

Sea of Faith

exploring and promoting religious faith as a human creation

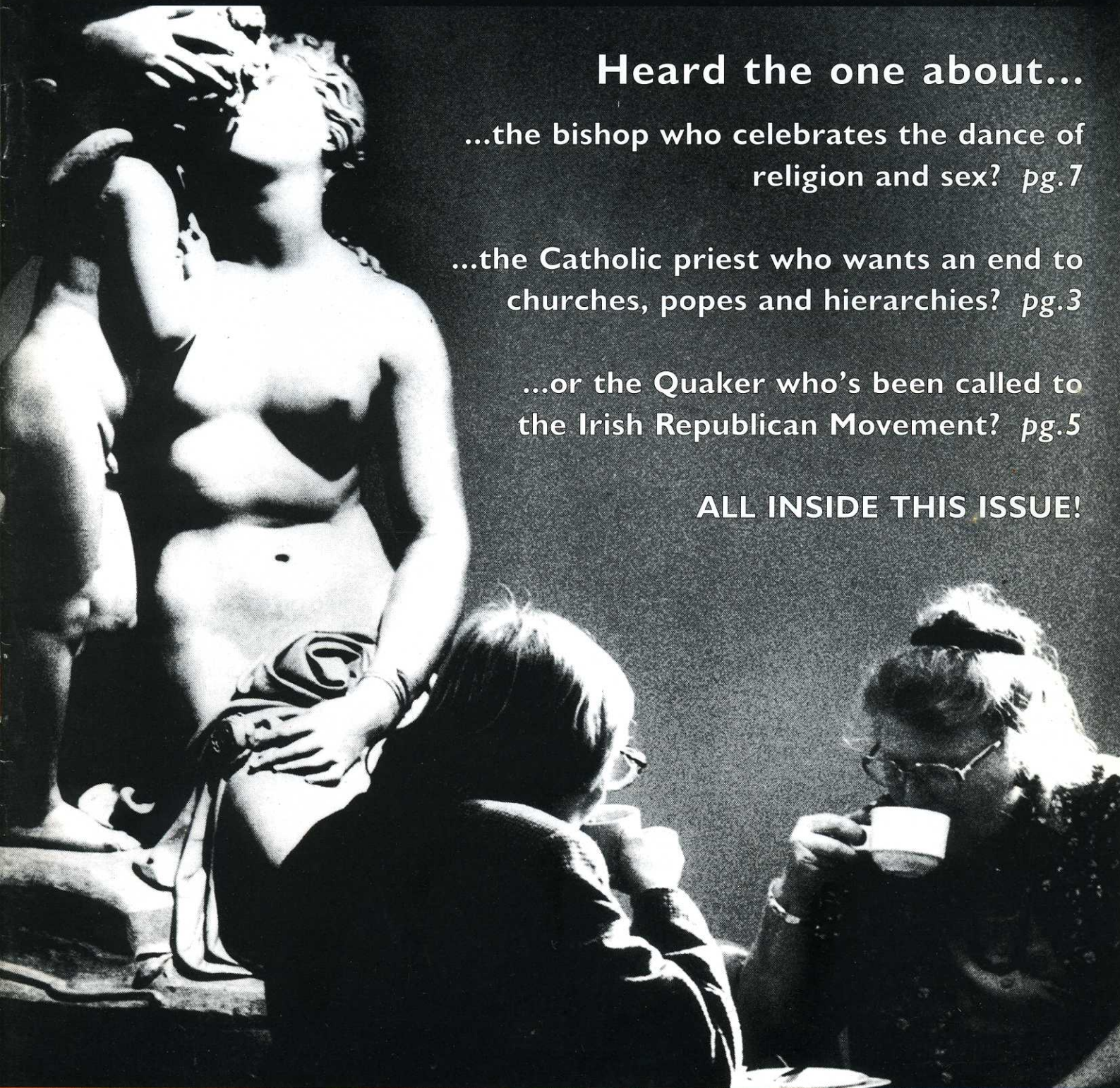
Heard the one about...

...the bishop who celebrates the dance of religion and sex? *pg.7*

...the Catholic priest who wants an end to churches, popes and hierarchies? *pg.3*

...or the Quaker who's been called to the Irish Republican Movement? *pg.5*

ALL INSIDE THIS ISSUE!



The Quarterly Magazine of the Sea of Faith Network

No. 28 Spring 1997

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ABOUT THE NETWORK...

The Sea of Faith Network (UK) aims "to explore and promote religious faith as a human creation". We explore the implications of acknowledging all religion as wholly human; we promote this view of religion and all faith traditions; and we affirm the place of religious thought and practice in the intellectual, imaginative and spiritual life of humankind.

The Network has no creed. It welcomes all who share its aims, from both religious and non-religious traditions. It has a Steering Committee elected annually by the membership, an annual conference, local groups, and sister networks abroad.

It publishes a regular Newsletter and the quarterly Sea of Faith magazine, the pages of which are open to all.

A *Reasonable Faith: Introducing the Sea of Faith Network* is available free to enquirers (£2 to members) from the Network Secretary.

Network Secretary

Ronald Pearse,
15 Baldon Street,
Loughborough LE11 2DT

Chair

Stephen Mitchell,
27 Cotes Road, Barrow-upon-Soar,
Leicestershire LE12 8JP

ABOUT THE MAGAZINE...

Sea of Faith is published quarterly in the Spring (March), Summer (June), Autumn (September) and Winter (December). It is free to Network members (who pay an annual membership subscription), and available at £2 per copy or £8 per year to non-members.

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Contributions express the views of the writer and should not be attributed to the Network or the editor.

Editor

David Boulton
Hobsons Farm, Dent,
Cumbria LA10 5RF

Distribution Manager

Penelope Mawdsley
7 Ashbourne Avenue
Blundellsands, Liverpool L23 8TY.

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A young iconoclast reacting to Alex McGregor's statue, *Man*, near St Paul's Cathedral
photo: Edward Webb

Let's go for the

Kingdom!

by Jude Bullock

I HAD THE UNUSUAL PRIVILEGE OF being brought up to think for myself, without any religious indoctrination. I can remember clearly the first time I ever heard the word "God". It was the first day of infants school. The headmistress invited us all to close our eyes and talk to God. I looked around before joining in this strange method of communication, waiting for God to come in and be talked to. I am still waiting.

