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Making Sense

Sofia

down to Earth

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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.

Making Sense

'Making Sense', the title of this issue of *Sofia,* ranges from seeking, to seeing to doing. It covers trying to understand or interpret, arrange coherently, or it may mean something is reasonable, is the right action to take. We might say: 'I am trying to make sense of this happening/text.' Or 'Now I see'. Or 'That makes sense. It is the right thing to do.'

This *Sofia* has a wide range of articles relating to the theme. Digby Hartridge begins our first one: 'In my eightieth year in the middle of a pandemic, what I always thought to be my duty, to make sense of existence, took on a new urgency.' He goes on to try to make sense of his own life and of the world in which we are living now. 'By chance,' he says, 'I was born during the Second World War into a privileged ruling class and into a land isolated from the worst of the hostilities, Southern Rhodesia. He studied Social Anthropology at university, disagreed with the ruling white majority but found he could make 'little difference by arguing with my contemporaries'. He is suddenly reminded of the feeling of helplessness he felt then when facing the urgent questions of today when 'climate change dominates intelligent discourse', and most of us may acknowledge capitalism's excesses but 'do *all of us* not satisfy ourselves with half measures?'

In our second article Martin Spence, who led the discussion at the SOF Annual Zoom conference on Terry Eagleton's talk on the Death of God, gives his own response to Eagleton. He argues that our humanity 'expresses itself as a transcendent impulse, an ever-present urge to reach out for meaning beyond the immediacy of daily life'. So religion, 'far from being the *source* of transcendent value is a particular form of *response'* to that human urge'.

In our third piece David Rhodes offers some comments on the assertion: 'We created religion to explain stuff we didn't understand'. That is followed by David Lambourn's 'Letter to Mark', which asks about the meaning (intention and interpretation) of Mark's Gospel. He also gives 'Mark's reply'. Then Frank Walker writes about 'Horror and Hope at Christmas'.

Kathryn Southworth revisits *The Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James. The final episode of the BBC dramatisation of the novel was broadcast in 1968, when Kathryn became sixteen. She says 1968 was an *annus mirabilis*, a year of choices and intense experiences. 'How could a young woman not identify with [the heroine] Isobel Archer's sense of herself as "someone in particular", a work in progress, and with her zest to explore the world and all its possibilities?'

There are the usual letters, reviews and John Pearson's *As I Please,* this time on 'Bucket Lists'. In this issue we are particularly privileged to have an extended review by Keith Sutherland, the founder and director of Imprint Academic, *Sofia's* consistently excellent, long-term printer. Sutherland's review is of a new book by John Higgs: *William Blake vs the World.* Like Sutherland, Blake himself, of course, was a printer.

What Eagleton and Spence refer to as transcendence relates closely to what Blake calls the Poetic Genius (and also to what his contemporary Coleridge calls 'the shaping spirit of imagination'). Blake believed 'all deities reside in the human breast' and concludes his piece *All Religions are One: The Voice of one crying in the Wilderness:*

> As all men are alike (though infinitely various), so all religions and, as all similars, have one source. The true Man is the source, he being the Poetic Genius.

The 'most high' belongs to the realm of the human Poetic Genius or imagination. Sutherland quotes Henry Crabb Robinson questioning Blake on the divinity of Jesus Christ and Blake's answer : 'Blake replied "He is the only God", but then added "And so am I and so are you".

Christmas celebrates the story of God's descent to become a newborn human baby at the lowest point of the year, the Winter Solstice. He becomes the prototype of 'the human form divine', a vision of human potential. Although we can do and have done so much harm, we still also have that potential for good, envisioned by the human Poetic Genius. As Blake says in his poem *Jerusalem* (plate 27):

> The Divine Vison still was seen
> Still was the Human Form Divine,
> Weeping in weak and mortal clay,
> O Jesus, still the Form was thine.
>
> And thine the Human Face and thine
> The human Hands and Feet and Breath,
> Entering through the Gates of Birth
> And passing through the Gates of Death.

Leading up to Christmas, Advent yearns for the coming, the realisation, of 'the human form divine' in each of us and in human society. It is a season of hope, a story of hope – that prevails. As our days rush down into the dark, at the deepest point, new light and life is born.

On the final seven days (17– 23 December), the 'Great O antiphons', sung at Vespers or Evensong, each summons Christ, the embodiment of 'the human form divine', by a different title: 'O Come':

> O Sapientia (O Wisdom)
> O Adonai (O Lord)
> O Radix Jesse (O Root of Jesse)
> O Clavis David (O Key of David)
> O Oriens (O Daystar Rising)
> O Rex Gentium (O King of Nations)
> O Emmanuel (God with Us)

The initial letter of each title forms a reverse acrostic. EROS CRAS: I WILL BE TOMORROW. At the Solstice on 21st December the new sun is invoked as the sun of justice:

> O Daystar Rising, shining of eternal light and sun of justice, Come and give light to those sitting in darkness and the shadow of death.

The very first O antiphon invokes Wisdom (*Sapientia/Sofia):*

> O Wisdom, proceeding from the mouth of the most high, reaching from end to end, arranging everything strongly and sweetly, Come and teach us to have good sense.

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Now that it has Happened

Digby Hartridge

In my eightieth year in the middle of a pandemic, what I always thought to be my duty, to make sense of existence, took on a new urgency. I hasten to add: such introspection is only one strand in my life! I have other preoccupations: classic cars, Shona sculpture, oral history, feeding the blackbirds – the usual incoherent mix. But the failings of our society are suddenly manifest, especially where our elemental sectarianism and western self-centredness combine and collide with our dependence on a fragile web of technology and last-moment supply chains. I see how few relatives I have left and how deceased friends have been replaced by latter-day never-more-than acquaintances. I see how badly equipped I am, compared with, say, my grandfather, to cope if my car breaks down, let alone to survive in a wilderness or even a prolonged power cut.

We are all uniquely formed and we do not wholly understand one another. If I correctly, though rather baldly and simplistically, interpret the latest thinking: as babies we start devising frameworks to cope with our lives and everything thereafter must be fitted into them; these frameworks are adjusted by happenstance and education and propaganda, but arguably insufficiently to shape us into competent beings and certainly insufficiently to slot us readily into our splintered communities. When you consider our diverse histories and the varying order in which even shared familial relationships come to us, it is reassuring to see how well we do rub along.

Here I shall discuss the Sea of Faith, conscientious and questioning, strand in my life. In this mode I imagine I have been expecting the present crisis all my life. (Though the trigger could have been some other pandemic or nuclear war, pollution, asteroids, antibiotic resistance, climate change, drought, a standoff with China – and any of their consequences.)

The following clarification is also by way of apology to you: By chance I was born during the Second World War into a privileged ruling class and into a land isolated from the worst of the hostilities, Southern Rhodesia. My grandparents came from different places and different backgrounds – Anglican evangelical and Irish Catholic, Liberal and Conservative, upper and middle and lower working class – and at the turn of the 20th century all four had emigrated, separately, and the Empire allowed them to come together and pass on their disparate but distinctively late Victorian views, views that have been since less modified than they might have been had we all stayed at 'home'.

For three of my infant years my father was fighting in Italy and my mother was with me all the time. As a studious only child I learnt from books rather than from my peers. I lived in comfort beside poor people in a thinly-populated land – and always on the fringe of the bushveld where I could see the depredations of man as pesticides and buildings and industry replaced game and insect. At University, Social Anthropology put Economics into perspective. The British Empire's religion sustained me, the paternalistic Stoicism of Marcus Aurelius.

Then I suffered an illness. Recovering, I found myself quite suddenly on the political fringe, not one of the ninety per cent of an electorate that believed white rule would last forever: through circumstances rather than by nature I was a (somewhat limp) rebel. On the 'native question' I had drifted fortuitously into believing my own eyes. I took to heart the ideas of Olive Schreiner or Doris Lessing, just as on other matters I was persuaded by Ruth Benedict or Rachel Carson or Vance Packard or Mary McCarthy or Sloan Wilson.

Sometimes I was arrogant: was I not one of the few who saw the Emperor had no clothes? But more often doubting myself: could I really be right? Just as I ask today: perhaps we can after all wheedle our way out of this mess by means of conspicuous consumption and ingenious scientific tweaking? Then (as now) I was not particularly brave: there were few political white martyrs in Rhodesia as we 'liberals' were merely insulted or ignored. I realised I was accidentally set apart and in retrospect I think it caused me to be, rather than confrontational, oblique and flippant, for if I disagreed I could make little difference by arguing with my contemporaries – frightened people tend to splutter with rage and erect barriers – but I found I might make some impression with a joke or disconcerting aside.

I experienced a feeling of helplessness and irrelevance, and now I am suddenly reminded of it. What should be one's role in a highly polarised society? In Rhodesia a *military* one was assumed. But then and later and in all contexts it is hard to be a militant centrist. Thoroughly sceptical, unwelcome in my own country, I emigrated twice, to Australia, where the class system and racism and hypocrisy surprised me, and then to England, where little did – my standard Empire-wide education had prepared me for it. And here I can sometimes pass as a native!

Of course nowhere am I persecuted but, let me tell you, émigrés of colour endure a startlingly different experience: I have witnessed their world at Heathrow or at the Visas & Immigration Service and Support (sic) Centre, Solihull. But like all immigrants I shall never be at peace, never feel 'planted', fated to look at events from a remove. My deepest feelings have been set aside, and I confess it follows that English natives can appear to me to be colossally complacent, though they may be no more so than anyone. Yet the outsider does have his or her perspective.

I thought in some excitement that the pandemic, the first of the expected catastrophes, would wake everyone up. Perhaps it has but I can see little evidence of change – as always there is a surfeit of new ideas, but old habits persist. Climate change and environmental destruction had stirred us into some action, but minimal action. We had tolerated crass populism; we met the loss of biodiversity with the token reintroduction of a favourite animal; the causes of illegal immigration remained unaddressed; overpopulation was a non-subject. Now perhaps we would begin to stir? But to my quarantined mind we were not rising to the challenge – yearning to book optimistic holidays in the (amplified) sun or queue at Primark or otherwise swarm.

The only plus is that my stunted emotional growth has been explained: I never learned to hug everyone at sight. Fault lines appeared: vaccine nationalism, profitable outsourcing, bizarre rumours, denialism. There was global callousness beside local kindness. And I could see little sign that we Sofists were stirring. I have been disappointed that, while we happily argue about philosophical concepts, we rarely tackle the starkly obvious moral dilemmas of the 21st century.

