brings us to the third word in the new title: 'worldviews'. Here, the plural form is used and is vital. The singular form 'worldview' would contain too much overlap with 'religion', but the plural signifies that many different forms of worldview may be studied and this means that within the field of study of 'religion', many different worldviews may be investigated. Thus, both religious and non-religious, institutional and personal worldviews are included. We are free at last!

No longer is the subject formerly known as RE limited to the consideration of a single religion, or even 'six major faiths in Great Britain'. Nor is the subject confined just to what 'recognised religions' are saying or have said. Our starting point is no longer what the powerful elites within certain religions would like our children to know; rather, we select from the human treasury of experience in order to illuminate, for children and young people today, the key concerns of religions and philosophies throughout the ages. Here is the opportunity to build a new academic discipline, based on the traditions of religious studies begun in the 1960s and 70s by Ninian Smart and others, that will incorporate as much wisdom from the human world as may be squeezed into the curriculum and aim to facilitate a broad and deep understanding of what really matters.

What then should we teach our children about religion and worldviews? How are we going to select what's needed from the vast amount of available material? Let's take the word 'religion' first. The Commission on Religious Education (CoRE) recommended keeping the word religion in the title of the new subject name 'both to provide continuity and to signify that young people need to understand the conceptual category of "religion" as well as other concepts such as "secularity", "secularism" and "spirituality" ' (2018, p.7).

This is interesting. The suggestion is that the new subject of Religion and Worldviews (RW) should involve learners in a study, not just of what is meant by 'religion' but also some related concepts; and some equally complex concepts too. I think this is an excellent suggestion. Any young person emerging from their studies of RW with a decent understanding of what might be meant by religion, secularism and spirituality will be well on the way to a successful navigation of the Sea of Faith!

For me, the word 'religion' in the subject name marks out the field of enquiry. The term itself is a complicated one, with a long history and fascinating etymology. Richard Holloway notes the big questions that the human animal asks, 'What happens to us after death? When we die, is that it or is there anything else to come? If there is something else, what will it be like? What we call religion was our first crack at answering these questions' (*A Little History of Religion.* 2016. New Haven: Yale University Press. pp.1f.). So this is our first point: religion has to do with the big questions of life; questions asked by even the smallest children. These questions – and their possible answers – religious and secular – constitute one of the key areas that we will study in RW. But this is not all.

Don Cupitt offers this definition: 'Religion, I suggest, is the complex of ideas and practices by means of which we try to reconcile ourselves to, and make the best of, life in general and our own lives in particular. Religion is about coming to terms with life and learning how to live and how to die' ('Religion after the West'. 2006, in *Sofia, No 76,* p.7). So here we have something else worthy of study: the *ways in which* we deal with what life throws at us. How do we *cope*? How to we *make sense* of our experience? And more, How do we *make the best* of it all?

Then there is the magic of story. Why do some stories become so successful that they take over the world? The most successful stories don't have to be 'true'; they don't even have to be easily understood. Was Jonah really swallowed by a great fish? What does it mean? Does it matter? Or is the most important thing that people have adopted that story so that it is part of their sacred or special tradition and reveals something about a larger set of beliefs, practices and experiences? When you look at the context of such stories, much is revealed about the people who follow the traditions in which they are set – and this too is worthy of study, because it helps us to navigate the streams of religious and cultural difference.

So too are the many artistic and creative ways in which religious beliefs, practices and values are *communicated.* As well as stories about meaning and value, there are paintings, music, film, drama, architecture, symbols and symbolic actions. Icons and iconoclasm – another great topic for study within Religion and Worldviews.

It is clear that where society and religion intersect – sometimes clashing, sometimes indistinguishable from each other – there lies another area of enquiry for RW. Here, there are fascinating questions of *influence and power* to be considered. Throughout history and most obviously in today's world, understanding the relationship between 'secular' and 'spiritual' power is crucial in any attempt to resolve so many of the conflicts that feature in the news.

But what of religion in the future? According to the writer Yuval Noah Harari, 'The new religion that will take over the world… beginning now to take over the world, will come from Silicon Valley'. What counts as a 'religion'? Football? Technology? Shopping? It's worth thinking about this because children and young people are developing their own way of looking at the world and the influences on them are many, not least what they see on social media. A study published in January 2020 revealed that 90% of 11 year olds in the UK now have their own smartphone. But we all need a deeper understanding of where our own beliefs, values, and feelings about things come from.

What I've described so far marks out the rough territory for the study of 'religion' as it may be broadly understood, but what exactly are 'worldviews'? According to the CoRE, 'A worldview is a person's way of understanding, experiencing and responding to the world. It can be described as a philosophy of life or an approach to life. This includes how a person understands the nature of reality and their own place in the world. A person's worldview is likely to influence and be influenced by their beliefs, values, behaviours, experiences, identities and commitments' (2018, p.4).

The Commissioners go on to distinguish between *'institutional worldviews'* (which include traditional 'religions' as well as 'non-religious worldviews such as Humanism, Secularism or Atheism') and *'personal worldviews'* which refers to 'an individual's own way of understanding and living in the world, which may or may not draw from one, or many, institutional worldviews'.

I find this really helpful, since it involves a much more inclusive approach to the study of what might count as wisdom in the world than has previously been the case in the old religious education. In particular, there is a challenge here to those schools where RE has been conducted in a narrowly 'confessional' way, ignoring all traditions other than that of a school's foundation. In fact, say the Commissioners, in the interests of equality, all pupils should be 'entitled to experience religious education that is objective, critical and pluralistic' (ibid, p.73). The terms 'objective, critical and pluralistic' are somewhat contested, but were given further weight and definition by the European Court of Human Rights in a landmark case in 2007 (Folgero v Norway). I believe it will be helpful for teachers to know that their approaches to RW, whichever worldviews are studied, will be aim to be critical, objective and pluralist, at least in the sense of *not* being uncritical, subjective and narrowly focused on a single tradition.

The Commission recommends a 'National Entitlement', that is a series of things that all pupils should be taught about in relation to Religion and Worldviews. In summary, the result should be pupils who can understand what world-views are and how diverse they are, the impact they have, and how people with different worldviews use them to make meaning, answer existential questions and deal with controversial issues.

This is not so much about *which* worldviews are to be studied as 'whether pupils have gained an understanding of the main elements of the National Entitlement, the core skills required, the range of academic approaches to the study of worldviews, the attitudes that enable them to work with others with whom they might disagree, and space to reflect on their own developing worldviews' (ibid. p.73).