From my father I inherited a critical mind. He is at the forefront of particle physics, and now Vice Provost of University College London. When the religious bug bit me in my early teens, criticism and serious thought always tempered my idealism and enthusiasm. An early dalliance with the Free Church ended abruptly over a dispute with one of the elders concerning evolution. It had never occurred to me to question such an obvious scientific fact. I remember being dismayed that anyone could seriously argue for a historical Adam and Eve.

My entry into the Catholic Church remains for me one of the most important

days of my life. After leaving Ashley Road Free Church I cycled down the road to Beaconsfield Road Catholic Church of St Alban and St Stephen. I met one of those rare individuals that have the capacity to change one's life by just being him/herself. Richard O'Rourke was the man I wanted to be, a priest, a devout human being, living the Christian life in a wonderfully understated and quiet way. Before he went to South Africa (where he has recently opened a couple of homes for people living with AIDS), the parish housekeeper confided in me that the reason why he was her favourite was that he never talked down to anyone. He was the equal of the humblest person in the room. I had never thought of him like that before, for me he was a Christian intellectual (with a string of degrees as long as your arm) who encouraged doubt and probing in a friendly, caring manner. But after she had spoken it all rang true. The long old journey from faith as belief in supernatural propositions to faith as a way of life was taking its first tentative steps.

My journey to the priesthood was far from simple. I managed to get thrown out of the college at Osterley at the age of 19. I had just discovered sex (in possibly the most inappropriate place. My name was added to the long list of "Duvet Martyrs". As a result of suddenly finding myself a pariah and very lonely, depression set in and I had to go into therapy. It was thanks to the Dympna centre that my ideas began to change and that was where I encountered for the first time people of faith who had been hurt and badly treated by the Church. The profound effect of this experience has never left me: these were people who were not enemies of the Church, but men and women who had been sinned against by the comfortable occupants of presbytery armchairs, seminaries and moral certainty.

I finally went back to college in 1984, to Allen Hall and amongst both students and staff met a number of people who remain my inspiration. It is just tragic that they all had to be men. I studied for my degree at Heythorp and enjoyed it immensely. This

was also my introduction to such 'heretics' as D.Z. Phillips, S. Sutherland, Don Cupitt and the great Wittgenstein. Philosophically my main preoccupation at the time centred around the Process thinkers. Teilhard de Chardin stays as one of my all-time heroes. God was gradually losing his eternal transcendence and gaining a biography.

Of course anyone who has managed to survive for a few years at Seminary is going to get ordained if for no other reason than to spite the ridiculous seminary system. I chose not to pursue too much deconstruction of traditional theological thought...that is what life after ordination is for! Besides, a point that is often missed, especially by the Right when they would hound us out of our jobs, is that the priesthood is about ministry and service. It is about supporting the faith journeys of those we come in contact with. It is about being a listening ear, or just being there when needed. What the hell a literal belief in the virgin birth, or drivelling on about transubstantiation has to do with ministry is one of life's little abiding mysteries.

I served my diaconate at Westminster Cathedral and re-discovered a dislike of formality and the 'socialite' life that can at times be the priestly lot. I also got to know the Cardinal who has had an effect on me like that of Richard O'Rourke. He is a man I cannot praise enough. Rarely does one find an individual of such profound wisdom and insight as well as humility and humour. Even rarer perhaps to find one in a position of ecclesiastical power. The great sadness I have is that we shall only know how fortunate we are to have had him as the foremost Catholic cleric in the country after he has gone.

I have now been ordained a priest for over six years. My development has been quite simple really. A saying farewell to God for God's sake. I can remember sitting in my room at Camden and finally admitting to myself what I already knew. We are alone, painfully alone, all certainty vanished with the realisation that what we humans call facts are no more than those things that matter most to us at any one time. What is true is that which means most and no more. The supernatural was over for me, metaphysics breathed its last and expired. What a tremendous sense of liberation it was too!

The myths in which our faith speaks to us could at last stand as myths and be appreciated and venerated as such. The sacraments could at last stand unsupported as sacred dramas, in which we create ourselves and speak of our creation to

"I would like to see an end to churches, to popes and hierarchies. I would like to see the synagogue, mosque, temple and pagoda all come to an end. The dream of this Catholic priest is for the whole world to be seen as sacred and no one tradition seen as more sacred than any other."

date. At last the atonement was complete, God had poured himself entirely into human life. To look for him beyond was to make both a philosophical and a spiritual error. At least it was and is for me.

I re-read my Cupitt, and ideas that had once been put on hold made their way homewards. I read Anthony Freeman's book *God in Us* and found myself in complete agreement. Joining the Sea of Faith network followed shortly afterwards, as did the decision not to keep my views to myself any longer. Of course, I get into trouble periodically, one expects that. Without wishing to paint too much of a dramatic picture there is a battle royal going on, a battle for the heart and mind of faith itself. This is no time for silence. What is at stake is spirituality, the spirituality of the Christian tradition. The longer we remain in hock to defunct systems of thought, faith is doomed to be as irrelevant as Plato. Nietzsche was quite right and well ahead of his time, this is indeed the twilight of the idols. Our world view can no longer support another world, regardless of who the illustrious inhabitant of such a world might be. We need a Christianity that can speak to the world without any props or invisible means of support. There is no point in changing the wrapping paper when the content has gone off.

I teach philosophy and theology for A-Level in two (soon to be three) schools. My admiration is unbounded for my students who in many cases are way ahead of me. It has become abundantly clear to me that spirituality requires myths and meaning, it does not require metaphysics or belief that supernatural formulations are factual. In fact for many of the young spirituality starts when such formulations fall under the weight of inquiry. The hacks who would like to see a return to catechism-style Catholic education never cease to amaze me. If they had their way they would (and this is speaking from the coal face) kill off

any developing spirituality for the sake of orthodoxy. So much of the evil in Christian history has occurred when orthodoxy was placed before orthopraxis.

I do have a vision for the future, though I make it a religious practice to live as completely in the present as I can. My vision is simple and finds its origin in Jesus of Nazareth. I would like to see an end to churches, to popes and hierarchies. I would like to see the synagogue, mosque, temple and pagoda all come to an end. The dream of this Catholic priest is for the whole world to be seen as sacred and no one tradition seen as more sacred than any other.