African elephant among endangered species. wwf.org.uk

Morality

The following are questions of morality and I will start with the essential ones. What should be the response of a person of a religious sensibility, albeit an atheist post-Christian person, to the challenges we face? I do not positively look forward to an imminent end to the world so, as our prospects diminish, how can I live with myself?

Climate change dominates intelligent discourse but the politicians and religious leaders and no doubt influencers are wriggling to avoid clear answers. Capitalism's excesses I take it most of us acknowledge but do *all of us* not satisfy ourselves with half-measures? What if everyone lived as *you* do? What do *you* say to Christians who have forgotten the Sermon on the Mount? To true believers who maintain no one would want to be a 'wealth-creator' if they were not disproportionately rewarded?

Though we are all asking questions now, are they anywhere near radical enough? And of course we do not think rationally. We think emotionally and it is here I revert to the child. As a child I saw Africans in mud huts near our spacious bungalow and I asked my mother about it. She said: 'They are happy with very little.' Oh, and some truth in it: we really do not need many material possessions, and I can bear witness to the way peoples with very little freedom or personal wealth can live with their burdens and face the world with laughter.

At the age of twenty I wrote, for my studies in Social Anthropology, a dissertation on the many hundreds of sectarian sects in Northern Rhodesia (Zambia). Their congregations might number a score or maybe a thousand. Typically they loved hymns and foot-stamping and intoned gospel readings and dancing in the aisles, revelling in dramatic ceremonies like total immersion in baptism or exorcisms. They valued Revelation and gnostic writings. They merged Christian teachings with traditional beliefs in ancestral spirits or clan taboos; frequently they permitted polygamy. And joining an independent church could be a substitute for political protest, then most tightly controlled by the government.

Bemba people. Image: kwekudee-tripdownmemorylane.blogspot.com

I was greatly moved by the story of the Ban ma Mutina. I dug out my notes and find I am moved still. The Ban ba Mutima were lapsed Roman Catholics and their preferred text was 'Blessed are the poor'. Their leader, Emilio Mulolani, walked barefoot and carried no money. Church members, themselves poor, gave away clothes and food to all in need, especially to paupers. (Some anthropologists saw this as congruent with the Bemba peoples custom of food-sharing.) In church, collections were taken in secret, to discourage showing off. Men and women sat together in services. Husbands were exhorted to destroy pride by participating in housework. So be it there were more female than male adherents: they took Jesus's words seriously. Fancy that! In England, anon, the Rector did not fancy seeing their story in the parish magazine.

This is just scratching the surface of the moral universe. There are scores of practical issues, and space for barely one of those here, to illustrate a point, because the issues might relate to the construction industry, power generation, transport, agriculture, clothing, cosmetics, you name it. Specifically, a boy obsessed with motoring and still a boy, I knew enough to be wary of buying a diesel car. And today I suspect that electric cars are a poor solution to the problems of personal transport. If you insist on your own conveyance, the best provisional answer is probably to keep your petrol car for twenty years and a million miles, quite attainable with proper maintenance and spares provision and the proud skills of mechanics of the old school, while waiting for a viable hydrogen fuel or hydrogen cell replacement. There are dozens of such practical matters. The solutions on offer are likely to be ill-understood or short-termist and highly expedient. Or obvious and neglected: wear every garment a hundred times and patronise a tailor if you cannot do the alterations yourself.

No one knows more than a tiny sliver about our world. So how do we persuade people who are not equipped to deal with science or the modern media (ourselves in other spheres?) to steer through the complexities, even if we are rational and caring, to avoid the trap of believing only what is *comfortable* and what suits industrialists? Or, if you reject these arguments, what is your message for the poverty-stricken? Are the dying poor natural wastage, unavoidable casualties, as Malthus fatalistically argued? What are not avoidable are the arguments about population – unless you blank your mind. If David Attenborough can make little progress, I do not expect to. For a start, I do not fully understand why we are we all so reluctant to tackle the matter. Though do I really have to explain I am not proposing selective euthanasia and forced sterilisation?

Random reflections. But the major religions take up their positions, diametrically opposite to the drift of mine, so it is surely our duty as Sofists to give some thought to it. I am not pretending to have any remedies but I can tell you that the main recommendations of the organisation Population Matters include educating and protecting the rights of women, maintaining aid, reducing overconsumption and promoting balanced third world economies.

I am of an age where folk run back over their lives and are wracked by guilt, various personal regrets to the fore, and I am serious when I ask: where has my thinking gone awry? How would I know if I were tipping into dementia? Are these just the misgivings of a rich man standing before the eye of the needle, combined with fashionable colonial guilt? Please advise.

***

Select Reading

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Population Matters (populationmatters.org)

Born in Zimbabwe in 1941, Digby Hartridge has worked on three continents in diverse occupations, including archivist, oral historian, lecturer, children’s librarian and training officer.

Freedom to Love

Nothing can take away the freedom to love;
not even a torturous death on a cross.
For love is the source of life itself
and God is that Love; love is our hope.

Christ died not to undo things done.
Christ died to show us how to love;
how to get out of a hopeless condition.
In short, he showed us how to live.

To be ‘in Christ’ is to be in love.
‘Yes’, it is as simple as that.
No fancy church dogma needed;
just straightforward love.

All our systems should be based on love,
since love is the way to live fully;
fully human lives are meant for everyone.
Love is the only true capital.

And the paradox of all paradoxes
is that selflessness, and not selfishness,
is the foundation of love and, therefore, life.
Life is truly relational; not individual.

To be rooted and grounded in love
is to let Love live in you;
to let Christ live in you. And yes,
to be surprised that it works.

The dark night of the soul is all
about letting love work in you;
not knowing where it will lead,
but trusting the source of love.

Clarity and certainty, there are none,
but the joy of love is inestimable.
Fears are dispelled; anxiety is quenched.
Sterile beliefs are replaced by living love.

No man is an island; we are all part of the whole.
Government should be for all; not the few.
Compassion should be the only guide,
along with maximum freedom to love.

And simple, ‘few words’ prayer is the way
to discover the daily, ongoing path
such that love can travel in and out
through the ever swinging door of life.

Grenville Gilbert

Forms of Transcendence

Martin Spence led the discussion at the SOF Annual Zoom Conference on Terry Eagleton's talk on the Death of God. Here he gives his own response to Eagleton.

It was clear from the start that the 2021 SOF Conference in July would have to be an online affair. The pandemic was (is) still with us, and a face-to-face gathering was simply not possible. So we set out to make the best of it, and among other things we went looking for online content which might spark discussion. One online item which got a good response was a YouTube talk by Terry Eagleton, entitled 'The Death of God' (2015).

Eagleton's argument

I like Eagleton. He is very much an academic, a Professor of Literature, but he has never allowed a job-title to limit either his areas of interest or his sense of mischief. His articles, books and talks always fizz with ideas, paradoxes, contradictions and knockabout humour. He was brought up a Catholic and became a Marxist, and he retains respect for both traditions while also mining them endlessly for jokes and throwaway lines. So for instance, in his 'Death of God' talk he asserts that: 'Hegel believed that History had reached its conclusion inside his own head' – which manages simultaneously to be a bit true, rather unfair, and quite funny.

'The Death of God' is of course a familiar phrase, conjuring up both Friedrich Nietzsche, and the radical theology of the 1960s – but Eagleton uses it to mean something different. He is concerned here not with theology or individual belief, but rather with the social and cultural *conditions* and *consequences* both of religious belief, and of its absence. So, early on in his talk, when he says that 'Atheism is really difficult', he doesn't mean that it's intellectually sophisticated (no-one who has read Richard Dawkins could possibly think that) or emotionally challenging. He means, rather, that human *societies* need some shared faith or meaning – some shared 'source of transcendent value' – if they are to hold together. He means that it is difficult for *societies* to function in the absence of some such source.

If we apply Eagleton's argument to our own society, it seems to hang together. Not just in Britain but across Christendom, for centuries, there was indeed a shared transcendent value in the form of a near-universal belief in the Christian God, and near-universal acceptance of the rituals and practices associated with the Church as the institutional vehicle of that belief. Eagleton describes this mass-participation religion, with its transcendent messages which steeped daily life in shared meaning, and connected individual experience to divine purpose, as 'the most successful form of popular culture ever'.

However, Eagleton goes on, organised religion is not the only possible source of transcendent value. In the West, modernity has spawned secular alternatives: Art, Science, the People, the Nation, Progress, Communism. But in the last analysis, Eagleton sees these as inadequate God-substitutes, 'doomed attempts to fill God's shoes'. They may still have real power: the idea of 'the Nation', for instance, has inspired sublime poetry, extraordinary self-sacrifice, and bestial cruelty. But this is precisely his point: nationalism is powerful when it mimics religion, lifting 'the Nation' on high to the point where it seeks to become a substitute for God, positing itself as a mystical source of ultimate meaning.

All of which leads Eagleton to pose the question: Can any society survive in the absence of some shared source of transcendent value? And he answers his own question by suggesting that we are right now in the process of finding out, because we ourselves live in just such a society. Eagleton claims that the twenty-first century West is the first society in history which has attempted to hold itself together in the absence of any binding religious or transcendent belief.

We live, he argues, not just in a capitalist society but in a *post-modern* capitalist society, quite unlike the merchant capitalist, or industrial

Penge Festival

capitalist, or state-capitalist societies of previous centuries. He sees post-modern capitalism as both globalised and individualised, a world-market driven by billions of short-term individual consumer choices, with no binding meaning or ethos beyond its own self-reproduction. It holds itself together by stimulating desire, briefly satisfying it through the market, then re-igniting it once more. Unlike previous phases of capitalism which still relied on religion and religious morality, such as a Protestant work-ethic, Eagleton argues that this post-modern phase needs no conviction, or faith, or belief. All it needs is for people to turn spontaneously to the market to satisfy their desires.

But, Eagleton continues, despite appearing to bestride the globe, this faithless capitalism is really quite fragile. For faith and belief persist in the world, sometimes taking violent and intolerant forms, and given the opportunity they will strike back against faithless post-modern capitalism. Hence 9/11.

To sum up then: Eagleton argues that killing off God is a risky business, because religious belief and practice provide sources of transcendent value which bind societies together, underpinning social stability by investing everyday life with meaning and purpose. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries many societies claimed to have replaced religion with more modern ideals – Nation or Progress or Communism – but for Eagleton these were merely God-substitutes. Not until our own age, the age of post-modern capitalism, do we truly encounter a society without faith, without any binding source of transcendent value. And the jury is still out on whether such a society can survive.

Whenever I read or listen to Terry Eagleton, I always find him enormously compelling; his combination of erudition, intelligence and humour carries me along. Sometimes I remain persuaded even after I've allowed the ideas to percolate, but at other times doubts arise, and this is one of those other times. I don't go along with his 'Death of God' narrative, for one big reason: I think he misrepresents religion and its relation to transcendence.