Will such worldviews as may be called 'Christian' be part of the new subject of RW? Yes, of course. But how many 'Christianities' are there? In the context of RW, children will come to see that there are many versions of Christianity, both institutional and personal; they will understand that there may be aspects of Christianity with which most adherents can agree, but that there are many things about which they don't; they will see something of the impact of Christianity on British history, culture and society and understand how being a Christian can motivate believers in a variety of ways, both helpful and more controversial. They will see how Christianity has changed and may change again in the future.

Other 'major religions' and philosophies of life will continue to be taught in RW, as will smaller scale worldviews and even aspects of widespread political and individualist philosophies, such as capitalism and hedonism perhaps, but the central aims will not revolve around a narrow and often simply descriptive understanding of a single worldview or single version of a worldview. Rather, the depth of learning that pupils will gain will be of religion itself, and of its many associated questions, experiences and impacts. It will, in short, encourage a new depth of understanding of humanity and of what may count as 'wise' in the world today.

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Canticle of the Creatures

Most High, all-powerful, good Lord,
to you be praise, glory, honour, and all blessing.
To you alone, Most High, do they belong,
and no human being is worthy to speak of you.

Praise be to you, my Lord, with all your creatures,
especially through Sir Brother Sun,
who brings the day; you give us light through him.
And he is beautiful and radiant in his shining.
He is a sign of you, Most High.

Praised be you, my Lord, for Sister Moon and the stars.
In the heavens you have made them clear and precious and beautiful.

Praised be you, my Lord, for Brother Wind
and for air and cloud, clear sky and all weather,
through which you give your creatures sustenance.

Praised be you, my Lord, for Sister Water,
who is very useful and humble, precious and clean.

Praised be you, my Lord, for Brother Fire,
by whom you light up the night
and he is beautiful, cheerful, robust and strong.

Praised be you, my Lord for our sister Mother Earth,
who feeds and governs us
and bears different fruits with coloured flowers and herbs.

Praised be you, my Lord, for those who forgive for your love's sake,
and suffer sickness and distress.
Happy are those who endure in peace,
for by you, Most High, they will be crowned.

Praised be you, my Lord, for our Sister Bodily Death
from whom no one living can escape.
Woe to those who die in mortal sin!
Happy are those she finds doing your most holy will,
as the second death will not harm them.

Praise and bless my Lord and give thanks
and serve him with great humility.

Composed by Francis of Assisi in 1224 in the Umbrian dialect. Revised translation by Dinah Livingstone.

Praising, that's it!

Dinah Livingstone

Covid 19 has provided a pretext for some people to wallow in an almost gleeful loathing of humanity in general. They proclaim the plague is God's punishment for our 'sins', citing homosexuality, for example. Or they proclaim it is Gaia's revenge on humanity's hubris, as if she were a goddess with consciousness and the authority of natural law. But by nature, women can have ten or more children with many of them dying in infancy. It is not wrong for medical science to try stop them dying, fight diseases. Then contraception is 'against natural law' (the argument for banning it used in the papal encyclical *Humanae Vitae)* but right both for the woman and the planet. Certainly, as a species, we should not abuse the Earth or our fellow creatures – humans or other animals – and should work for policies to stop that. But there have been plagues long before humans were as powerful as we are today, indeed even before there were any humans on Earth at all. Rather than loathing, there is plenty to love and praise in most people, who struggle to live decently and kindly. So as Jane Austen says in *Mansfield Park:* 'Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery. I quit such odious subjects as soon as I can, impatient to restore everybody not greatly in fault themselves to tolerable comfort, and to have done with all the rest.'

I live alone and when the first strict lockdown came, the little park at the end of my street was vital to me and other local people. I walked in it every day and watched the great London plane trees coming into leaf again. I saw squirrels bouncing along and plenty of birds, among others, the pied wagtail, alone at first but who then found a mate, grey wagtail (with yellow front), dunnock, a pair of sparrows (many happy returns!), a flock of starlings, wrens and lots of robins. I saw one robin regularly carrying food to a nest in the hedge. I love them but what lifted my spirits, above all, was seeing the people in the park. Walking round the park, we had to keep our distance but could still greet each other. I saw young couples, a mother picking up her three-year-old, who had run and tripped over, comforting him: 'We'll put a plaster on that knee when we get home.' Another mother with two small children called one back who had gone too far, in a language I don't know (could it be Bulgarian?). The usual little party of drunks were chucking a ball to a Jack Russell, while cracking jokes about the government and cackling.

When the lockdown eased a bit and the weather got warmer, small groups formed to picnic on the grass, the playground in the park reopened. A young father was pushing a baby, about eight months old, on the swing. As I walked past, each time it swung back the baby gave me a huge grin. The cafe in the next street re-opened (the owner told me how hard it had been for her having to keep it closed for so long). 'Fellowship is life,' said William Morris. People sat outside it again, chatting and arguing in Portuguese, as I went past each day to get my newspaper. We could now drink and chat in a neighbour's garden or be with children or grandchildren for real, rather than just seeing them on a screen. All this greatly cheered me up and I felt a burst of praise for it all.

I thought about likeness in difference. I love the fact that Londoners speak so many different languages, but in many respects we are alike. I could not understand the Bulgarian words with which the mother called her child, but I understood what she meant, as well as I understood the English mother speaking to her son who had fallen over. And there is not only likeness in difference between humans, but between us and birds and other animals. The mother (or father) robin was feeding its young, just as human parents do. Humans belong to the fauna of the park and the planet, as fellow creatures with the rest. I praise them, as well as the birds and trees. I remembered the joyful morning hymn:

The Earth is awaking the sky and the ocean
The river, the forest, the mountain and plain.
The city is stirring its living commotion;
The pulse of the world is reviving again.

Though I think the word 'commotion' was put in to rhyme with 'ocean', I've always loved the last line of that verse and remembered it when, after the strict lockdown, the playground and the café were 'reviving again'. The likeness in difference and difference in likeness of all the people of London is a foretaste of the imagined beautiful city of kindness in Revelation, where 'tears are wiped away'. Of course, London is also the city of dreadful night where the price of a home is exorbitant. But that 'foretaste' is compelling and my heart leaps up. Children need praise to flourish. Likewise, praising a good idea helps it to flourish. When we get an inkling in what is already there of how things might be, it can encourage us to pursue and embody it in reality.

The National Health Service is a good idea. During this pandemic nurses, doctors and other staff are working heroically to look after those with the deadly disease. Some of them have given their lives. During the strict lockdown we had our weekly clap for the NHS. Whole communities came out to clap on Thursdays. People came out in our street too and the gay couple in the end house, who both work for the NHS, were very touched (they did not join in the clapping because they thought they would have been clapping themselves). Others who deserve praise are bus drivers, those delivering our food, post, and parcels of goods ordered online, together with thousands more ordinary people just bravely carrying on with the job.