The world I would like to live in is the world in which the human family can meet as equals in places that are not considered any more sacred than the land they occupy, where we can share the variety of sacred stories and sacred rites with each other. A world in which we listen to and participate in ways of life that are different from our own, a world in which we are not afraid to be nourished by the myths and meanings of others. A world in which every human life is valued as though it was the incarnation. Such a world requires a conversion of heart, a conversion to the human. We need to fall in love again with the world, with ourselves and see ourselves as *Theotokos*, the bearer of God.

I am just old enough to have lived through the sixties, that wonderful era of hope and change. Peace and love. So perhaps I am just a middle-aged hippie, but I do genuinely think that such a world is a possibility and not just a dream. The structures of institutional religion will not change unless there is a change in the composition of such institutions. It is pointless waiting for the Pope to introduce a democratic Church, it won't happen. There is every point in building a democratic and all-embracing church in one's own community by the way we live. I try, and invite others to do the same. I just cannot imagine Jesus excluding anyone, why then should we?

When I say we, I do not mean Popes and magisteriums. I mean you and me...let's go for it and create the kingdom ourselves. Why not? ■

Father Jude Bullock is a Roman Catholic priest at St John of the Evangelist, Islington, and a member of the SoF steering committee. This article first appeared in the September 1996 issue of Renew and is reprinted with the permission of the editor, John Challenor.

New Paths to Peace

by Robin Percival

Robin Percival attends the Bishop Street Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Derry. Quakers have a long pacifist tradition. But Robin is also a committed Republican, linked to Sinn Féin, and a member of the Pat Finucane Centre which works for human rights and democratic politics in Ireland.

Some of his fellow-Quakers have criticised his association with a party which clearly backs the IRA's campaign of violence. He has been denied full membership of the Society of Friends. But his supporters point to the fact that Friends are active in other non-pacifist parties, including the Conservative and Unionist party (which has one Quaker MP), and all the mainstream parties which support the enforced division of Ireland.

Here, Robin Percival explains why he has chosen to work for peace from within the Republican movement, applying the Quakers' historic peace testimony where it is least expected.

IT IS DIFFICULT TO EXPLAIN TO British people why someone like myself, who is English yet has lived in Northern Ireland for 25 years, should want to be a republican. Most people in Britain regard Irish republicanism as synonymous with the IRA, with violence, terrorism and murder.

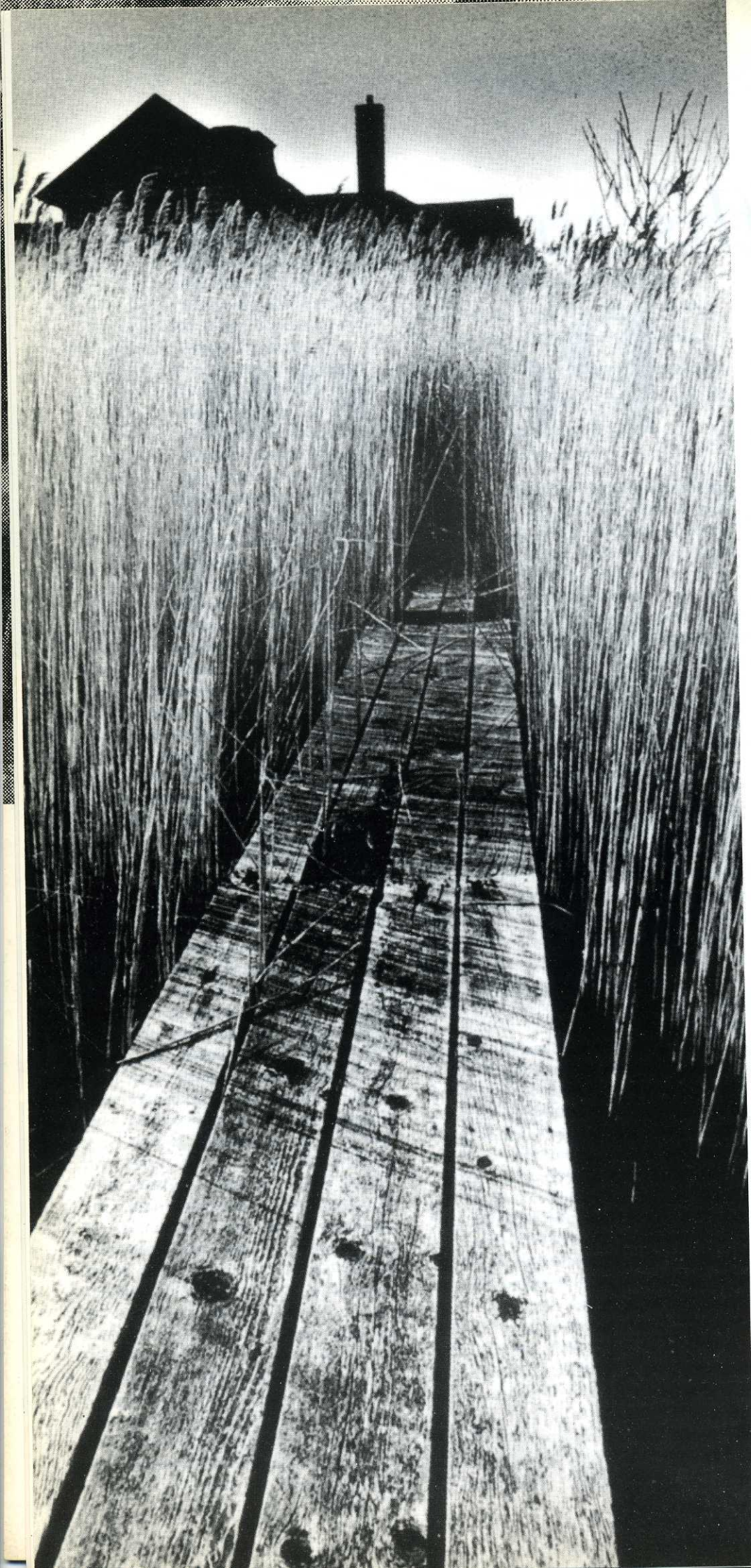
My position is very clear. I have never supported the IRA but I understand why there are many people in Ireland who see violence as a legitimate means of achieving political goals. Too often events confirm the view that British Governments find it easier to respond positively to violence than to nonviolence. Despite 18 months of ceasefire the British Government could not set a date for all-party negotiations. Six days after the bomb in Canary Wharf they announce a date!