Religion and transcendence

Eagleton argues that religion is the primary and authentic source of transcendent value, and that while secular ideals such as Nation or Progress or Communism may reproduce some of its effects, they only succeed insofar as they model themselves upon the religious original. But underlying this argument is an unspoken assumption that we can treat 'religion' as if it were a thing, a structure, a discrete domain, within society.

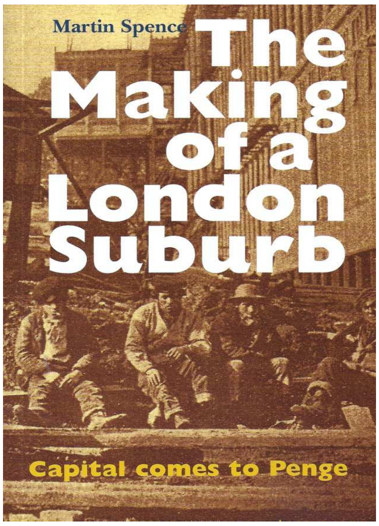
I do not accept this. I think that it misrepresents both religion and society. Just as many theologians have insisted that God is not a 'thing' in the world, so I want to argue that religion is not a 'thing' in society. Human society is not a machine consisting of separate and distinct components, one of which is labelled 'religion'. Society is, rather, a dynamic field of activity in which all our actions have many parallel aspects, parallel qualities, which co-exist and interact.

Consider a devout believer participating in a collective act of worship in a church, mosque, synagogue, or temple. This activity is incomprehensible if we remove its religious dimension; worship is, undeniably, a religious act. But it is not *only* a religious act. It is also a linguistic act, a performance of individual and collective speech, spoken and perhaps sung. It is a gestural act involving ritual movement, bowing, kneeling, hand gestures. It is a spatial act, for all the worshippers have travelled from their homes to the place of worship and soon will travel back again. It is a sartorial act, involving dress or costume appropriate to the occasion. Above all it is a *communal* act, a meeting with others at an agreed time and place for a shared purpose. None of these aspects – linguistic, gestural, communal and so on – compete with or detract from the religious aspect of worship. On the contrary, they help constitute it, giving it form and practical presence in the world.

This has a direct bearing on Eagleton's concept of 'transcendent value'. In his presentation, he suggests that religion is the authentic source of transcendent value, connecting our worldly lives and experiences to other-worldly ultimate meaning, up to and including divinity. But I think he's got it the wrong way around. I think that transcendent value, broadly conceived as a sense of connection between everyday life and a larger realm of truth or meaning, is bubbling up all the time in all human communities, in a thousand ways, through work and speech and gesture and community. I think that our humanity, our nature as social primates who make tools and sentences, expresses itself as a transcendent impulse, an ever-present urge to reach out for meaning beyond the immediacy of daily life.

This means that religion, far from being the *source* of transcendent value, is a particular form of *response* to it, channelling the transcendent impulse towards other-worldliness and divinity. But there are also other possible responses, which channel it in other directions: towards a heightened sense of human community; or a sense of historical progress or improvement; or unity with the natural world. And these different responses are not mutually exclusive, but mix and merge with one another: hence Judaism and Hinduism, which may combine a profound sense of other-worldliness and divinity with an equally powerful sense that the community of believers is ethnically or nationally defined.

This should alert us to the uncomfortable truth that the transcendent impulse is not necessarily benign. A heightened sense of human community, a sense that each individual life is enriched and made meaningful through participation in a wider fellowship, may lead to generosity and sharing and co-operation – and may equally lead to authoritarianism, nationalism, racism, and violence towards strangers and outsiders.



If there is a transcendent impulse; if it is the case that by virtue of being human, we inevitably and repeatedly seek transcendent frameworks of meaning and validation; then Eagleton's vision of faithless post-modern capitalism must fall. He has mistaken the decline of certain high-profile religious institutions for a decline in religion as such; and he has taken the connection between religion and transcendent value to be causative and necessary, when in reality it is responsive and contingent. In fact, if the human condition generates a transcendent impulse in the way that I have suggested, there can be no such thing as a faithless human society. There can only be different societies with different transcendent frameworks, some of them clearly and self-consciously religious, others furiously denying any hint of religiosity, but all of them sharing that fundamental urge to enrich everyday life by reaching out to a larger realm of truth and meaning.

Conclusion

The SOF Network's motto states that 'religion is a human creation'. I have suggested here that we are subject to a deep-seated human impulse to seek transcendent meaning, which springs from the material realities of our humanity; our character as social primates, our facility for making tools and transforming our environment, and our possession of language. And I have argued that religion, far from being the source of that impulse, is rather a particular response to it. I hope that this perspective may offer one way of putting flesh on the bones of that motto of ours.

Martin Spence is a former Assistant General Secretary of BECTU. He lives in Penge and his book *The Making of a London Suburb: Capital Comes to Penge* was published by Merlin Press in 2007.

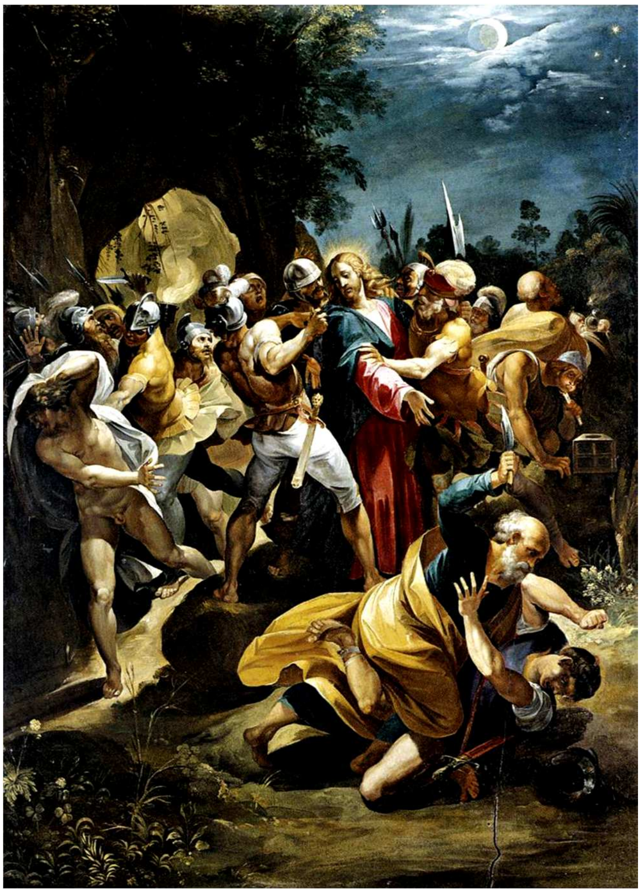
Letter to Mark

Dear Mark (If I may),

I have long wanted the possibility of conversation with you and this letter is the closest that I can manage. I am hoping for a response of some kind!

Since my teenage years, I have been a reader of your work, that work which has long been referred to as the Gospel of Mark. Here, then, is my first problem: I am not clear as to whom I am writing! Are you a solitary writer perhaps? One of a group? Perhaps the scribe of your local synagogue? At some point, someone gave your work the name 'Mark' – and, for simplicity, that is how I shall address you, I hope you understand.

I write for several reasons. In part, because I am convinced that there is more that I can gain from what you have written, than others have so far read. Further, and this is something which I am sure that you and I share: that in the act of writing we find, or create, what we hold to be the case. The question of whether we *find* what we hold to be the case, or *create* it, I would like to leave on one side for the time being – and come back to it later.



Giuseppe Cesari, *The Arrest of Jesus,* c. 1597: 'A young man, wearing nothing but a linen garment, was following Jesus. When they seized him, he fled naked, leaving his garment behind' (*Mark* 14:51–52). commons.wikimedia.org.

You and I both know from our experience of writing about our cultures, about writing of differing groups and telling of the stories of the past, that we fail to say precisely what we wish to say – what we wish to say seems ever elusive. I think that I know what it is that I want to say, and yet I do not seem to be able to say it! That is one level of my problem – imagine what it is like when there are several of us trying to reach agreement on what it is that we would like to be doing in a particular situation: each knowing what he or she wants and yet unable to say, precisely, what it is. At its best, we call this important task conversation.

You wrote of the last year or so of the life of Joshua ben Joseph of Nazareth – I'll use the Greek name you gave him, Jesus. You describe him as concerned with something which has often been termed the 'kingdom of God' – or the 'realm of God'. This issue, *realm* or *kingdom* is a good example of the difficulties of saying what one intends. When you wrote of it, did you intend to say (a) that this realm was in the *immediate* future (b) that it was *already present* and that we were invited simply to step into it or (c) that by acting differently we would thereby *be creating* the new realm? Part of the problem, as I see it, is the question of whether the idea of the kingdom/realm of God is to be taken literally or metaphorically, whether you are writing in literal or figurative language. This is something that I would like to pursue on another occasion.

Just those three possibilities illustrate some of the difficulties we have – especially when trying to write of something new. Perhaps your colleagues had differing experiences and would speak of them in different ways and you wanted to allow for their legitimate viewpoints?

If I were to try to write about this kingdom/realm for my friend who is unfamiliar with the idea, I would face a number of difficulties. If I understand it as a *realm*, what are its boundaries, if any? What are the important features? Have I the use of an adequate vocabulary to describe it: if I speak of a realm with boundaries, have I introduced a metaphor which is useful, or perhaps misleading? How might I present the issue in such a way that my friend can grasp what I am hoping he will? I suspect that my writing will be more figurative than literal.

Arguing from my experience, I wonder how I should be understanding what you wrote. Which is, of course, exactly where I started this letter! I shall write again, shortly. In the meantime, I am hoping for some response.

I remain, an enquiring reader,
David.

Mark Replies

PAX TIBI MARCE EVANGELISTA MEUS

The Lion of St Mark. en.wikimedia.org

Dear David,

Thank you for your letter I get so very few – I welcome yours because you are clearly interested in the difficulties of writing about other people and what drives them. If I understand your thinking aright, it would seem likely that we have much to learn from each other. As you imply, we both have to employ our imaginations in order to benefit more fully. It would be less than honest if I were to claim that I knew exactly what it was that I was writing about. But I think that I can claim that what got written was well worth the effort! I hope you agree.