Praise is also due to people trying to work from home in a small flat, perhaps with bored and lonely children off school, sometimes driving each other up the wall. In the recent Black Lives Matter protest we saw Patrick Hutchinson, a black professional trainer and grandfather, carrying a far-right white thug to safety: 'I scooped him up in a fireman's carry and marched him out.' The powerful image went viral and strangely echoed pictures of Jesus carrying his own cross. Praise be to them all.

St Francis' *Canticle of the Creatures* expresses a tremendous love for the sun and moon, the Earth with its creatures and praises God for them, It begins:

Singing Robin. commons.wikimedia.org

Praise be to you, my Lord, with all your creatures,
especially Sir Brother Sun,
who brings the day; you give us light through him.
And he is beautiful and radiant in his shining.

He goes on to praise people, especially those having a hard time:

Praise be to you, my Lord,
for those who forgive for your love's sake,
and suffer sickness and distress.

It is a passionate, positive poem, paraphrased in the hymn 'All Creatures of our God and King'. But why not praise the things and the people themselves, rather than praising God for them? The urge to praise is the same; it is the 'creatures' that are the richness and delight of the *Canticle.*

Another example is Hopkins' poem 'Pied Beauty' (reprinted on page 19), which begins 'Glory be to God for dappled things' and ends:

With swift, slow; sweet, sour, adazzle, dim;
he fathers forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise him.

Isn't it 'the dappled things' themselves that have so elated Hopkins? Why not just praise them? Actually, he *is* praising them; they are the power of the poem. Atheist William Morris's utopian novel *News from Nowhere* was published in 1890, just 23 years after Hopkins wrote 'Pied Beauty'. At the end of the novel, Ellen the heroine exclaims: 'O me! O me! How I love the Earth, and the seasons and weather and all things that deal with it and all that grows out of it.' Nevertheless, perhaps an imaginary creator of them all is a poetic reminder that we are one Earth, one ecosystem and belong together as part of life on Earth, which means we should take care of one another.

The Catholic Church's liturgy has prayers for the hours of the day from morning till night with psalms of praise. The Church of England has kept Morning Prayer and Evensong, praising God in the morning and evening. With the same feeling we can praise the morning and evening themselves. Not long before the lockdown my journalist daughter had interviewed a Mapuche leader for the BBC. The Mapuche are an indigenous people of Chile. He told her:

> At five in the morning everyone was up, checking on the animals. We were always taught, from when we were very little, to go out early in the morning, when all the force of nature is there and take in nature's energy. You have to look at the volcanoes because our ancestors are there and they reflect all our knowledge. You have to get up early and walk in the mountains, and be inspired.

This reminded of my father, who in the early morning would bellow at us: 'Rise and shine!' It's lovely to go out in the early morning, he would say, and we would feed our animals before breakfast too. After hearing the Mapuche interview, I found that I was going out early on a sunny morning into our park, St Martin's Gardens, to stand on the mound in the middle and look at the trees and the new day in praise. The park was an overflow from the cemetery of St Martin's in the Fields and bones are buried under the mound, ancestral Londoners.

Noon and evening each have a different light and a different feeling. P.G. Wodehouse describes the magic atmosphere of evensong in a country church. Then comes end of the day when night falls.

As well as going through the day, the church's liturgy goes round the year through the seasons, with Christmas and new birth at the winter solstice and death and resurrection in the spring at Easter. This harvest hymn also goes round the year:

> We plough the fields and scatter
> the good seed on the land,
> but it is fed and watered
> by God's almighty hand;
> he sends the snow in winter,
> the warmth to swell the grain,
> the breezes and the sunshine
> and soft refreshing rain.
> All good gifts around us
> are sent from heaven above,
> then thank the Lord, O thank the Lord
> for all his love.

Again the hymn praises God for the seasons and the harvest. But why don't we just praise them for themselves?. So many poems and songs praise God. The Chilean singer-songwriter Violetta Parra's *'Gracias a la Vida'* ('Thank you, life!) expresses the same exultation but does not mention God at all.

We are one of Earth's animals, the ones who can speak. After love and kindness, wording is our most essential human power. We can get to know the Earth and its creatures and describe them through scientific research and in other ways. We can speak about them and for them in poetry and song. We also produce art and music.

I think it was a great shame that in the English Revolution many of those on the side of increasing social justice and democracy were puritans. Puritans, including future Quakers, fought in Cromwell's army, stabled their horses in Winchester Cathedral, smashed the stained-glass west window and other windows, damaged statues, cutting off some of the saints' heads. They did the same to other beautiful buildings. The people of Winchester were so distressed that they saved the fragments of broken glass and later mended their great west window. In June 1947 Parliament abolished Christmas Day as a holiday. Puritans had been campaigning against it for decades. For example, in the 1580s in his

Anatomie of Abuses Philip Stubbs had written: 'More mischief is that time committed than in all the year besides, what masking and mumming,… what dicing and carding, what eating and drinking, what banqueting and feasting is then used, more than in all the year besides, to the great dishonour of God and impoverishing of the realm.'

Quakers were averse to colour and wore sober clothes. In their meetings they abolished music, poetry and song ('embodied word'), together with the liturgy of the hours of the day and the seasons. Their poetic and musical iconoclasm paralleled the artistic iconoclasm that had been expressed in smashing statues and stained glass windows. Perhaps they believed 'pure spirit' was somehow 'higher' or 'purer' than embodiment, whereas embodiment is the core – the crux – of the Christian story. Rather as the medieval theologian Joachim of Fiore thought that in the course of history there had been an age of the Father, followed by the current age of the Son, with an age of the Spirit to come, perhaps Quakers thought they had reached the age of the Spirit. They have a good record in caring for the oppressed and campaigning for social justice.

In our speaking, particularly in poems, stories and songs, we not only describe what we see but also imagine all sorts of things. Poets and others have imagined a whole supernatural realm, including God or gods. As suggested above, one benefit of imagining a single creator of the Earth and all its creatures is the insight that we are one life, one ecosystem. The extraordinary development of imagining God as three-in-one is elaborated in Augustine's theology of the Trinity. God's name for himself when he speaks to Moses in the burning bush is 'I AM'. In the theology of the Trinity God the Father personifies origin and Being. He knows and expresses himself so perfectly that his self-knowledge becomes personified as Word, which contains the whole of himself – God the Son. Father and Son love each other with all that they are, so that their love becomes personified as Spirit (love, fellowship ('communion'). So Being generates Word and together they breathe Love, which flows round again into Being and Word ('circumincession').