Most People in Britain see the conflict in Ireland as one in which Protestants and Catholics are fighting amongst each other and Britain is somehow caught in the middle preventing the whole situation from getting out of hand. In earlier times I was told that the British presence prevented the North from collapsing into civil war. With over 3000 people dead and dying it is hard to argue that somehow Britain contains the situation. If British people tell me that now I tell them the truth as I see it. The British Government is making a bad situation worse, not better.

I believe that Britain is primarily responsible for the conflict in Ireland. I do not deny the reality of sectarianism or the fact that many people in the North want to live in the United Kingdom. But nothing can detract from the fact that the British

Government is the most powerful of all the "players" in the North. It is the *de facto* government of the North. It has under arms far more people than all the paramilitaries put together. It can mobilise more political power than all the political parties put together. The key question that British people should ask themselves is not why the Northern Irish problem is so intractable but whether the influence and power of its Government has been used to facilitate peace in Ireland or to promote conflict? Has the British Government over the years (or even the past two years) worked to achieve a political settlement to which all can feel committed as something they have helped to create? The honest answer is no. Since the collapse of the Power Sharing Executive in 1974 the British Government has pursued a single strategy aimed at winning the war against the IRA. The IRA, not surprisingly, have responded in kind and the ordinary people of Ireland (and sometimes Britain) have been caught in the middle with the situation deadlocked.

Over the past seven years the republican movement has been pursuing a strategy aimed at achieving a negotiated end to the conflict. In 1989 I was asked by Sinn Féin to take part in a small group which could advise on how the political process in the North could be developed and enhanced. One of its central recommendations was eventually to kick-start the peace strategy which culminated in the August 1994 ceasefire. A key member of the group was Pat McGeown, a former IRA commander in Belfast and hunger striker who, when he was released from



prison, was elected a Sinn Féin councillor. Sadly Pat died last year. He was one of the key activists within Sinn Féin who knew that the future of Ireland lay not in armed struggle but in the generation of unarmed political movements which seek to fundamentally change Irish and world society. He was as committed to achieving a genuine, accommodating peace in Ireland as anyone I have known. That was *because* he was a republican, not despite it.

For the past number of years I have worked in a group called the Pat Finucane Centre. It is based in Derry and is named after the Belfast lawyer assassinated by the UDA, the largest loyalist paramilitary organisation. Though the Centre has no links with any political party, we would be perceived as being republican and none of our members would take any exception to being described as a republican. Our focus is human rights and political development. We are explicitly committed to non-violence and oppose all violence. Peace and reconciliation is our bread and butter.

As I look back over the work of the centre, some things stand out. The sight of the Church of Ireland minister panicking when he thought the media had rumbled a secret meeting which included Ulster Unionists and Sinn Féin members. The picture in the local press of a man who lost his brother on Bloody Sunday warmly welcoming to Derry's Bogside a former UVF commander. Or the group of Warrington clergymen who came shortly after the Warrington bomb. They met with people whose loved ones had been killed by the British army. One of the clergyman stayed in the home of a family whose son was an IRA volunteer killed on active service. Another was billeted with the local secretary of the Ulster Unionist party. At the end of the stay one of the ministers spoke up and said that he had been a member of the Parachute Regiment and had been in Derry on the day in 1972 that they had shot dead 13 people. He was told that we had known that all along. Republicans are not interested in vendettas or seeking revenge. They accept that all of us must change to make the peace work and that all of us are capable of change. They want an end to the conflict which has brought so much hatred and bitterness at least as much as anyone else. We have all contributed to the problem (including the British) and we must all resolve it. No one can or should be excluded ■

Bishop John Spong contributed this Foreword to David Hart's new book, *Linking Up: Radical Christianity and Sexuality*

The Strange Dance of **Religion and** **Sexuality**

by John Spong

RELIGION AND SEXUALITY HAVE been united for centuries in a strange kind of co-dependence. Both seek to define something basic that lies at the heart of human identity. Both are sources of enormous and intensive power. Both create fear. Both enslave and free the human psyche.

Throughout the human adventure we call history, religion and sexuality have danced together in a fashion not unlike the Yin and the Yang. Sometimes religion and sexuality have been incorporated into one another so deeply as to be all but inseparable. The gods identified with the agriculture cycle of fertility were, for example, frequently worshipped with sexual orgies, temple prostitutes and even ritualistic sexual offerings. The first fruits of the harvest, in such a world, were offered to the deity in sacrifices. Sometimes they were human, sometimes animal and sometimes vegetable. We need to be aware that child sacrifice was a highly sexual worship response to the god of the agricultural cycle.

Sometimes religion and sexuality were separated so totally that they were portrayed as enemies locked in a mortal struggle. In some traditions the prerequisite for being religious was to deny and to repress all aspects of sexual energy. In this tradition the holy man was defined as the sexless man. The holy woman was defined as the "undefiled" virgin. Sex was thought to be nothing but an expression of a "sinful animal passion" that would diminish