I am reluctant to answer your opening questions as to who actually decided what should be written. We judged that it was unnecessarily risky to put a name to our writing – in those early days the writing was for our own local use. The risks came from more than one direction. The different parties within Judaism did not welcome the reforms we practised, much as we emphasised our loyalty to many of the traditions. The frequency and seriousness of the skirmishes between groups of our younger men and the occupier's military were clearly escalating and, later, came to a dreadful ending in Jerusalem, as you know. Yes, I did the actual writing, but there were a number of contributors and some kind of agreement had to be arrived at between us.

Try to imagine how the writing came about. The Sabbath, the idea of the synagogue, the *minyan* all were a source of moral strength, it helped us to maintain our traditions, our sense of who we were. Some there were who in their haste to benefit from the occupation almost became Romans themselves. We were often challenged as to our authority for the modest changes we were advocating. All we had to offer, other than selected passages in the scriptures, were stories. Moreover, there was even disagreement between the stories: they even changed in the telling – that was another problem!

What happened was probably as much by accident as by design. Perhaps it was the occasions of the major feasts which drove it. We wanted to show how our practices bore some comparison with the designated reading at those times.

Deciding that it would be good to get the stories written down was but the start of our problems. As you know, new stories were circulating about sharp disagreements between those in Jerusalem and those who supported Paul; he who wanted to spread the reforms brought about by the teachings of Jesus (as we shall call him) to the *goyim*. This argument looked as if it might run and run. Steering a course between them seemed sensible. Full disclosure: I had a distant relative who had travelled with Paul and Barnabas but had separated from them and returned to Jerusalem, so I was somewhat torn myself.

Speaking of full disclosure, I am grateful for your letter, because it allows me to admit, as I hinted earlier, that I do not know what happened in any detail. I, too, had to rely on the stories and make of them what I could. Perhaps better, *we* had to make of them what *we* could. Do not read what we wrote if you want to know the truth of that man's life and teaching: that has to be sought by searching for whatever coherence might be found between the stories. Perhaps better, by an exploration of finding what works?

I shall leave you with just one thought. As you know, we, the writers, were convinced that the tradition that Jesus had a very distinctive style of teaching, whether in the synagogue, or on the road, was a faithful tradition. He always taught by telling stories which, for the most part he did not explain, though he did make some very clear demands in specific situations. In our writing, we have tried to follow that lead, believing that there is something very powerful about that process of storytelling without explanation.

In that belief, I offer no further stories or claims other than those we wrote at the time, but I do hope that we might continue our conversation.

I also remain, an enquirer,

'Mark'.

David Lambourn is a member of the Norfolk SOF group and is willing to be contacted at: davidlambourn@mac.com

‘We created religion to explain stuff we didn’t understand.’

David Rhodes offers some comments on this assertion.

What follows are some musings around the origin of religion. It is a response to a line I hear often: ‘Oh yes, well religion was just created to explain things that people couldn’t understand’. This comes frequently from atheists and humanists that I speak to, and it is offered without any evidence and usually gets nods from other atheists. But it has always disturbed me. It just doesn’t seem right. I’m no anthropologist - but then nor are the people who make this assertion.

I am not offering anthropological or scientific evidence, more a set of first-principle thoughts. These thoughts were reinforced by reading Reza Aslan’s *God: A Human History of Religion* (Corgi Books, 2017). I don’t think I have a particular axe to grind, except challenging what I see as misguided. I am an atheist in the strict sense (there is no theistic god) but I have room in my life for god and the Christian tradition, interpreted as fully human constructs.

Some comments about the ‘Religion arose to explain things we otherwise couldn’t explain’ assertion

1. It is an assertion, not backed up by anthropological evidence.

2. It isn’t obvious that an explanation of natural phenomena would be needed by early man. A social understanding of how the world works is certainly essential for the survival and development of early societies (small though those societies may be). It is part of being in the environment. But an ‘explanation’ seems a modern concept.

3. Explanation isn’t primarily what religion is about. Certainly, religion does have a role in explaining the natural world, and this is shown when it comes into conflict with other ways of viewing the world – Darwin and evolution being probably the prime example. From people I know, and from articles I have read, there are various reasons for people being ‘religious’ – social contact, meaning to their lives, spirituality, comfort (especially regarding the next life), awe and wonder. Providing an explanation for natural phenomena doesn’t really feature. I understand the potential criticism here: what people get out of religion today is probably not the same as what early human beings got out of it. That’s true, especially since religion is a social phenomenon, and societies change – I’m just suggesting that explanation may not be a core motive for religion.

4. There is an agenda behind the assertion, which explains why it is popular with anti-religious people, including some modern humanists. The argument is straightforward – religion arose to explain things that couldn’t be explained at the time; as science advances it will explain more and more things leaving less and less room for religion, until it isn’t needed any more. And if the main function of religion were to explain things, this seems a valid argument. And I am aware that saying that people have an agenda when they argue something doesn’t make the argument incorrect.

5. I’m trying to get into the minds of people in those very early social groups. Does religion *really* explain things? Does it *really* help that society interacts with its environment don’t think so. For example:

* *The sun goes round the earth. That’s what the sun does. How does the idea of a god in a chariot pulling it round make it easier to understand?*

* *Waterfalls fall. That’s what they do. Does the idea of a spirit of the waterfall explain what waterfalls do any more usefully?*

* *Thunder is terrifying. It’s a warning and we need to be careful. It sounds like anger. Fear causes us to revere and respect thunder. But does a thunder god explain things?*

6. Finally, here's a question that has to be answered, and Reza Aslan is good on this. If it is the case that early people used the idea of a god to explain a natural phenomenon, where did that idea come from? Let's look at the supposed thinking:

- *We don't understand that natural phenomenon.*
- *Let's associate it with a god or a spirit.*
- *That'll explain it better.*

But to get the second step (associate it with a god or a spirit), we must already have the idea of spirit. I use 'spirit' loosely to mean something beyond the physical thing, which seems the basis of what we call religion. Psychologically, and logically, in order to say 'let's assign a spirit or god to that natural phenomenon', the idea of a spirit or god must already exist. So, where did that idea come from?

Where does the idea of 'spirit' come from?

I think the answer is that we don't really know. But I'd like to make some comments on that.

1. By spirit, I mean something other than the physical presence of things, creatures, or the world.

2. The idea that things, creatures, the world itself has spirit, or something other than the physical presence, is the essence of what we call religion. Animism (spirits in creatures and things) seems to be the early form of religion.

3. Religion is a social phenomenon, and always has been – in the same way that humans are social beings and always have been. Religion pre-dates class societies, so although it is true that religion has been used by one class or section of society to impose dominance, that cannot be its origin.

4. As far as we know, every human society that has ever existed has had some form of spirit-based worldview – something that we would recognise as religion in the broadest sense. It seems that this truly is part of being human. By human, I mean modern humans, as I understand that spirituality in, for example, Neanderthal societies is contested, although proof of burial (also contested) would point to something spiritual.

5. Finally, and Reza Aslan goes into detail on this, some speculation about where the spirit-worldview comes from. How do things look to people (especially in early societies)? Societies consist of human beings (to state the obvious), and these people are born, live and die. Individuals are part of society but are also unique with unique characteristics. A person has a being, a personality, a life, a mind, a spirit, a soul (or at least so it appears). This spirit (to narrow down to that word) is part of, but somehow different from the physical body. When a person has died, their body may lie there and we can see it, but something has gone. That 'person' is no more, what has gone is the spirit. The spirit lives on in our memory (especially if we loved the person), and we can wonder whether the spirit lives on in some other way. In any case, the clear distinction between the physical body and the spirit or personality is manifest.

That's a clear but astounding idea. There is more to a person that the physical body. There is a spirit which is both part of, and yet separate, from the physical. And every human society shares that idea.

As an aside, this has nothing to do with materialism, dualism, naturalism or any modern philosophy. The appreciation that a person has a character, or personality, that is not reducible to their flesh and bones is universal.

Is this awakening – that there is more to a person than just the physical thing – the real origin of religion? We don't really know. But it is a short hop from here to thinking of other living things as having spirits (in the same way as humans do, especially as humans didn't seem so much like the masters of creation as they do now). And finding spirits in rocks, waterfalls, thunder and the sun is a bit more of a hop – but not much in a hundred thousand years of human development.

David Rhodes is a retired computer software consultant and trainer living in Dorchester – a wavering Christian, and quiet SOF member for thirty years.

Horror and Hope at Christmas

Frank Walker

My sitting room contains so many pictures of Mary the Mother and her child that a stranger coming into it might be tempted to exclaim, What a Catholic house this is – just look at all these pictures of the Virgin Mary! This would be an understandable conclusion, perhaps, but in my case not correct. I very much admire the great work done all over the world by the Roman Catholic orders of charity. I am not anti-Catholic, though I may join with many ordinary Catholics in being saddened by the abuses that have occurred in schools, children's homes and churches, but I'm well aware that abuses occur in all manner of large institutions including churches of all denominations.

So why do I have all these pictures in my house? Because I think these are some of the most beautiful and meaningful pictures there can be. I consider them the most beautiful Christian icons, but not in any exclusive or sectarian sense. Similar images occur in all cultures and in all ages all over the world. The Chinese have their own ideal Mother, strikingly like Mary, but who has emerged entirely independently of Christianity. I am not claiming anything supernatural by displaying my pictures.

Inherited from a minister's daughter who lived into her hundredth year, I have a large reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's portrait of Mary with St Anne and the infants Jesus and John the Baptist. There is a photograph of a statue from the French cathedral of Autun, famous for its marvellous sculptures, a plate from the Vatican Museum, an icon from a Russian Orthodox convent in the Auvergne, an imitation Della Robbia plaque from my Italian daughter-in-law's native city, Bologna, a very English-looking Mary from my favourite English parish church, Thaxted in Essex, and dozens of postcards from French churches, abbeys and cathedrals. My favourite is from a church in Rome, in which Mary and her baby are both laughing at a little bird fluttering in the child's hand.