This complex imagined God has been regarded as a baffling psychological conundrum but is also poetically rich. It is suggestive both of the course of evolution and of an ideal human model. In evolution, being develops into life and then into living, speaking beings. Humans are and are alive, they can know or seek to know and word it. Ideally, the model intimates, our being and wording should flow into loving, both our nearest and dearest, and it all as one I AM. Praise be!

Pied Beauty

Glory be to God for dappled things –
For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;
Landscape plotted and pieced – fold, fallow and plough;
And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise him.

Gerard Manley Hopkins

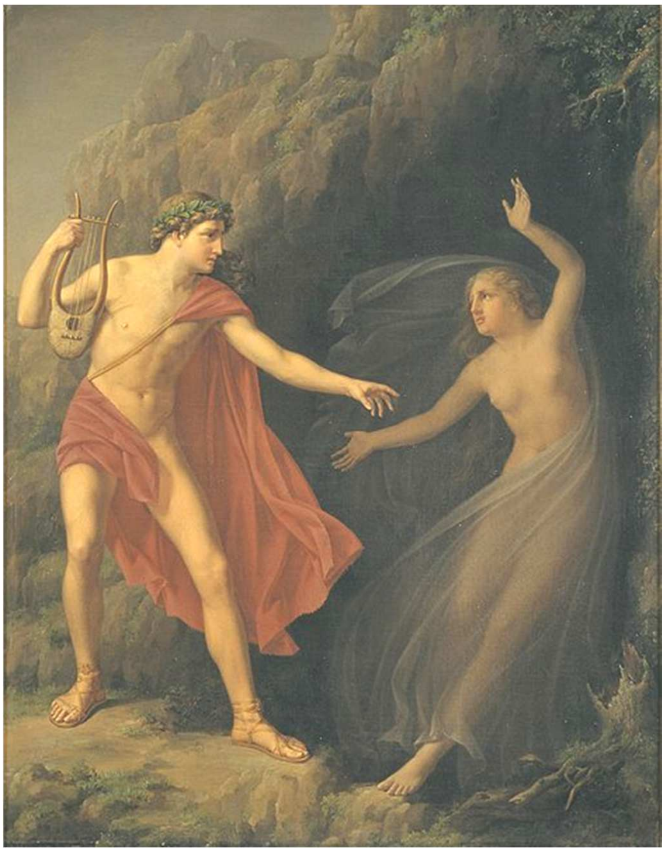
Uplifting Songs

Martyn Crucefix revisits Rainer Maria Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*

Even readers not much acquainted with Rilke's work often know the story of how his two masterworks – *Duino Elegies* and the *Sonnets to Orpheus* – came about. He'd begun the *Elegies* in 1912 at Castle Duino, on the Adriatic coast. But ten years had to pass before he could complete that original 10 poem sequence and, in the same few weeks of February 1922, the *Sonnets* also broke upon him 'completely unexpectedly'. He was by this time living in the Château de Muzot in the Swiss Valais region. Reflecting on that moment, he later said that he 'could do nothing but submit, purely and obediently, to the dictation of this inner impulse'. What Rilke wrote in that storm of inspiration often has a similar impact on his thunder-struck readers.

So it did for me too – though from inauspicious beginnings. In the mid-1990s a group of friends planned to present an evening celebrating Rilke's work. This had been provoked by a *Poetry Review* survey of contemporary UK poets, several of whom declared his work to have been influential. But I had not got very far through my Penguin Modern European Poets *Selected Rilke,* translated by J.B. Leishman in 1960. So I was only asked to contribute a reading aloud from the *Elegies.* The ninth poem was chosen, but as I practised my lines, I found myself stumbling, losing the thread and, frankly, I hardly knew what it was I was reading. I supposed this obscurity was part of the point and that it must signal unplumbed depths of profundity. Years later, I know that a proportion of this difficulty is Leishman's obfuscating translation and that the resulting impression of slippery 'mysticism' has misleadingly been part of Rilke's appeal for some readers.

As much to my own surprise as anybody else's (I'd hardly attempted to translate poetry before then), within a month I had produced a new 'version' of the ninth Elegy. By version, I mean a close-ish translation, but I'd had to take considerable liberties with particularly obscure passages and I'd occasionally inserted what I thought Rilke might have meant, or perhaps what I wanted him to mean. Even so, delighted with the audience's response to these first efforts and by now firmly hooked on the Rilkean vision, I tried the first Elegy too and, over the course of 10 years, I completed and published my translation of *Duino Elegies.* But I'd not had enough of Rilke: my translation of the *Sonnets to Orpheus* also appeared 6 years later in 2012.



Orpheus and Eurydice by Carl Andreas August Goos (1826)
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Why do these life-changing enthusiasms strike us? In part because the writer expresses ideas and feelings we already know. They clarify and extend our own still inchoate thoughts. In an important letter of November 1915, Rilke describes the way we create deities from the 'unwieldy and ungraspable forces' of our own inner life. He argues that we 'agreed to place them outside us' but, as their origins come to be forgotten, these false gods begin to exert an influence on us. This same sleight of perception has also been performed in our relationship with death so that, once externalised and alienated in this same way, we come to see it as the contradiction, the adversary of all we love, all that we then too narrowly define as 'life'. Rilke wrote to his Polish translator explaining that *'Affirmation of life AND death appears as one in the 'Elegies'* . . . we must try to achieve the fullest consciousness of our existence, which is at home in the 'two unseparated realms, inexhaustibly nourished by both'. It was this sort of insight into the fabrication of deities and the true wholeness of (human) being that chimed with and so excited me about Rilke's work.

Now, on revisiting the *Sonnets to Orpheus*, besides these powerful and profound ideas, I am also struck by the wide cast of supporting objects, creatures and individuals that Rilke draws into the magic circle of the sonnets. This is a sure indication of the successfully syncretic nature of his vision. There are the ancient sarcophagi he once noticed, probably at Alyscamp, near Arles. Many of them had been emptied, lined up and re-purposed as irrigation channels. Their duality of use – having once contained death and now the source of life – permits them to become a perfect metaphor for the comprehensive openness to experience that Rilke is advocating. There is a white horse he first saw in May 1900, in the village of Nisovka, Russia: 'Round its front leg, the fetter from a stake'. In a letter written after the poems had been completed, he said he'd made of the horse 'an *ex voto* for Orpheus' and it comes to represent the unquenchable life spirit of a creature harmed by its earlier tethered imprisonment.