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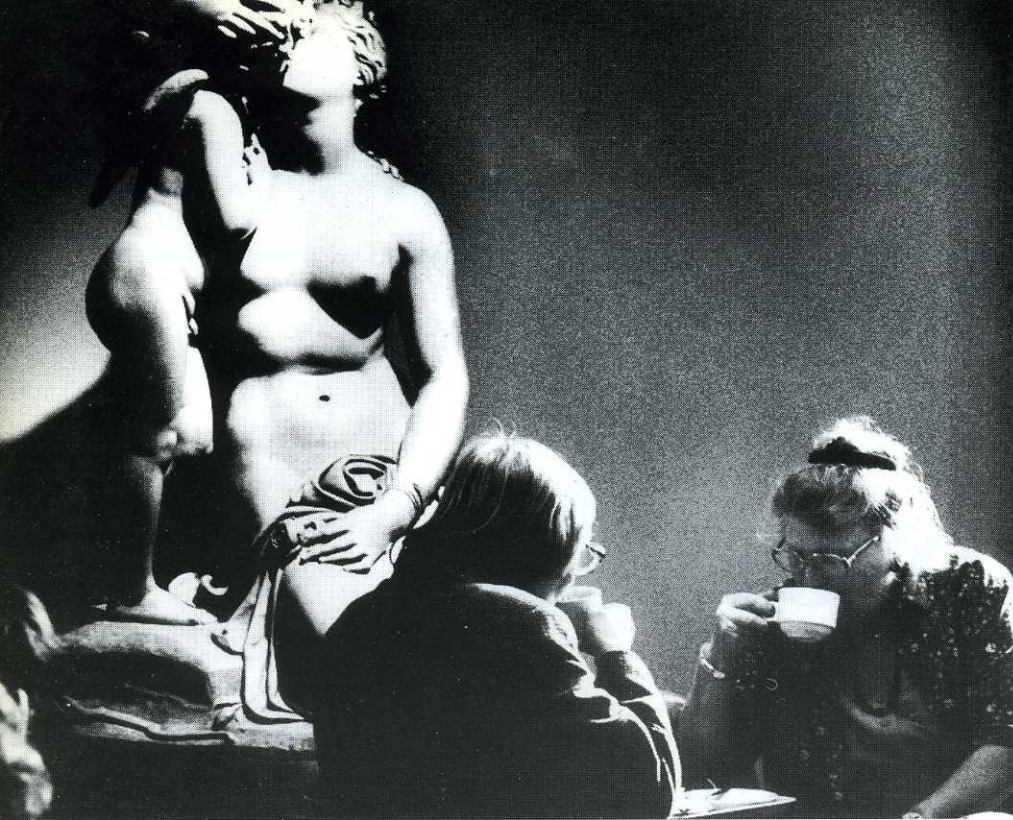
one's true spiritual identity. One vestige of this attitude still alive in our world today is found in our cultural designation of a sexual joke as a "dirty joke".

With these attitudes toward human sexuality emanating from within the orbit of religious activity, it is easy to see how sexual stereotypes reflecting these religious convictions gained the status of an almost unquestioned truth on the life of a religiously dominated society. One has only to observe the cultural definitions that are still operative today regarding what it means to be a man, a woman, a virgin, a homosexual man, a lesbian and even a bisexual to be aware of this reality.

In the western Judeo-Christian world, far more than we recognise, the content of the great religious debates through the ages has been overwhelmingly sexual. The traditional Christian marriage service in the West has always assumed the definition of the woman as a male possession. The bride took solemn vows to obey her new husband and master. The ring on the brides' finger marked her as the property of a man. (The double ring ceremony is a post-World War II phenomenon). The customs that surround the wedding, from the

shoes attached to the get-away vehicle (which were symbols of the husband's ability to physically punish his wife), or the carrying of the bride over the threshold of the wedding bed where her worth was determined by her ability to be the source of her husband's pleasure, all reflected the stereotypically religious definitions of a woman. The man had the God-given right, it was assumed, to exercise total control over his wife's body.

It has been out of that unstated definition that the male-dominated Christian Church has sought to prohibit a woman freedom to escape this definition. That is why divorce was and is so vehemently resisted in traditional Christian circles. Divorce originally was only a male's prerogative. As such, it was designed to cover the divorced woman with shame. She would not have been divorced, it was assumed, had her behaviour not warranted it. Marriage had never prohibited a man from seeking other sexual outlets. It only prohibited the woman. However, with a dawning sense of justice, alimony was added to the divorce mix and, still later, when a more equitable distribution of a family's assets to separating spouses became law, divorce became for some women a doorway into freedom, as well as an opportunity to escape abuse. It also became a legal option for a woman to initiate this procedure. It was at this point that the intensity of the Church's opposition to divorce became the most overt. Divorce



Two lumps please
photo: The Independent

is still the only human failing that has been written into the canons of the church as sin punishable by excommunication. It clearly threatened the male-female power equation which the male Church felt called to uphold.

So even more deeply did the issues of birth control threaten the male-dominated Church. Both birth control and abortion represented emancipation proclamations for women. Both suggested that the body of the woman was her own possession to control. It was not the property of a man, nor was it subject to the control of a male-dominated Church. The emotional debate and violent action that accompanies the abortion battle today is deeply revealing.

The intense negativity in some segments of the Christian Church toward the opening of the doors of the all-male priesthood to women has also been quite revealing. If the Church believed that it spoke with the voice of a God understood only under masculine images, and that it was the Church's task to control sexuality in the name of this Father God, then having women in the councils of ecclesiastical decision-making as priests was anathema. So as the debate raged the world was treated to the amusing spectacle of a body of highly feminised, ordained men, robed in dresslike silk and satin vestments, saying strange and bizarre things about both the maleness of God and their own authority as God's male representations. When one of these males was removed from the ranks of the ordained, the process was called "defrocking". That word made it obvious that vestments

"In some traditions the prerequisite for being religious was to deny and to repress all aspects of sexual energy."

were in fact "frocks", the name of a specific piece of feminine clothing. When the ecclesiastical blinders that guard our conscious life are pulled back, we become painfully aware of the gender confusion that goes on in church life which is the source of much of the ecclesiastical hostility toward women. Religion and sexuality are deeply intertwined everywhere one looks.

When the issue of homosexuality arose in the life of both the Church and the world, the same threatened dynamics once more appeared. No issue is more viscerally resisted, condemned and debated in the churches of the Christian west today than is the subject of homosexuality. Surely the Church has had gay clergy forever. The priesthood has been for centuries the primary closet in which gay men could hide. The requirement of sexual celibacy was an open invitation to those who found marriage "unnatural". To cover the obvious, the Church took the status of singleness, encased it in the vocabulary of sacrifice, and named it a virtue. Gay men who had no desire to abandon their singleness found in the priesthood an enormous personal affirmation. It not only relieved them from the cultural prejudice to marry, but it also offered them the prospect of living in an

all male community, either in a monastery or a rectory. It is thus no wonder that the priesthood became the vocation of choice for the gay male population. Nor is it surprising that into the priesthood gay men flocked. Inside this all male community of the priesthood, gay partnerships flourished and the Church, while condemning homosexuality externally as sinful, depraved and unnatural, winked internally and hoped its cover would not be blown.