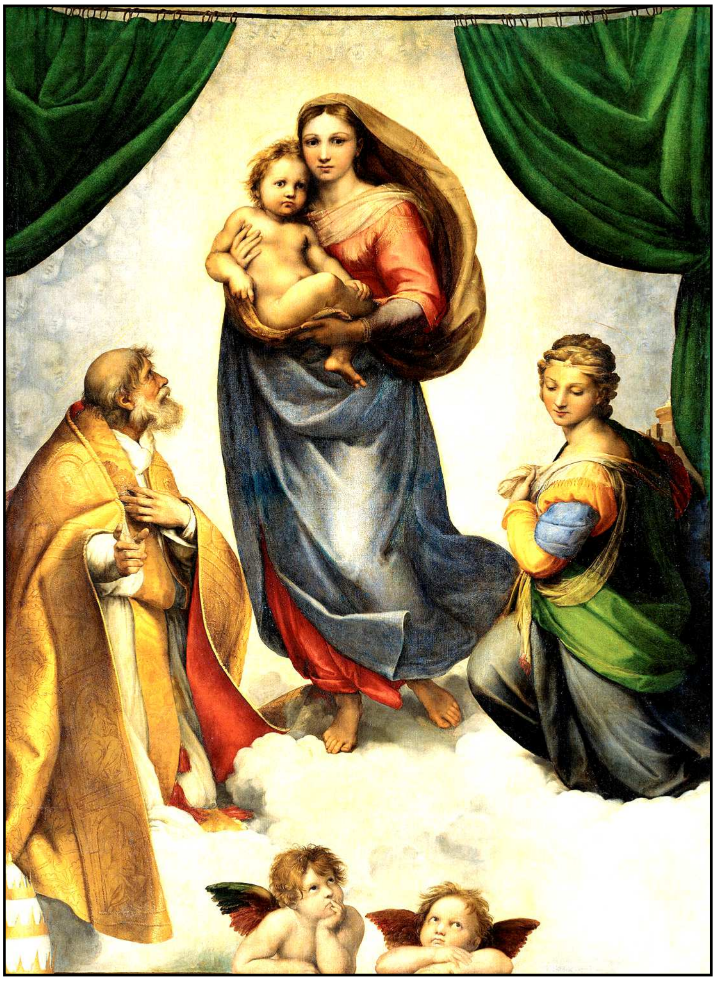
My latest addition is the picture the *Sistine Madonna* by Raphael on the front cover of a book that I recently received as a gift: *Horror and Hope* by Dominic Kirkham, who was for 35 years a Roman Catholic monk in Sussex and then priest of a Catholic church in Manchester. He became ordained, inspired by Pope John XXIII and the ideals of the great Second Vatican Council, designed to bring the Church up to date and make it a friend (albeit not an uncritical one) of the modern world. He left the priesthood because he felt that during the time of Pope John-Paul II the work of the Council was being systematically discredited and dismantled. He became an admirer of Don Cupitt's 'non-realist' theology and an advocate of a thoroughly humanitarian expression of Christianity. He has become deeply involved in community businesses and enterprises, often advising and carrying out repairs in the homes of the disabled and elderly and teaching classes in arts and crafts.

He is the author of three outstanding books: *From Monk to Modernity*, an autobiography*, Our Shadowed World,* a thoughtful account of humanity's present perilous position, which he continues to explore in his latest book, *Horror and Hope, The Conflicted Legacy of Christianity.* I cannot praise or recommend these books highly enough. They are wonderful!

He relates how he has recently read a new biography of the great Russian writer and chronicler of the Soviet era, Vasily Grossman. Grossman lived during one of the most tyrannical regimes in history, the era of Josef Stalin. As an official war correspondent he reported on one of history's most barbaric battles, the battle of Stalingrad. Then he followed the Red Army across the Ukraine. So complete was the utter destruction there seemed no evidence that humans had ever lived there. He sought out the village where he had grown up and struggled to to find any news of his mother. There was nothing, only an absolute desolation surrounding him.

He followed the Red Army into Poland and new places of destruction: Treblinka, Sobibor, Majdanek. He saw something that had never happened before with such a degree of systematic planning and intellectual fore-thought, carried out with such a degree of brutality: the extermination of an entire people and their culture. Understandably he fell into a deep depression. Many contemplating what he saw have been driven to suicide. They could no longer live with a humanity capable of committing such horror. Out of all this came Grossman's great book, *Life and Fate*, inevitably to be condemned by the Soviet censorship. While he was writing his book, Grossman was stunned and confused by an unexpected event.

In 1945 the victorious Red Army had brought back trophies and treasures from a defeated Germany. These included paintings from Dresden, now brought to Moscow. It was not until 1955 that Khruschev allowed these paintings to be put on public display. It was something of a sensation. Among them was Raphael's *Sistine Madonna*. Grossman saw it. He was overwhelmed. He said, 'As soon as you set eyes on this painting, you immediately realise one thing, one thing above all, that it is immortal.'


Raphael, *Sistine Madonna and Child.* en.wikipedia.org

Interestingly enough, a hundred years earlier, another Russian writer, Dostoevsky, a great explorer of the depths of the human soul had stood before the same painting and declared it to be a 'supreme expression of life and humanity.' It comes upon us like a fantastic ray of light in a darkened world. Grossman was not a Christian and thought of himself as a humanist, but he saw this painting as 'the power of life, the power of what is human in man', a spiritual force that cannot be wiped out by violence or captured by tyranny. As a reporter he tried to reveal the truth of people's actual lives. For this he was denounced, vilified and suppressed. He fearlessly depicted the regime's murderous and callous cruelties, the total lack of justice, the over 70 million lives destroyed. As one of his characters from the Ukraine asks, 'Is it really true that no one will be held to account for it all? That it will just be forgotten without a trace?' Grossman did not allow it to be forgotten, but attempts are still being made in today's Russia to cover up Stalin's horrors.

The *Sistine Madonna* has been been seen by at least twelve generations over five hundred years. For each generation it has reflected profoundly something of their own lives and experiences. She was the young mother who brought her child into the world where vast crowds roared their love for Adolf Hitler. Grossman writes, 'It was she, treading lightly on her little bare feet, who walked over the swaying earth of Treblinka; it was she who had walked from the station where the transports were unloaded to the gas chamber. I remember her by the expression on her face, by the look in her eyes. I saw her son and recognized him by the strange un-childlike look on his face … here she is boarding the transport train. What a long path lies ahead of her.'

Until I received Mr Kirkham's book I was not aware of this painting by Raphael. I can't remember ever having seen it before. I can see at once its tremendous power. Mary, the Mother who is every mother, looks out with an extraordinary determination. We can't express how utterly strong she is. She sees all, but she will face all and never give in, her humanity will never give up; it is without limit. The gas chambers will destroy her body, but what she represents, what she is, is indestructible. Her son, who is every child, in the same way does not look out with the gaze of an infant who understands nothing. He has, as Grossman says, a mysterious unchild-like look, he sees everything; he understands everything, including the utmost horror, he looks out with an infinite sympathy and sorrow, and because he sees all his compassion know no limits.

The world is deep
and deeper than the daytime thought.
Deep is its pain.
Yet deeper than heartache is delight.
Pain says: Go away!
But joy yearns for eternity,
deep, deep eternity.

So, famously, wrote Friedrich Nietzsche. He could have said it in response to this painting of Raphael's. More than any creed could possibly say, this great painting represents our deepest beliefs and hopes in ways that formal religion, philosophy and theology cannot adequately convey. With its Christmas theme it throws a great ray of light into a darkened world with all its cruelty and hate, expressing beauty, unconquerable strength, kindness, gentleness, compassion, brotherhood, sisterhood, motherhood and peace.

Frank Walker was a Unitarian minister (and teacher of English in Further Education) in Halifax, Bristol and Cambridge, 1959 - 2000. .

Naturally

I love this garden but am grieved
when some who praise nature feel
they must immediately contrast it
with a gleeful loathing of humanity.
They wallow in the wrongs that we have done –
which indeed we have – but disregard the rest,
the kindness and imagination.

I walk through the park
where a mass of alkanet, madonna blue,
mingles with pink campion
and cow parsley in glorious array.
In the playground I see the children,
black and white and pink and brown,
with mothers and fathers chatting,
exchanging worries and stories.
Each keeps an eye on them playing,
ready to help or intervene.

One encourages a timid boy to climb:
'Put your foot there. Hang on! Yes, that's right!'
Another tells her girl who barges in:
'No, we must wait our turn.
We share. The swing's for everybody.'
With routine toil and tender care
day after day forming small citizens.

Love is builder of cities.
We fall in love and may create new life.
We cook and feed a family and guests.
All kinds of loving,
maybe ecstatic or just ordinary,
strong, persistent, unrecorded,
goes on everywhere, all the time.
Naturally.

We are Londoners and I remember
moments in London's history.
1936. The Battle of Cable Street
when Catholic Irish dockers
and many more Eastenders
joined their Jewish neighbours
to stop the fascists marching through.
No pasarán! they shouted
in solidarity with Spain.

No need to translate the words
just the action. And how that watchword
echoed in revolutionary Nicaragua
in a famous poem which thousands sang:
'Even though we may not be together,
love, I promise: No, they shall not pass!'

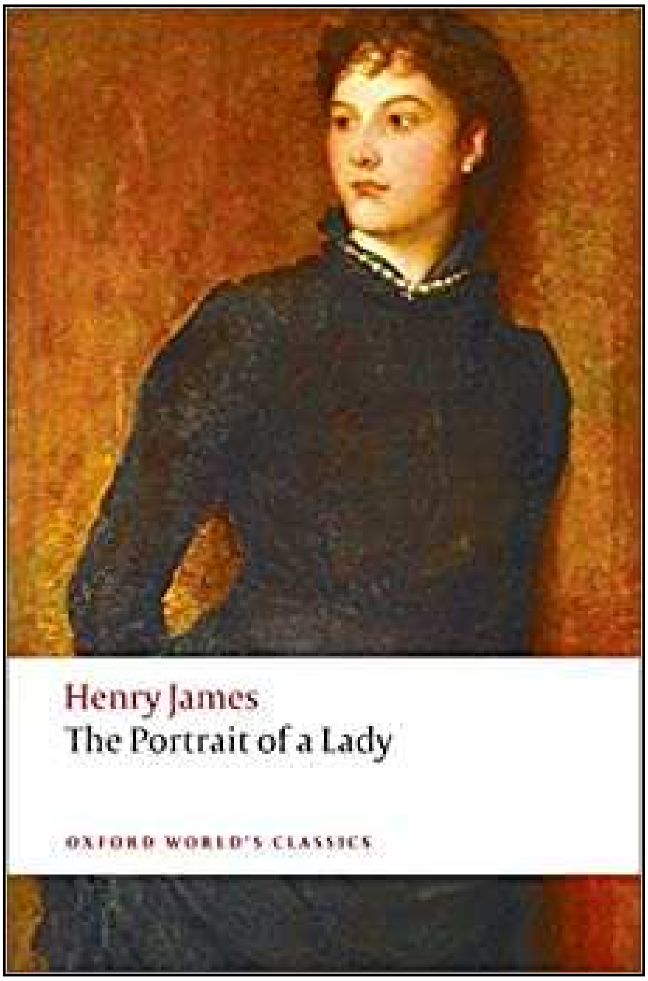
Although defeat and failure
come repeatedly, so do kindness
and poetic vision. The struggle continues
for the shining garden city
where everyone can flower.
Mortal fellow creatures of the Earth,
still is the human form divine
and humankind is part of nature
not its enemy.