Sonnet II, 7 describes young women arranging cut flowers, while in another poem Rilke recalls and addresses childhood playmates from 'the scattered gardens about the city'. Elsewhere, there are farmers working on the land: 'Listen – the first ploughs are already at work. / Once again, hear the human rhythm / in the measured stillness of the strong earth / in early spring'. In pointed contrast, the brutal hunting of doves in the Karst caverns in the South Harz of Germany, is methodically described (yet with a sense of horror) in sonnet II, 11:

'I know you better than a trap or a net, you strip of sailcloth
they would hang down deep into the Karst cavern.

They lowered you softly as if you were a symbol,
a mark of peace. A boy seized an edge, gave it a shake
and night flung a handful of white doves from the cave.'

Of course, a more important figure in the poems is Rilke's own Eurydice. In Munich before the Great War, Vera Ouckama Knoop had briefly been friends with his daughter, Ruth. He met Vera only a few times, but she was beautiful, a dancer, attracting attention through the 'art of movement and transformation which was innate in her body and spirit'. She abandoned dance when found to be suffering from leukaemia. Her body shape changed, growing heavy, her artistic aspirations switching from dance to music and then, 'finally she only drew – as if the denied dance came forth from her ever more quietly, ever more discreetly'. Rilke received an account of her death on New Year's Day 1922 and, in the completed sequence, alongside Orpheus and the narrator of the poems, Vera becomes a third image of the inspired, driven artist: 'you tried out your beautiful steps / in hope of turning your friend, his face, perhaps / his course one day toward healing celebration'. In these lines, Rilke is the 'friend' and his 'celebration' is the poetry he eventually wrote for Vera.

It's true that the overriding impression one gets in reading the *Sonnets to Orpheus* is of celebration and joy. The *Duino Elegies* fight their way towards this condition, but the quick-coming sonnets took the godless world as a given, as well as the perception of life and death as one whole and the consequent relish of our being in the world. Hence, we aspire to the kind of ecstatic, almost erotic, experience of blooming flowers:

'Flower-muscle that opens the anemone
in its meadow-mornings, step by step,
until the noisy polyphony
of heaven pours its light into her lap,

into the rapt, quiet star-flower's shape…'

Sonnet I, 13 evokes the same kind of ecstatic joyfulness through the sense of taste, pushing at the limits of ordinary language:

'Try to express what it is we call 'apple'.
This sweet one with its gathering intensity
rising so quietly – even as you taste it –

becomes transparent, wakeful, ready,
ambiguous, sunny, earthy, native.
O experience, touch, pleasure, prodigal!'

Such lines are also a fine example of the speed, intensity and flexibility of Rilke's use of the sonnet form to convey the impression of vigour, excitement and song-like ecstasy. Such poems must echo the language of Orpheus, the singing god, who, even after suffering death at the hands of the maenads, continued to create:

. . . 'you – singing still to the last, divine one –
even as the swarm of scorned maenads struck,
you beauty, you drowned out their shriek
with order, from ruin raised your uplifting song.'

To return from death singing: all those years ago, I took this to be Rilke's key message. I heard him urging a willingness to undergo transformation in our encounters with the Other and – as C.S. Lewis has argued – the paradox that what must destroy us may remake us to even greater joys is an ancient one. I often return to sonnet II, 13 (the one identified by its author as 'most valid of all'). This stunning poem reasserts the idea that we must welcome change. Despite the passage of years, I still read it as an urgent call to continual renewal. We are to collude in our own demise in order to move forward:

'*Be forever dead in Eurydice – by singing ascend*
and give praise, rise into the pure relation.
Here among fading things in a realm of decline,
be a ringing glass shattered by its own sound.'

Martyn Crucefix is a poet and translator. His poetry collections include *The Lovely Disciplines* (Seren, Bridgend 2017). A poem from it is reprinted on page 8. His translations include *Sonnets to Orpheus* by Rainer Maria Rilke (Enitharmon, London 2012). His translation of one sonnet is on page 3.

letters

Sofia welcomes comment and debate.
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Sofia 136: Act of God?

I am just writing to say that I enjoyed this month's *Sofia.* From Stephen Mitchell's 'There is no God, there are no Acts of God', to Patti Whaley's 'Death is what gives life meaning' (Have you read Martin Hagglund's *This Life: Mortality Makes Us Free?* – an excellent book), through Bobbie Stephens-Wright's 'one can learn a lot as one passes through life' to your 'Keeping Faith' and 'Word embodied in humanity', there are some very interesting thoughts and ideas. Well done and well done also to those who produced *Sofia* in difficult circumstances! I have found the time very creative as have a lot of my literary friends.

Grenville Gilbert
Ottery St Mary

*

Particularly appreciated your forthright editorial on pointless prayer, sanity in a peculiar world.

Edwin Salter
King's Lynn

Flying turtle dove.rspb.org. Image: Graham Catley

Modern Slavery

Like so many of us, I guess, I was particularly struck at the end of last week that under normal circumstances I should have been enjoying my much looked-forward-to annual reunion with SOF friends old and new in the peaceful setting of one of Leicester's university halls of residence in Oadby. The contrast between this late July and previous years was more poignant than ever, not only because Leicester City – and the suburb of Oadby itself – had been locked down owing to a local spike in Covid-19 cases but also because SOF member, Hugo Freeman, had brought my attention to one of a large cluster of recent newspaper articles about the appalling conditions still pertaining in the many small garment factories of inner-city Leicester, not a million miles away.

There have been worrying reports about pay and conditions in these places over many years. A 2018 report by the House of Commons Select Environmental Audit Committee on this matter chaired by ex Wakefield MP Mary Creagh (HC 1952) has received no serious press coverage so far. Although we have an Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner the matter is ultimately one for Priti Patel at the Home Office.

I wonder whether our Trustees could add SOF's voice to the others protesting about the slow Government response to this particular version of Modern Slavery. There are numerous press websites to visit in order to find out more.

Penny Mawdsley
Bodfari, Wales

Pauline Pearson reviews

Bread of Life in Broken Britain: Food Banks, Faith and Neoliberalism

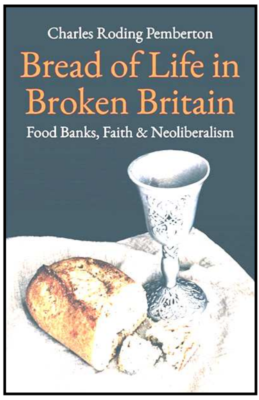
by Charles Roding Pemberton

SCM Press (London). 2020. Pbk. 224 pages. £19.99.