It has been. Bishops have ordained gay men and lesbians openly and honestly in our time. Those gay men and lesbians ordained under the "don't ask, don't tell" regime of the past have also with increasing eagerness refused to continue to hide in their closets, which means that another stereotype totters today on the edge of oblivion. While this revolution swirls around us, the Church struggles just to reassert its control and when that fails, as inevitably it will, to find a way to accommodate the changes without sacrificing its claim to moral authority. At this moment even that appears to be a losing fight. Religion and sexuality have danced a strange dance together for centuries.

So onto this stage comes David Hart's book. Both parts of his title represent polarities that this author is not willing to sacrifice. He is a radical Christian. He will not surrender his claim to identify himself in this manner. There will be many conservative Christian voices which are both fundamentalistic in either an evangelical or catholic mode that will challenge this author's Christian credentials. His Christian credentials however are real. That will not prevent his book from being deeply threatening to those who think Christianity must be defined within very narrow limits that will prohibit either debate or new insight. From the perspective of a radical Christian David Hart will also in this book explore the sexual landscape historically, psychologically, scientifically, and morally. His words present dazzling, insightful analysis. Finally David Hart will help these ancient aspects of our human identity - sexuality and religion - to play upon each other in uniquely modern and informed way. The result is a highly readable, challenging and profound book. David Hart has served well both his church and his world ■

John Shelby Spong is Bishop of New York USA and author of Liberating the Gospel, Reading the Bible with Jewish Eyes.

Sea of Faith

The Quarterly Magazine of the Sea of Faith Network

Hobsons Farm, Dent, Cumbria LA10 5RF

Editor: David Boulton

The Moral Mess

or Forward to Basics...

SHORTLY AFTER THIS LITTLE journal thuds through your letterbox (unless events overtake our editorial process) there will be a General Election which may or may not produce a change of Government, may or may not mark a sea change in the public mood, may or may not place the affairs of society in the hands of those who believe there is such a thing as society.

The long run-up to this blessed day of choice (still blessed, even if the choice is more limited than many of us would wish) has been marked by a serious outbreak of public moralising. Preying on our gullibility, politicians solemnly assure us that they pray. Fixedly-smiling spouses are paraded before photographers to demonstrate a deep commitment to family values. Ministers whose policies have exacerbated the divisions which lead to violence and lawlessness, and whose relentless arms sales have done far more to destabilise the world than the petty muggers they demonise, seriously blame the rise in violent crime on *Tom and Jerry* and TV trivia. "God" is back in the political vocabulary, pronounced alike by Old Tory and New Labour with the pious inflexions borrowed from pontiffs and bible-thumpers.

But politicians don't embrace morality unless they see votes in it, and if they see votes in it that is because they know, as we know, that there is a widespread sense of moral drift, a growing unease about "standards" and "values", a rumbling revolt against "I" and "me" as against "we" and "us". Quaint old-fashioned words like "community" and "co-operation" are being



"But how do they know?"

fetched from the attics where they were dumped in the seventies with Beatles LPs and Mary Quant skirts. The times they are a-changing again, and our prospective legislators don't want to miss the bandwagon.

It's the Big Theme of the nineties: How do we construct a moral code which is broadly acceptable to a highly diversified and pluralist society which has ceased to look to preachers and priests for guidance and instruction? On what do we base our ideas of right and wrong, our moral values, if not on sacred books and a superhuman lawgiver? Where do we start? What do we tell the children? What do we tell ourselves? They are, of course, the oldest questions in the world; but society rather lost interest in them in the unlovely seven-

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ties and eighties, and is having to ask them all over again, with a new urgency.

Such questions lie at the heart of Sea of Faith's enterprise. "Creating human values" was the theme of last year's Network conference and, in a different form, will shape our deliberations when we meet again in July. But many other groups, organisations and networks are tackling the same themes, and some are clearly outpacing us, particularly when it comes to practical work rather than Sofist gab-festing.

Particularly noteworthy was the initiative taken last year by Nick Tate, chief executive of the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority. The Authority organised a National Forum for Values in Education and the Community which brought together 150 members of the public, representing different viewpoints and disciplines, including the teaching profession, religious groups, teacher training, the media, law, parents, governors, researchers, youth workers and others. Some 62 companies and schools were also consulted.

The 150 were set the task of putting together a statement of spiritual and

moral values "shared by society as a whole": a "new ten commandments" which would reflect and identify "the prevailing consensus on these matters". One fundamental rule of the enterprise was that the Forum would focus on "overarching statements of what we stand for", not on metaphysical argument over whether the sources and authority for such statements and the values they expressed were religious or cultural, God-given or created by humanity out of its own experience.

Astonishingly, given the huge diversity of religious, philosophical, political and cultural approaches represented, "a new ten commandments" did emerge from the exercise with only five dissenters in the 150. (These, as one would guess, were all religious conservatives who insisted that the code endorse marriage as the only moral basis for sexual relationships and family life. Inevitably, Education Secretary Gillian Shephard refused to publish it – though much of it leaked to the press – until the Forum placed "more emphasis on marriage").

What the Forum demonstrated is that cultural diversity need not prevent 97 per cent of us from reaching at least temporary agreement on rights and wrongs. Moreover, we don't have to go "back to basics" or retreat to Victorian values to reach a consensus. Nor does the consensus have to be bland and all-things-to-all-women. (One commentator dismissed it as "Be nice to yourself, be nice to other people, be nice to trees".) As the four-part "statement of shared values" [see right] demonstrates, a lot of value can be packed into a code short enough to be engraved on the reverse side of one of Moses' stone tablets.

Of course, considered judgment of the Forum's efforts must await publication of the full text (Mrs Shephard or her successor permitting). And even if it does get a general thumbs-up, no-one must imagine that the job is done once and for all. Dr Tate would like children to learn by heart the four statements we have boxed, but I would like to add a fifth: *We value our right to refuse to recite any declarations of belief without asking questions.* And a sixth: *We value our right to re-write our statement of values – and we intend to exercise it!*

These reservations apart, the Forum has usefully demonstrated that a broad cross-section of humanity – or at least of current British society – can create human values without relying on the dead letters

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preachers and priests for guidance
and instruction?"**

of holy scripture and divine authority. We make it up ourselves. We know that's really how it is, and we've probably always known it! And we know that, because what we make up will always reflect and cannot transcend our culture, it will change from time to time and place to place. Creating human values is an ongoing, evolutionary process. Priests and politicians may peddle their ancient and supposedly timeless prescriptions but they no longer convince. Our man-made and woman-made values will not be "absolute" in any metaphysical sense, but they will reflect our deepest convictions, honed by human experience, human imagination, human reason. That's why for all their uncertainty, all their messiness, they will have a greater authority than anything supposedly imposed on us from Above ■

"We value..."