Dinah Livingstone

This poem was first published in the *Camden New Journal.*

Revisiting

Kathryn Southworth revisits *The Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James



The nearest I came to wanting to murder my parents was on February 10th 1968 at about 9.40 in the evening. I know this because I found the date on Google: the date, that is, of the final episode of the BBC dramatisation of Henry James's novel *The Portrait of a Lady*. It was for me an intensely private experience and, at that time, I had no idea what the fate would be of the protagonist Isabel Archer. When my parents came back from their night out and disturbed me whilst I was hanging on every moment of the dénouement, I hated them with a vengeance.

I cannot say when I actually read the book, but I do know that re-reading for this article I found I remembered it almost word for word. I can also recall the Signet edition I read it from – who knows how many times – a rather nasty American paperback whose spine was inclined to split and spill out its pages. (That never happens with Kindle!) This edition was probably bought at university which was sympathetic to students' modest means and Signet, for all its shortcomings, was inexpensive. Not that *Portrait of a Lady* was actually on the syllabus (but neither, disappointingly, was Dante and much of what I remember reading during my course).

Henry James was presented to us first via his slighter work, *Washington Square*, and then the daunting *The Ambassadors* through our star lecturer, novelist and resident Catholic, David Lodge, whose own novelistic practice was suffused with the Higher Criticism of literary theory and stylistics. James himself in the prefaces to his novels, collected as *The House of Fiction*, began the practice of self-conscious analysis of narrative. His work embodies the shift from the detailed realism of the Victorians, via Turgenev, to the highly structured, filtered impressionism of modernist fiction. He anticipated modernism in his elliptical technique, his reticence, an approach to portraiture which respected the unknowable or unrealisable. What he carried over from writers like George Eliot was his sense that his characters really mattered: that a young woman choosing among her suitors can embody the identifications and life choices that define us as human beings. I spent my undergraduate career assuming that I belonged to the Victorian camp and have never lost the pleasure of immersing yourself in a long novel. (Trollope was my preferred lock-down reading.) However, as an academic it was modernism and its challenge to empiricism that most engaged me.

It was only days after that final episode on the BBC that I hit sixteen and my sister joked about when I would be getting married. Not any time yet, but 1968 was in other ways an *annus mirabilis,* a year of choices and intense experiences. How could a young woman not identify with Isabel Archer's sense of herself as 'someone in particular', a work in progress, and with her zest to explore the world and all its possibilities?

I did not go to Italy, though I had already felt its lure, but I did go to the USSR, didn't get marriage proposals but did have a romantic encounter with a young man who seemed to have the virtues of all Isabel's suitors: intelligence, passion, easy manners and impeccable taste (not least in liking me). Yet, even this heady excitement was not enough, this immersion in the Paterian gem-like flame of intensity, the will to mould one's life as though it was a work of art. Already there lurked in me Isabel's reservations about absolute independence, her sense that one ought to choose, committing to some corner of the universe as a deliberate act. I was already planning to join the Catholic church.

In Isabel's case the reader intuits that her act is dangerous and tragically misguided, indeed that she has been duped into marriage with the cold, manipulating Osmond who will seek to quell her life-force in what we would now see as an act of coercive control. The dead hand of Europe triumphs over the youthful idealism of Isabel's native new world. Even her comic foil, Henrietta Stackpole, eventually falls into marriage with an Englishman, a compromise position adopted by James himself who made his home in Rye.

The quiet Eden of the novel is Garden Court, the English home of her cousin Ralph Touchett, played in the serialisation by everyone's heart-throb Richard Chamberlain. Ralph, the unwitting facilitator for the fortune-hunter, Osmond and his side-kick Mme Merle, is a helpless observer of an unfolding tragedy of Shakespearian dimensions. Indeed, despite the subjectivity of the novel, James's own pretensions to the theatre are amply displayed.

For instance, there is the beautifully realised scene when Isabel, going to make her farewell at the convent where her step-daughter is being detained by her father's gothic manipulations, is met by Mme Merle on the same errand. The confrontation ends with each of the former friends encountering the depths of their own, and the other's, pain and failure as they part for ever. For all James's sense of theatre, however, his own attempts to be a playwright ended in humiliating failure.

This is a traditional coming-of-age novel in some respects, except that it does not end with the traditional resolution of marriage. Written against the background of the Married Women's Property Act, which was passed in 1882, the year following the novel's serialisation, it explores the position of women but without endorsing or critiquing proto-feminism. It is famously a novel of culture wars familiar from our own decades of debate about the European Union. Arguably, though, its resonance is more profound and universal.

Isabel is betrayed but her generous spirit is not quite quenched. Her marriage was undertaken 'to do some good', not least for Osmond's child and she promises her step-daughter, with Christ-like echoes, 'I will not desert you'. There is little doubt, despite the open-ended conclusion to the novel, that Isabel will not seek redemption in escaping the decisions she has made, but will face all the hardships that lie before her. She makes the difficult admission that she has been wrong but still has, to quote another American writer, 'promises to keep': not just to an unworthy empty aesthete but to an innocent girl – and to herself.

Isabel says drily of her husband , 'He has a talent for upholstery'. This is all, in the end, that aestheticism alone amounts to, and the lessons of history do not suggest that the appreciation of beauty necessarily goes along with moral behaviour – or vice-versa. As for my own commitment, sufficient to say that the prevailing art and music of 1960s Catholicism was not its greatest attraction. However, I have kept true to my promises, in my fashion, for more than fifty years. As for that other question – marriage – well that was another decade away and a different book to re-read.

Kathryn Southworth is the former vice-principal of Newman University College in Birmingham. Her most recent publications are her poetry collection *Someone was Here* (Indigo Dreams, Beaworthy, 2018) and her pamphlets *No Man's Land* (Dempsey and Windle, Guildford, 2020) and *A Pure Bead,* a sequence on Virginia Woolf (Paekakariki Press, London 2021).

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The Future of God and Organised Religion

I have just read John Pearson's article. So much of what he has to say rings true. I don't give the Established Church anywhere near as long as 150 years; divide by ten and you are nearer the truth. That is the average length of time that us church-goers have left! The Established Church as we know it will soon implode. I detect in John a good Christian who, like so many of us, are weary of the efforts that we have made to bring about change for the better in our various Christian churches. However, I am not so pessimistic.

The seeds of change have been sown. People like Don Cupitt have been busy dedicating their lives to preparing the soil. I am sure that John is also one of them. Jesus faced the same difficulties and frustrations and ended up feeling forsaken. I turn to the stars at night; I think of the oceans of human compassion; I look at the purposeful ways that ordinary people live their lives; and, I can't help feeling that there is meaning and purpose behind it all. It is as though it is written into our very DNA. The very fact of our awareness of everything is, itself, mind-blowing. The answer lies, for me, in helping others to see that life is a consequence of love and not belief.

As Samuel Taylor Coleridge (our local poet) once said, it is a question of trying it and seeing if it works. The man-made structures of religion, I guess, will all come crashing down but, hopefully, in their place will emerge communities of compassion and love; even the Bible speaks of God as love. I recall Karen Armstrong writing that the basis of all the major religions is compassion. Thank-you John for being so honest; it always pays but it can be hard!

Grenville Gilbert
Ottery St Mary, Devon

Considering the end of SOF Network

In his letter in *Sofia* 141, Jerry Peyton drew attention to my hypothesis in my conference talk that The Network sensibly has a future life of only ten years … something I also alluded to in Portholes 164. Jerry asks me to account for myself.

My fear is indeed driven by my vision of its practical sustainability, rather than a denial of its worth. Those who have kept it going this far, and still do in some cases, are a small and ageing body. No names or pack drill, but most of these persons will be over 80, over 90 even, ten years from now. I suggest, quite simply, that without an intake of dedicated Trustees (and/or members) currently in their fifties and sixties (younger if possible) the thing just can't go on for ever – and membership numbers generally are in decline.

More worthy of discussion perhaps is how we should *manage* our departure? I suggested a pretty specific timescale because this might focus the mind, allowing for planning. We have reserve funds via our investments, seldom used (a long-standing bugbear of mine). I fear that when the time comes we shall suddenly seize up, relatively cash-rich but with little support and no sensible direction or purpose any more.

My suggestion therefore would be a graceful, measured retreat, cementing our legacy for the future: carefully investing in promising ventures such as *Sofia,* Solarity, new publications which bring together new and existing writings epitomising the ideals of the Network, and nine more stimulating Annual Conferences (regional ones too if we can muster the support), plus more editions of *Sofia.* If adopted, the above would mean a lot of work. We need you, out there, to help us do it. Will you?

John Pearson
Newcastle upon Tyne

Keith Sutherland reviews
William Blake vs the World
by John Higgs

Weidenfeld and Nicolson (London 2021). Hbk. 400 pages. £13.99.

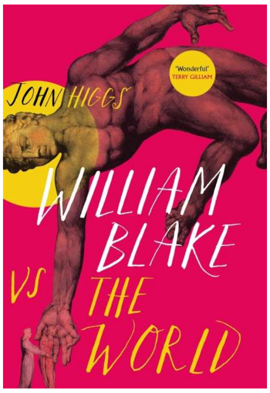
If the doors of perception were cleansed then
everything would appear to man as it is, infinite.
(William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*)

Like Blake, I earn my living as a printer (of *Sofia*, along with other fine publications), so I was intrigued to learn from John Higgs' new book (Higgs, 2021) that this oft-quoted line was inspired by his innovative print engraving technique – an 'infernal method' that employed corrosives 'melting apparent surfaces away and displaying the infinite that was hid' (Higgs, 2021, p. 98). In his earlier work *William Blake Now, – Why he Matters more than Ever,* Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London 2019) Higgs puzzles why Blake opted for a (perceptual) door, when a window, which can become dirty and opaque, would have been a more obvious metaphor – his answer being that while we only look through a window we can pass through a door, and in both directions (Higgs, 2019, p. 46).

As a collector of 1960s rock albums, I'm not sure that I would have picked up *Strange Days* by an LA rock group called 'The Windows', although Van Morrison did write a catchy song about his earlier career as a window cleaner. St. Paul's 'through a glass, darkly' is probably a mistranslation of the Greek ἐσόπτρου (mirror) and only Alice managed to pass through the looking-glass (unlike the wardrobe door to Narnia or the gateway to Cittàgazze).