Pemberton's argument, in a nutshell, is that 'Food banks sit at the junction of two roads that are oriented in opposite directions': the largely instrumental and often exploitative quest for profits on the one hand, 'neoliberalism', and on the other, commitment to love and care for the human beings we share our planet with – labelled 'participation' in this book. Realising participation that affirms the value of 'other' is the challenge which faces us. His prologue situates the genesis of this book in his reflections on the story of one regular visitor to a North East foodbank, and the way in which her life of selflessness has been discredited by politics, economics and society.

After an initial introductory chapter setting out the big picture and the structure of the book, the book begins properly with a substantial set of food bank users' stories of their experiences and the intersections of food insecurity and faith. It moves on to an examination of the emergence of food banks in USA and UK in particular, which notes the relatively unexplored but significant role of Christian communities in their activities. An important element in this chapter is the way it highlights the phenomenal proportion of food waste which happens through industrial farming, noting that to produce the food wasted in the UK takes an area the size of Wales. It further argues that redistribution of surplus food, fundamental to food banks, is essentially palliative, and does not address waste or poverty.

In the third chapter, Pemberton looks at the place of food in the teaching of the Christian faith, and addresses some of the principles underlying Christian teaching around food – for example ideas of gift and generosity. He develops a participatory theology of food which might inform debates about the positives and negatives of current food bank practice. Chapter 4 examines how well food banks now measure up to the principles outlined in the previous chapter, and suggests that they fit in part, but not completely. Food banks enable community members to provide welcome and effective support for people who are isolated and hungry. The ill fit is suggested to be in two areas: firstly in relation to food banks' dependence on a food industry that in general pays little attention to ecology and environment – and the sanctity of the created world. Secondly, Pemberton raises questions about the role that food banks play in our culture in stabilising a society which is not participatory and devaluing those who have no other option but the food bank. They deflect attention from fundamental injustices, and, Pemberton suggests, are consistent with a privileged church which places charitable giving rather than radical social change at the heart of the gospel.


Charles Roding Pemberton
Bread of Life in Broken Britain
Food Banks, Faith & Neoliberalism

In the final chapter he examines a possible way forward for Christians concerned with food insecurity, asking 'what would we need to do to live sustainably and within a fair food system' [in the UK]? How can we divest ourselves of these food banks without either damning the poor abroad or damning the poor at home?'

The first solution which Pemberton examines relates to addressing the precarious nature of work, and its impact on wages and benefits, through the development of a Universal Basic Income. Addressing the issues of a privileged church, he goes on to ask whether the Church of England at least might be better served by becoming disestablished, in order to be released to be more prophetic. He suggests that it would. Thirdly he examines patterns of farming and consumption of food – advocating local small-scale production and a move to increase vegan and vegetarian diets. The book ends with a brief concluding section which reflects on what the future might hold for food banks.

This book, written before the pandemic, is both informative and challenging. It is written accessibly for the general reader and integrates material from diverse strands of thought. In examining food insecurity and faith, Pemberton advocates a participatory and liberating approach to tackling food insecurity, poverty and climate change. I strongly commend this thought-provoking book to anyone interested in addressing such issues.

Pauline Pearson is Emerita Professor of Nursing at Northumbria University and a Team Vicar.

Andy Kemp reviews
Humankind: A Hopeful History
by Rutger Bregman

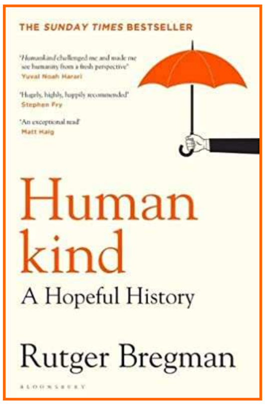
Bloomsbury (London). 2020. Hbk. 463 pages. £20.

The young Dutch historian Rutger Bregman first came to my attention because of his effective championing of 'Universal Basic Income', in TED Talks, TV appearances and his earlier bestseller: *Utopia for Realists* (Bloomsbury, 2018). I warmed to him further when he took on the tax-shy billionaires attending the Davos 2019 World Economic Forum, and after the dismissive mauling he suffered on the BBC's *This Week*, at the hands of those three old cynics, Andrew Neil, Michael Portillo and Alan Johnson.

Cynicism, particularly concerning the human condition, is one of Bregman's targets in this pacey, often funny, canter through the strengths and frailties of humanity: alone and *en masse*; prehistoric, 'civilised' and modern. Cynicism is easy, especially for those in power; it's hard to prove a cynic wrong. Cynics believe they're realists. Bregman begs to differ. He argues forcefully that Hobbes was mistaken; civilised humans are forever running away from the 'necessary' Leviathans in charge, not towards them. The idealist Rousseau and the romantics were the 'real realists', recognising humanity's innate nobility. The error is bound up with how ill-adapted humans are to civilised life, ever since that fateful moment in the Fertile Crescent when the first farmers and their families realised there was no going back to that hunting, rooting, fishing kind of life.

The 'radical idea' at the heart of the book, says Bregman, is: 'that most people, deep down, are pretty decent'. He argues that taking this attitude in almost all decision-making situations, while it may have some limited dangers, can have immense, liberating and world-changing benefits. He argues – with pandemic pertinence – that catastrophes bring out the best in people; but their efforts are often hampered by elite panic from powerful people, who see the rest of humanity in their own self-focused image.

One is tempted to say, 'That's all very well, but how come charismatic sociopaths and corrupt narcissists, seem to rise to the top?' With Hannah Arendt, Bregman argues that humans, with the best of intentions, are too often tempted by evil masquerading as good. It's the 'disconnect' which trips us when relating to those beyond our group, which can only be addressed with more meaningful contact and the understanding of context.


THE SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLER
'Humankind challenged me and made me see humanity from a fresh perspective'
Yuval Noah Harari
'Hugely, highly, happily recommended'
Stephen Fry
'An exceptional read'
Matt Haig
Human kind
A Hopeful History
Rutger Bregman
BLOOMSBURY

The author's stock-in-trade is the debunked myth and he performs it well, with the calculated panache of a stand-up comedian. From the *The Lord of the Flies* to the Taungs baby skull; from the unfired rifles of Gettysburg to the toppled moai of Easter Island; from the Stanford University 'prison' experiment to Stanley Milgram's electric-shock machine; from 'broken windows' theory to Bratton-style policing (the out-workings of which did for George Floyd and many before him); not to forget football between the frontlines at Christmas 1914, and Richard Dawkins' 'Selfish Gene': these and several more are given the Bregman treatment. It makes for an entertaining and thought-provoking read.