The Forum proposes that school children learn by heart the following "statement of shared values" in the four areas of self, relationships, society and the environment:

SELF

We value each person as a unique being of intrinsic worth, with potential for spiritual, moral, intellectual and physical development and change.

RELATIONSHIPS

We value others for themselves, not for what they have or what they can do for us, and we value these relationships as fundamental to our development and the good of the community.

SOCIETY

We value truth, human rights, the law, justice and collective endeavour for the common good of society. In particular we value families as sources of love and support for all their members as the basis of a society where people care for others.

ENVIRONMENT

We value the natural world as a source of wonder and inspiration, and accept our duty to maintain a sustainable environment for the future.

[But see also our proposed fifth and sixth statements in the main text!]

Thanks to the energies of Patti Whaley, SoF established its own site on the Internet last year and growing numbers of wired-up SoFers across the world have burred away to each other on their computers. What have they been saying? We hacked into their conversations, and now offer a taste of netspeak for the benefit of the underprivileged minority who wouldn't know a modem from a commode...

The SoF website can be found at: www.emma.cam.ac.uk/www_server/fellows/cupitt/sea_of_faith/sofhome.html

Working the Net

IN THE BEGINNING THERE WERE two. On March 5 1996 Patti Whaley congratulated Stephen Mitchell on getting his new computer to work and pointed him in the direction of wacky religious websites. "There are several Quaker and Humanist sites, lots of Buddhists and zillions of fundamentalists and new agers", plus "a bunch of college students trading bathroom humour with your occasional religious comment thrown in". Stephen didn't immediately reveal where his particular interest lay.

More joined the list. A heavy dialogue soon developed on the rights and wrongs of Israel and the Palestinians, one correspondent being a Jewish Quaker from Boston who had heard of SoF from the *Universalist*, magazine of the Quaker Universalist Group in the UK. By August there were 34 correspondents, half of them in New Zealand. Patti proposed a contest for an SoF theme song "to counter the attack that we are too academic and dry". Her own entry was "Cupitt wants me for a sunbeam", and she promised a workshop at the 1997 conference on "Nonrealist Revisions of Tacky Church Songs". (Let's hold her to that!).

New discussion subjects made their entry: how to reform church liturgy, especially the "disaster area" of the confirmation service; atheism and

SoF; what does prayer mean today?; sex and religion. Adam Thomson from Belgium picked up the theme-song suggestion and offered a few lines from an old sixties songbook to the tune of Beethoven's Ode to Joy, beginning "Come all spirits roaming freely/Bind your will to common thrust..." Stephen Mitchell replied that he was "a bit dubious about creating songs. Certainly if you're a church-going Sofer then it would be good to write some hymns for your church. But to write ones for SoF to sing as SoF seems highly suspect to me. I find community singing as manipulative as church services at times!"

Patti found and posted a fine nonrealist prayer by Michael Leunig, which had "reconciled me to the idea of prayer again":

"We give thanks for places of simplicity and peace. Let us find such a place within ourselves.

We give thanks for places of refuge and beauty. Let us find such a place within ourselves.

We give thanks for places of nature's truth and freedom, of joy, inspiration and renewal, places where all creatures may find acceptance and belonging. Let us search for these places: in the world, in ourselves and in others. Let us restore them. Let us strengthen them and protect them, and let us create them.

May we mend this outer world according to the truth of our inner life and may our soul be shaped and nourished by nature's eternal wisdom".

To an impassioned appeal for "grassroots revolution against the establishment within each faith", one correspondent urged instead that we direct the revolution at the establishment within ourselves. "What we need, and maybe what this forum can offer in a modest way, is a developing analysis of the myriad ways in which we all oppress and hurt each other so that we can learn, pick ourselves up and do our bit to make the world a better place. With his background, how do you expect the Pope to think? There but for the grace of God..."

The Pope's widely publicised reassertion of the perpetual virginity of Mary struck sparks. "Behind the virginity cult is a value system set up primarily for men, but it is even more exasperating that women have been such willing accomplices in their own denigration". But there was also the subversive Mary of the Magnificat, "a rallying cry of liberation theology". One correspondent urged the need to "re-appropriate the physical, the bodily and sexual into Christian spirituality. I have just been to see the exhibition of paintings by Lucian Freud in Kendal, these large canvasses which por-

tray naked human bodies (warts, veins, wrinkles, bags, sags, spots and all) in all their materiality and contingency, but also their presence. They are not beautiful in the usual sense but they have a dignity and a grandeur which I find compelling and renewing. Freud makes us face up to our fleshiness and accept and love what the Church has taught us to fear."

Michael Robbins started a discussion on SoF and Buddhism, recommending a Buddhist review called *Tricycle*. Zen and the art of tricycle riding - or reading? Hugh Gilman in New Zealand wrote that "part of the testing process for me is to be confronted by zealots, as I am forced to review where I stand and formulate responses. Some day I will find courage to say to a Seventh Day Adventist on my doorstep [in answer to the question whether I have found God], 'Why, have you lost Him again?'"

Stephen Mitchell kept banging on about virgins and purity. "I don't like singing 'Blest are the pure in heart' - I just don't get any inspiration from that kind of language. Nor do I get much from talk about rights and wrongs. Most actions - bombing a country's military communications system, selecting one person for a job, medical decisions, bringing up children - have downsides to them. I fancy there are a lot of people who just don't get involved with these sorts of decision or are inhibited because they see them as a mixture of rights and wrongs, goods and evils. So it means they can't be pure in the world of political (little 'p') decision-making. I guess they can try to construct a life where they can remain a moral virgin - a moral monastery - but how many of us want to live in one? I prefer to talk about what we'd like to do. There'll still be downsides to that but I can cope with talking about desires and wants, joys and sorrows, pleasures and pains... My definition of a nonrealist is someone who doesn't find much use for the word 'real'. To test whether you're a nonrealist spend a week not using the word 'real'. Now I think I'll add to the wordlist 'right'. What use are these words? Why should I use them? Oh well, Onward Virgin Soldiers..."