But that's enough quibbling over metaphors – when Blake, aged four, saw the face of God pressing in his window or, aged eight, saw a tree filled with angels, or (in 1801) got into an argument with a thistle, or challenged the archangel Gabriel to prove who he was ('Oho, you are, are you?'), he was speaking literally. Yet he claimed that all gods, angels and demons were the product of the human mind – leading Higgs to referencing Michaelangelo's painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, where the strange pink cloud from which God is depicted emerging is 'an exact, anatomically correct cross section of a human brain.' (2021, p. 73)

Notwithstanding his tilt to Renaissance humanism, Michaelangelo was called at the time *Il Divino* ('the divine one'). Blake, who was home-schooled (primarily with the Bible), viewed himself as a sincere Christian, although Higgs concludes that he would be better described as a 'divine humanist' (2021, p. 330). Blake had no love of the Church (at the time undergoing an evangelical revival), particularly when it tried to control the sensual aspect of people's lives, as shown by the following lines from *Songs of Experience*:



Priests in black gowns, were walking their rounds,
and binding with briars, my joys and desires.
(2021, p. 149)

Blake would have appreciated the irony of the animated projection of his painting Urizen (aka Satan) on the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral, publicising the 2019 retrospective of his work at Tate Britain. Notwithstanding his biblical schooling, Blake referred to God in less than complimentary terms:

Then old Nobodaddy aloft
Farted and belched & coughed
And said I love hanging & drawing & quartering
Every bit as well as war & slaughtering (ibid.)

When asked by his friend Henry Robinson if he believed in the divinity of Jesus, Blake replied 'He is the only God', but then added 'And so am I and so are you'. A direct comparison could be made here with the claim of the fourteenth-century mystic Meister Eckhart that every creature is the *Logos* (word of God) and that 'my eye and God's eye are one eye'. Eckhart died before the Inquisition delivered its verdict on this heresy and Robinson couldn't make up his mind whether Blake was a mystic or a madman.

Blake's understanding of the human mind was remarkably sophisticated, involving four different kinds of perception. He claimed that the dualism of physical reality and mental imagination was always with him and that to abjure the latter led to 'Newton's sleep', in which only the physicalist perspective was allowed. Blake also invoked a third mode of perception, 'Beulah' – a name derived from Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progess* – which involved a 'sweet, moonlit place . . . a blissful embrace from the whole universe'. But on top of this spiritual balm, there was a fourth modality – a glimpse of the ineffable higher realm that Blake referred to in his epic poem *Milton* as eternity:

O how can I with my gross tongue that cleaveth to the dust
Tell of the Four-fold Man, in starry numbers fitly orderd
(2021, pp. 25-6)

Neither of Higgs' two books on Blake could be described as biography, his principal concern being how we might achieve Blake's fourfold vision ourselves. Well versed in the literature of apophatic mysticism, Higgs argues that fourfold perception requires some form of self-annihilation – where the mind becomes so focused as to lose all sense of time, space and ego, as described in Blake's epic poem *Jerusalem*:

O Saviour pour upon me thy spirit of meekness and love:
Annihilate the Selfhood in me, be thou all my life!

Higgs references the work of the neurologist Marcus Raichle on the 'default mode network', which generates the (illusion of) self via memories of the past and predictions of future behaviour. 'When the brain is intensely focused on a task the default network becomes sufficiently quiet for the selfless 'flow' state to be experienced.' (2021, pp. 30-31). To Blake, this came naturally, both on account of his permanent experience of dual consciousness (physical and imaginative reality) and also, perhaps, on account of his intensely-focused day job as an engraver (that required the difficult practice of 'mirror' writing).

But what use is all this to us ordinary mortals who don't see God peering through the window or trees filled with angels? Referencing his book on Timothy Leary, Higgs notes the parallel with the psychedelic counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s, but rejects the claim that Blake partook of magic mushrooms. His own preference is Transcendental Meditation, in which the mental repetition of a mantra works to quiet the chattering mind. As the mantra is meaningless (in English), there are no mental associations that would activate the default mode network. Unlike the dramatic epiphany of the spiritual writer Eckhart Tolle, small manageable doses of TM are less likely to lead to years spent grinning idiotically on park benches (2021, pp. 131. 289).

Perhaps there's one trick that Blake missed. One of the consequences of his biblical home schooling was a lifelong contempt for his classically educated contemporaries. The preface to Blake's *Milton* begins with:

The Stolen and Perverted Writings of Homer and Ovid, of Plato & Cicero, which all Men ought to contemn, are set up by artifice against the Sublime of the Bible (2021, p. 204).

But Blakean 'divine humanism' is not that far removed from Plato's notion of *theia mania* ('divine madness'). According to *The Symposium* and *Phaedrus* (albeit viewed through the prism of their neo-Platonic commentators) the most effective path from self-obsession to love of the divine Good starts with the love of beautiful bodies and minds, although neither Plato nor Blake believed in free love in the counter-cultural sense. (Whilst Plato is anathema to many readers of this magazine, from a practical perspective it matters little whether the ultimate reality is the Sophist Good or the Sofist 'good'.)

Blake's mission was to restore balance to the Four Zoas (divine energies). His preferred approach was to undermine the dominance of Urizen (reason) by promoting Urthona (imagination). However this, according to Blake, means that salvation is only available to poets, painters, musicians and architects (2021, p. 329). There would be more hope for ordinary mortals like Henry Robinson, who confessed to having 'no imagination, nor any power beyond logical understanding' (2021, p. 5), if the emphasis were redirected to Tharmas (body) and Luvah (heart). Higgs acknowledges Blake's view that sexuality was linked with spirituality and divinity and speculates that this aspect of Blake's *oeuvre* may have been committed to the flames by the 'horrescent pietist' Frederick Tatham, his self-appointed literary executor (2021, pp. 157-8).

An interesting modern example of a Blakeian approach to consciousness is Dale Wasserman's re-telling of the Don Quixote story in the book/ screenplay *Man of La Mancha*. In Wasserman's account, Cervantes (played in the movie by Peter O'Toole) has been arrested and imprisoned in an underground dungeon and is awaiting interrogation by the Inquisition. In order to keep himself sane, he imagines the character Don Quixote and the adventures described in Cervantes' novel. Wasserman's Cervantes/Quixote is possessed of Blake's dual consciousness and fully aware that the giant waving his arms is really a windmill. The movie version focuses on his relationship with the (imaginary) Dulcinea del Toboso (played by Sophia Loren), so all Four Zoas are equally represented. And the theologian Brennan Manning describes Quixote's love for 'Dulcinea' (the peasant prostitute Aldonza Lorenzo) as the highest form of Christian *agape/ caritas*.

Keith Sutherland is the founder and director of Imprint Academic, Exeter, that prints *Sofia* along with other fine publications.

Stephen Mitchell reviews
Church Going Gone
A biography of religion, doubt, and faith
by Brian Mountford

Christian Alternative Books (Winchester 2021). Pbk. 328 pages. £14.99

I enjoyed this book enormously. Brian Mountford is a good raconteur and many of his anecdotes had me laughing out loud.

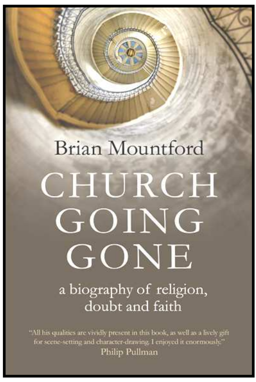
Ignore the title for the moment which is more the work of the publisher than the author. This is an autobiography and like all good memoirs reflects upon the time, beliefs and institutions with which the writer has been involved.

As such it's a brave book. After all, who is Brian Mountford? He isn't an archbishop or even a bishop (though by his own admission he'd liked to have been), he isn't a celebratory priest or a martyr of the faith. Who's heard of him? That isn't to belittle his many achievements. He's an MBE, as is his wife. He's been vicar of the University Church in Oxford for 30 years and forged an open liberal church in the midst of two highly conservative and critical institutions. He's published a number of popular books including *Christian Atheism* and *Christianity in Ten Minutes.* He is an ordinary hard-working priest. Yet to quote (in a totally different context) one of the three sermons included at the end of the book, 'in the gospel vignettes Jesus sees the ordinary person to be as good as the best of us'. Any life is revealing of the source of life and this book exposes what is to be human and to live by a faith.

It's also a brave book because it does something many of us want, or promise to do, for our children and grandchildren: answer the questions we wish we'd asked our parents. Yet how many of us balk at the thought of writing about our early mis-demeanours, our youthful arrogance, and clumsy insensitivities?

For those who've lived through the fifties or sixties, and were a part of the church of the seventies and eighties, witnessing the turning of the tide of faith, this book will not only evoke happy and sometimes painful memories but also help our understanding of those times.

There's some shameless name-dropping – on one page Tom Hollander, Rowan Atkinson, Peter Hitchens, Joanna Trollope and Her Majesty the Queen. Turn over and John Simpson, David Sheppard, Derek Worlock, Richard Dawkins, John Hapgood, Mervyn Stockwood, Thom Yorke and George Martin appear as unlikely bedfellows. This should not necessarily be interpreted as self-aggrandizement, since, of course, the University Church ought to be attracting and inviting big names.


Brian Mountford
CHURCH GOING GONE
a biography of religion, doubt and faith
"All his qualities are vividly present in this book, as well as a lively gift for scene-setting and character-drawing. I enjoyed it enormously."
Philip Pullman

But back to the title. When asked why he wrote the book, Brian replied: 'My life has spanned a period of immense social change. I became a priest in the 'Swinging Sixties' when the Church was enjoying the back-end of a post-war revival in religion; now, fifty years later, 52% of people in secular Britain say they have 'no religion'. I wanted to describe how this fascinating story evolved.'

Asked about the title, he replied: 'I really struggled to find a title. I could have called it 'The Life of Brian', I suppose, but it is so much more than my life. Initially, I called it simply 'Church Going', after Philip Larkin's 1954 poem of that name, with the intended play on the ideas of church attendance versus the demise of organised religion in Britain.

But those who read my first draft said no one's going to want to read a book about going to church, so I tried to spice it up with the addition of 'Gone?' You notice I added a question mark. I was accused of timidity and cluttering the page so I removed it. And there we are. Provocation is a good thing, and, in the book, it is something I argue the Church should go in for more enthusiastically.'

For me the question mark should have remained. Yes church attendance has declined. Yes, the high Anglican church of the fifties and sixties, in which he began his ministry, has all but disappeared. The church, like all institutions has changed, but for me, this book demonstrates that it is still possible for an open liberal church to exist welcoming people of all faiths and cultures.

Stephen Mitchell is a retired priest and former chair of the SOF Steering Committee. His book *God in the Bath* was published by O Books (Winchester, 2006) and his *Past Perfect* by Christian Alternative (Winchester, 2018).