Bregman has his heroes: debunking forerunners, thorough researchers, Norwegian prison administrators, alternative educators, and in particular Elinor Ostrom, the 'possibilist' author of *Governing the Commons* (Cambridge UP, 1990), who won the 2009 Nobel Prize for Economics in the wake of the banking crisis. Overall though, the book is a little light on global politics and the implications of climate change.

Bregman's father is a Lutheran minister, but the young Rutger rejected the Augustinian formulation of original sinfulness, and now assumes that for all intents and purposes everyone lives in a world without God. Nevertheless, amongst his diagnostics and tentative solutions, an acknowledged but modified Jesus comes echoing in and out of the text: turning the other cheek, accepting others as they are, not taking the easy way. He even ends the book with an alternative set of Commandments, or 'ten rules to live by'. Elsewhere he has suggested that hopeful, optimistic utopianism is his form of religion.

The book is an uplifting read. It is a tonic for these testing times and if nothing else leaves one feeling favourably disposed towards others and the author.

Andy Kemp has been a member of SOF since 1993. He lives on the Wirral and works for two Methodist charities.

Frank Regan reviews

The Cry of the Earth and the Cry of the Poor:

Hearing Justice in John's Gospel

by Kathleen Rushton

SCM (London) 2020. Pbk. 242 pages. £25.

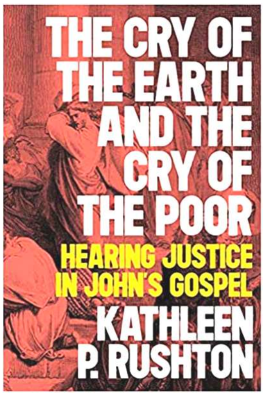
The Booker Prize winning author Margaret Atwood said some time ago that 'context is everything'. The context of this book is suggested in the very title. We have heard the cry of the Earth these last few months. The Covid-19 virus is far from the cry of birds singing sweetly in the trees. The cry sounds like that of a vengeful banshee, foretelling death to the four winds which have wafted the virus around the globe in just a few weeks.

And we have heard the cry of the poor, or marginalised, recently in Minneapolis USA at the murder of yet another black man at the hands, or the knee, of a white policeman. That cry has found echo here in the UK and has awakened an avid interest in black lives' history, current situation and future.

Author Kathleen P. Rushton, Independent Scholar and Lecturer at the Catholic Institute of Aotearoa New Zealand, and I agree that Jesus' most beautiful words were, 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly'. Rushton will show that the life Jesus refers to is this life. Jesus uses the word a total of 53 times. His theology speaks of God who works without ceasing. The churches' theology asks the question, who is God? Jesus' theology asks, what does God do?

Our author will offer us a framework which enables us to hear the cries of the earth and of the poor of the earth and so to work towards ecological and social justice. She hopes also to contribute towards a spiritual ecumenism that is about prayer and mission. And she also hopes to help sustain Christians in the huge task of addressing the degradation of the earth and the displacement of the marginalised – word she uses instead of 'poor'.

Our author finds here inspiration in two great movements of our age: hunger for a spirituality that embraces meditation and contemplation; and a concern for the environment which is inextricably linked with social justice. We think of John's gospel as contemplative and theological, not concerned with injustice in the way of the Synoptics. The reader is in for a few surprises. As she guides us through John she will alert us to the 'p' codes which permeate the behaviours, attributes, attitudes and powers of the various characters. These codes are: power, privilege, property, poverty and persecution.


THE CRY OF THE EARTH AND THE CRY OF THE POOR
HEARING JUSTICE IN JOHN'S GOSPEL
KATHLEEN P. RUSHTON

The world in John is the good world to which we are missioned; the evil world which we confront; and the alternative of which we dream, the reign of the Abba. To read John in the world of Jesus and in our world we must be aware of the Gospel's ancient context (the world behind the text); of the text itself with its stories, symbols and images; and of the text as it confronts the world, reading it to debunk its false dreams, illusions and its injustices. Throughout, our author wants to bring John's 'high Christology' (from above) closer—if such were possible—to the synoptics' 'low Christology'.

The format employed by Rushton is the same for each chapter. She begins with reading John 1. After a short commentary to highlight features of the text, she passes to a meditation which delves deeply into the text itself, illuminating phrases, exploring multi-faceted symbols and images, connecting with ancient Hebrew wisdom. This is first-rate biblical commentary which can generate a profound biblical spirituality. The last part of the chapter she calls, Prayer, Contemplation, Action. There she suggests a few questions which could motivate prayer which prompts action. Her implicit paradigm for Christian formation is that of Liberation theology, viz. see the real situation; judge it in light of Gospel values; act to change the situation.

Throughout her book our author emphasises Christ's ministry as 'barrier-crossing' and as 'completing the work of God'. Thus when he initiates a conversation with the Samaritan woman he crosses frontiers of sex, nationality and religion – all freighted with hostility. He leads her from wariness to witness. When Rushton speaks of water she explores both its material dimensions as necessary for human life and water's symbolic density. When she writes of bread she points to its value as nourishment, its lack as hunger and its symbolism for all of life. She goes on to speak of Christ as the Bread of life.

This is a book of theological reflection, biblical commentary, social awareness and spiritual refreshment. Well worth grappling with.

Frank Regan is a writer, theologian and former editor of *Renew* (Catholics for a Changing Church).

Kathryn Southworth reviews
Counting Backwards:
Poems 1975-2017
by Helen Dunmore

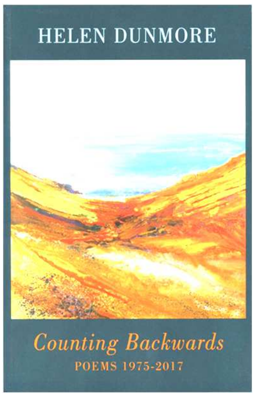
Bloodaxe Books (Hexham). 2019. PbK. 432 pages. £14.99

It is lodged in my mind as the most poignant reading I ever heard: Neil Astley of Bloodaxe Books at the Ledbury Poetry Festival in 2017 reading the last poem by his recently deceased author, Helen Dunmore. That poem, ‘Hold out your arms’, is a posthumous coda to Dunmore’s last collection, *Inside the Wave* completed shortly before her death. *Counting Backwards* is a retrospect covering ten collections by Dunmore, including all of her three most recent and a selection from earlier work. As the title suggests, in this book the poet’s end is the beginning and it is hard to read the poems in this large volume outside the framework of Dunmore’s death and her last spare and moving work.