David Lambourn reviews

Horror and Hope

The Conflicted Legacy of Christianity

by Dominic Kirkham

Wipf & Stock (Eugene OR, 2021). Pbk. 173 pages, £18.00.

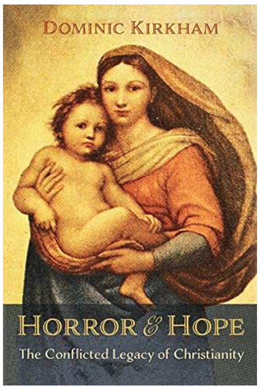
We learn history not in order to know how to behave or how to succeed, but to know who we are.' These words from Leszek Kolakowski, philosopher and historian of ideas, from his 1986 Jefferson Lecture kept recurring to me as I read and reread *Horror and Hope.*

I warmly recommend this book to Sea of Faith members and to others, not because it contains anything new in the way of facts – for example, Karen Armstrong covered much of the same ground in her 2015 *Fields of Blood* – but because of the way the accounts are told.

From the very first pages of this book, we learn of the story-teller, his own intellectual and personal growth, the development of his values. In telling us of these, he sets himself as our companion in the journey which is to follow. He becomes a known guide – one who makes it possible for his readers to make their own judgements both as to his choices of story to tell, and the manner of their telling. For a reflective reader, to make such judgements is to reassess oneself. Further, I read this book as one from a writer who is 'coming clean' with his reader, to use an idiom from police fiction – and perhaps as importantly, with himself. In so doing, Dominic Kirkham gives us an example of how, to a significant extent, we are formed by the societies and cultures within which we live. Part of his authority, for me, is in the breadth of his experience. He was a member of a religious order and left after 25 years; later, he also left the Roman Catholic church itself. Since then he continues to be active in a number of social projects.

Knowing something of the storyteller has come more into focus in recent years, not only within the academic world, but also in our more everyday lives: BBC? Fox News? The Mail? The Guardian? Our Prime Minister? Michel Barnier?

Although acknowledging that Christianity kept alive some important values through what has been described as Europe's Dark Ages, Kirkham faces us with many of the downsides of Christianity: Racism, Antisemitism from New Testament times to the present, Imperialism, Colonialism, Slavery. And he does not pull his punches. More, he makes connections showing how these interact and support each other and were enabled by the church. He adds 'though civilisation and savagery are often seen as antonyms we now understand that civilisation brings its own kind of savagery'.



A critic, although conceding the 'Horror' features of the book, might ask for more about the 'Hope' which the writer sees. Whilst readers are bound to concede that hope is not articulated as powerfully as is the horror, Kirkham provides evidence for hope on many a page. Certainties are undermined, leaving space for fresh perceptions. New Testament scholarship questions our assumptions of the unity and confidence among the early churches which, in turn, gives a licence to question current dogma. Archaeology renders claims based on 'historical truths' as better understood as based upon legend. Christianity described simply as a moral code to be followed, is shown to be an inflexible tool.

Coleridge said of Shakespeare: 'You feel him to be a poet, inasmuch as for a time he has made you one – an active creative being'. I suggest that Dominic Kirkham's telling of the many stories, prompting fresh questions and images in his readers, will similarly result in nudging us to become more active, creative, beings. His conclusion suggests that 'the one thing important' is love. Yes, we can readily agree, knowing that loving embodies curiosity and imagination, even re-imagination.

Reading history in the company of Dominic Kirkham prompts a questioning of oneself in relation to the communities within which we are, and have been, formed, together with a questioning of those same communities. Further, such a reading offers the possibility of understanding that, paradoxically, hope rests upon our readiness to pay a price when called upon to do so.

Kathryn Southworth reviews *the clarity of distant things*

by Jane Duran

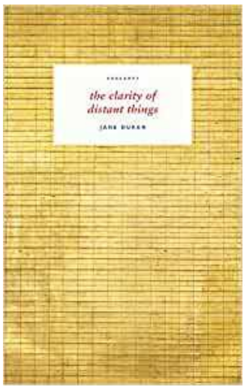
Carcanet (Manchester 2021) Pbk 103 pages. £11.99.

Jane Duran was born in Cuba and raised in the USA and Chile. Her father was a comandante in the Spanish Republican army in the Civil War, her husband is Algerian, and the different strands of her heritages have informed her writing. She won the prestigious Forward Prize for her first collection, has a Cholmondeley Award and two subsequent collections were Poetry Book Society recommendations. The latest book comprises two poem sequences, the first weaving together the life and 'grid-lines' paintings of Agnes Martin's paintings, and the second the art and artefacts of Islamic Iberia.

Both sequences are examples of ekphrastic poetry, engaging with painting and other artistic forms. Such writing may be descriptive or mimetic or use the subject as a starting point for more abstract explorations. In each section of this book Duran skilfully evokes her originals and draws from them their unique typography and culture in her own distinctive spare style. Her simple couplets suggest the square canvasses and grids of Martin's work, enclosing objects which fade into mere traces or emerge unexpectedly from the formal strictures.

Martin was born in Saskatchewan and moved to New Mexico via New York. Duran plays with the big skies and vast spaces of plains and deserts and the stretched white of the artist's canvases. In the title poem the wind brings her a distant house, a train halted on the horizon, each 'true in miniature' since 'nowhere is far anymore'. In 'Friendship 1963' Duran imagines the grids, gold leaf on gesso, which is represented on the cover of her book, as windows in an urban landscape, each having a distinct story.

The perspective of Martin's art, through the prism of Duran's verse, allows both distant objects and immediate ones to be present in time and in space. So in ' Night Sea 1963' the flaws and distortions of the canvass suggest the details of surface reflections but only when you stand back does the grid disappear and 'there is only night sea, opaque'. In 'The Peach 1964' the fruit 'bit into' is gone but 'gave back' through the stark grids its evocation of a living origin – 'orchard after orchard'. This 'rejoicing grid' is something which she finds in 'On a Clear Day' as being there all along and is a celebration of 'thisness' here with the poet/ artist 'under everything I see/whenever I can// wherever I happen to be'.



The second sequence 'Miniatures of Al-Andalus' is a series of 'glimpses' of seven centuries of Muslim culture in Iberia, largely through its art and artefacts. Duran plays again with the idea of enclosure, both in the miniature paintings, in their depiction of enclosed spaces such as gardens, and in objects like bottles and bowls. This is the opposite end of the telescope to the emptiness of prairie and desert but again there are reflections on the ability of art to evoke vastness, plenitude and time.

So in 'To Paint the Clamour' 'even seven horsemen will do to represent a multitudinous army' riding 'shoulder to shoulder/beard to beard'. 'Painted Bowl from Medina Elvira' wonders at the artist who can depict a bird guiding a horse 'simply by holding a thread in its beak' and at the affinity the artist found between bird and horse. Affinity, too, is portrayed between people of the different Abrahamic religions.

This is particularly evident in 'Cordoba', both in their respective gardens representing the 'inner man' and publicly in the 'radial encounters' in the sunlight of streets and markets through 'a glance, a warm greeting'. Continuity and heritage are the themes of the last poem of the book, 'Red Earth' where landscapes, geology, habitation and artefacts are all pulled together as the poet runs soil through her fingers, 'the idea of staying, a grant of earth// the earth I interrupt now with my hands'.

Duran's style realises complexity in the simplest and sparest manner, using words extremely sparsely, without punctuation and with an amount of white space which turns a page into a canvass or a piece of experimental music to be savoured slowly. As she says in 'Brass Astrolabe' 'to read brevity/ you need patience// meticulous time'. These poems are certainly worth that effort.

As I Please

John Pearson considers bucket lists.

Have you swum with dolphins yet? That time of year is nearly upon us, not just Christmas but the time soon after, for some, of New Year's Resolutions; things we should do, will do perhaps, in the year ahead. Usually goals for some self-improvement; eat less, drink less, swear less, be kinder to others and so on. How about something more long term? This might provoke thoughts of 'Bucket Lists'.

These can be viewed in a number of ways, begging a number of questions. At one level they might be seen as selfish, frivolous, self-indulgent fancies. Alternatively, they may be seen as the mechanism to get the most out of life before the arrival of a given deadline; before marriage, before baby, before reaching 70 (say), before the onset of debilitating illness (despite it or because of it). Or they could simply present a satisfying challenge, not time-limited: Read all the novels of Jeffrey Archer, listen to (or attend) all the Operas by Puccini, and so on. For the more energetic there are mountains to climb (all 282 Munros for example), a channel to swim, a world to circumnavigate single-handed and so on. Perhaps looking for targets to hit, goals to achieve, is an inherently human trait? It suggests the ability to see ahead, to maintain a focus and a hope into the future? We might all confess to having a bucket list, though not expressed in such terms; a top ten, say, of films, music or books?

Lists appear in magazines. There are books about them. Andrew Gall offers *Make your own Bucket List, How to design yours before you die.* There are lists for young people, old people, single people, couples. A quick search on-line gave this example, ranked in order:

Fall in love – 83%; Go on a wine tour in Napa – 53%: Change someone's life for the better – 52%; Get to my ideal weight – 47%; Go on a safari – 45%: Ride a hot air balloon – 45%: See the Northern Lights – 45%: Go to the Super Bowl – 43%: Swim with dolphins – 39%; Travel through Europe— 38%. If some of the above seems rather tame, the billionaires amongst us can now of course add 'Go into space'.

You can dismiss them or you can take them seriously. You might embrace items on your list in the spirit of living every day as if it were your last (in a positive sense) making every day count, making sure you are doing the things you want to / are getting out of life the things that you want, before it's all too late. Besides care for others, Buddhist Prayer allows the individual to seek to be well, happy, peaceful and contented. So why not a few simple pleasures for you?

Ponte Vecchio, Florence. Author photo.

Not all targets need to be self-serving or frivolous-seeming though. It is important to recognize content/ happiness/satisfaction but not to be too selfish in pursuing this. One might take up the challenge of changing the lot of others. Reflecting on this. I considered the simplest goal to which we could all aspire to each New Year – to do something which left the world a better place than we found it. This might involve single-handedly funding the invention of a cure for Malaria or, less ambitiously, brightening the life of a lonely neighbour or friend.

After all that, what is my list? What do *I* actually want? There are people I *should* see again. There are people I should *like* to see/see again. There are places I should like to re-visit if I could afford it. But what would make *me* most happy? Simple pleasures, I have to say. When immersed in the peace of timeless surroundings, such as in the shade of Balaam's Wood, could one ask for anything more? On a similar note, after a particularly splendid portion of fish and chips in Boroughbridge some thirty years ago or more I felt I could have died happy, there and then, my life fulfilled!

Good luck with your list in 2022.