Dunmore was a fine and prolific novelist and children’s writer as well as a successful poet, her poetry accolades including a shortlisting for the T.S. Eliot prize in 1997, the National Poetry Competition in 2010 and, posthumously, Costa Book of the Year. Her verse is unshowy, pellucid, focused on real objects in the world with the urgency and sharpness of someone who is about to lose them: ‘ I saw what no one has seen:/My cup-handle of a world,/ My pinhole morning’. Held between life and death, it is also liminal, poetry of the margins, of seashores, of the night, of the interface between nature and the human, like the mermaid of her children’s novel sequence.

Dunmore lives for the moment and in glorious colour. The cover of this book is a shimmering painting of winter sunshine at Porthmear. She loves wild landscape but is very far from romanticising it. Instead, she sees it as profoundly human made and subject to change. She hopes her poems do not hanker back to a ‘prelapsarian state of grace’ but rather celebrate resilience and adaptability. Though the agapanthus, for instance, is not native, she sees it as belonging to Cornwall: ‘a blue that gathers to it/the sky, the sea’. A host of flowers find their way into these poems. They are evoked in all their lovely particularity and in their mutability – or mortality, to humanise them – such as the tulips which ‘swagger’ in their exposure to the sun which ‘knows, as you don’t, that it can’t last long’. The connection is explicit in some of the last poems, like the exquisite `’my life’s stem was cut’ which ends:

‘I know I am dying
but why not keep
flowering
as long as I can
from my cut stem?’



In ‘The Hyacinths’, on the other hand, safety is in not flowering, the bulbs having ‘given themselves to darkness’. Flowering they are threatening, too ‘glossy and too talkative’ and the poet puts them back to sleep in the earth.

John Keats is the epitome of poets dying before their time, in his case at twenty-five. In the prose poem ‘Writ in Water’, Dunmore has his companion Severn recount the last hours of the one who has become a ‘plaster saint’: the reality he says, ‘was not like that’. Dunmore writes with great realism and simplicity of the dying, ‘her’ people, as she says: ‘I am of their company/And they are mine./ We wake in the wan hour/Between three and four,/Listen to the rain/And consider our painkillers’. In ‘The Underworld’ the poet revises her vision of the journey to death, no longer the narrow road she thought but ‘as broad as the sun’, inevitable and natural since, as she says, ‘I have more acquaintances /Among the dead than the living’.

Though not untimely by Keats’s standards, Dunmore’s death was still premature. Looking at her dates, it is a *memento mori* to find that Dunmore was born in the same year as myself. Like her in ‘Glad of these times’ I may have thought ours a lucky generation: I am not hungry, I do not curtsey,/I lock my door with my own key…/glad of polio inoculations/glad of twenty types of yoghurt’:

> *‘Because I did not die in childbirth*
> *Because my children will survive me*
> *I am glad of these times.’*

Yet in the current corona dominated times, we can take nothing for granted. We are all reminded horribly of our mortality and the fragility of all we love.

Kathryn Southworth is the former Vice Principal of Newman University College, Birmingham. She now lives in London. Her poetry collection *Someone was Here* was published by Indigo Dreams in 2018 and a pamphlet *Wavelengths,* co-authored with Belinda Singleton, was published by Dempsey and Windle in 2019.

As I Please

John Pearson writes about Plague – 2020 style

Images of the past four months – schools, shops and workplaces closed. Transport limited to a great extent. Train journeys, plane journeys, foreign travel all restricted or banned altogether. Car journeys discouraged except where essential for work. Masks mandatory on public transport, now in shops too. Public gatherings restricted or banned altogether… an end to cultural and sporting events, churches and their equivalent all closed. Family members living in separate households kept apart. Most of the 46,299 victims to date denied contact with their loved ones as they lay dying in hospital or old peoples' home … and 46,299 is an awful lot of people – imagine a whole football stadium full. Nearly everybody will know of at least one person who has had Coronavirus and, at worst, has died from it. We in the SOF Network have lost at least one of our number to this scourge, perhaps more?

So, we've all been in it together, pulling our weight, – clapping on Thursday nights, for the first few weeks at least, for the embattled NHS – the Blitz Spirit – or have we ? Most of the country has taken warnings, advice and instruction quite seriously, but against this we have seen the flaunting of rules by seemingly irresponsible minorities – like the hordes of young people, mostly without masks or any serious social distancing, seen drinking in Soho recently, following re-opening of bars across the country. Demands continue from selfish sun-seekers that they be allowed their customary foreign holiday despite the risks these may bring, both in terms of illness they might take abroad or return with, harming the rest of us.

The usually bustling Grainger Street, Newcastle upon Tyne

Despite some pieces of decisive leadership, the past few months have not passed without much confusion. Official advice has sometimes wavered, sometimes changed altogether from one day to the next, even between one politician and another, as have the personal examples set by our leaders and their advisers. Wear face masks, don't wear face masks, do wear face masks, and so on. Expert advice has been alternately cited in defence of Government clampdowns, or dismissed when recommending more draconian measures perhaps, likely to be too unpopular.

Precautions on a large scale can prove to be a mixed blessing it is true. Those earning a living from tourist areas, desperate to restore their livelihoods, understandably want us to start visiting again, *en masse*. When the crowds do descend however, the locals are horrified at the numbers and the risk this brings of a new surge in the infection. So, damned if you do, damned if you don't. Similarly, shops are re-opening, taking back staff where possible, only to find that the customers are not returning in sufficient numbers to make trading viable and it is suggested that many of these same staff members may be made redundant … talk is of numbers in the millions! Added to the effect of reduced 'footfall' are the conversion of many (either through necessary 'self shielding' or growing personal preference) away from physical shopping trips to searches and purchases online ... another nail in the coffin of the high street undoubtedly, speeded on by Covid.

Government placebos such as furloughing of employees, extending school meals across the summer, interim grants to businesses and the arts all mask the likely longer-term effect of the virus ... Only the strongest enterprises will bounce back fully if at all. The most recent 'perk', of up to £10 off each meal out, aimed at reinvigorating the economy, will only tempt those rich enough to dine out in the first place.

Perhaps we should have acted more responsibly sooner in the crisis, echoing the more stringent measures taken across Europe. Though I doubt any community could have matched the stoicism exhibited by the inhabitants of the Derbyshire village of Eyam. When faced by the Bubonic Plague back in 1665 they isolated themselves entirely from the outside world for 14 months, to protect neighbouring villages. It is said that of the original population of 350 as many as 260 died during that particular lockdown.