Bill LeFurgy reported a new software programme in Germany which allows users to confess to their com-

puters instead of priests. The programme lists 200 sins and may be customised according to the sinfulness of the user. The computer calculates the seriousness of the sin and prescribes a suitable penance. But apparently the German hierarchy has banned its use, insisting that "you cannot have sins forgiven by the push of a button".

Patti, again, picked up a reference to someone's friend who visited an Indian ashram though he "didn't believe in God as such". What, she mused, was the difference between "He doesn't believe in God as such" and "He doesn't believe in God"? Someone else threw in "Talk about God is a wastebucket of failed suggestions".

Or was God simply "as He is in Jesus"? No, replied Anthony Freeman. "Jesus is a very flexible friend - as flexible as God and he can be moulded into almost any shape which Christians wish. He is invoked in support of socialism and capitalism, pacifism and militarism, catholicism and protestantism, quietist mysticism and muscular Christianity. That is not to deny that the character of Jesus can be a great challenge to our settled ways and an inspiration to do great things. It is simply to reflect that to say that 'God is as He is in Jesus' is not to put any specific content into the term God." Adam Thomson thought we went on about God too much. "The question of God has been dealt with - she is mystery, that's the end of it." SoF should attend more to saving the world. To which Patti responded "Give me a break! Saving the world's what I get paid for!" (she works for Amnesty).

A dialogue between the Revs Mitchell and Freeman, with the same breathless readability you find in one of those footnotes in *Das Kapital* which take up more room than the chapters, had one or two e-mailers dropping off the list because the exchanges were getting "too erudite". Others stayed but remained readers rather than writers. Stephen tried to tempt them in: "How, I wonder, do they watch? With bemused cynicism, frustrated bewilderment, like the chorus in a Greek tragedy?" Tim Gouldstone responded by recommending *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self on Meaning, Manipulation and Promise*, by A. Thistleton. How many more left?

Erudition apart, Gouldstone introduced a new note, critical of the Network. "I believe that the SoF movement is moving towards becoming a platform for the fundamentalism of the dogmatic liberal/radical personality who despises all points of view except his/her own." Adam Thomson wrested the site back from the theologians, making his own contribution to the proper marginalisation of erudition with the following church noticeboard announcements gleaned from the *Guardian*:

"Don't let worry kill you. Let the Church help"

"Mrs Jones will sing 'Put me in my little bed' accompanied by the Pastor"

"The ladies of the church have cast off clothing of every kind and they may be seen in the church basement on Friday"

"A Bean Supper will be held on Tuesday in the Church Hall. Music will follow"....and many more of the same ilk.

John Maindonald restored respectability by asking how SoF related to earlier radical religious traditions: the 17th century radical movements, republican Quakerism, humanist Unitarians, "A great idea!" responded Patti. "It would be great to find (or, if that's impossible, to write) a single book that analysed and pulled together the radical fringes of Christianity. It might give us a clearer idea of where we stand. Does anyone know of such a study?" Maindonald suggested *The Radical Reformation* by G.H. Williams - "a huge 1500-word tome" published by Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, Kirksville, Missouri, and R.H. Bainton's *The Travail of Religious Liberty*, Westminster Press.

Hugh Gilman contributed the following, allegedly from a New Zealand exam paper: "Moses led the Hebrews to the Red Sea, where they made unleavened bread, which is bread made without any ingredients. The Egyptians were all drowned in the dessert. Afterwards Moses went up Mount Cyanide to get the Ten Amendments".

The discourse rolls on. Our hackers haven't uncovered the meaning of life in these random Soffistries, but they have had the sense of listening in on serious questions posed by men and women who don't take themselves so seriously that they are not afraid to pose serious questions - and who know when to stop! Thank you Patti! ■

Many important theological questions are answered if we think of

God as a Computer Programmer

Does God control everything that happens in my life?

He could, if he used the debugger, but it's tedious to step through all those variables.

Why does God allow evil to happen?

God thought he eliminated evil in one of the earlier versions.

What causes God to intervene in earthly affairs?

If a critical error occurs, the system pages him automatically and he logs on from home to try to bring it up. Otherwise things can wait until tomorrow.

Did God really create the world in seven days?

He did it in six days and nights while living on cola and candy bars.

How come the Age of Miracles Ended?

That was the development phase of the project. Now we are in the maintenance phase.

Who is Satan?

Satan is a MIS director who takes credit for more powers than he actually possesses, so people who aren't programmers are scared of him. God thinks of him as irritating but irrelevant.

What is the role of sinners?

Sinners are the people who find new and imaginative ways to mess up the system when God has made it idiot-proof.

Where will I go after I die?

On to a backup tape.

Will I be reincarnated?

Not unless there is a special need to recreate you. And searching those files is a major hassle, so if there is a request for you, God will just say that the tape has been lost.

Am I unique and special in the universe?

There are over 10,000 major university and corporate sites running exact duplicates of you in the present release version.

What is the purpose of the universe?

God created it because he values elegance and simplicity, but then the users and managers demanded he tack all this senseless stuff on to it and now everything is more complicated and expensive than ever.

If I pray to God, will he listen?

You can waste his time telling him what to do, or you can just get off his back and let him program.

What is the one true religion?

All systems have their advantages and disadvantages, so just pick the one that best suits your needs and don't let anyone put you down.

How can I protect myself from evil?

Change your password every month and don't make it a name, a common word, or a date like your birthday.

Some people claim they hear the voice of God. Is this true?

They are much more likely to receive e-mail.

BOOK BRIEFS

Jesus, God, Sex and the Universe

Jesus the Man by Barbara Thiering seems to be high on SoFers' reading lists. No fewer than four readers have sent unsolicited but welcome reviews or comments, all appreciative. It has to be said that specialist scholars on the Dead Sea scrolls (on which Barbara Thiering bases her new interpretation of Jesus' life) have been far more critical than our lay enthusiasts, particularly with regard to the author's tendency to wring somewhat speculative historical data from documents which had a devotional rather than an historical purpose. But it does make a fascinating read.

A more personal and experiential evaluation of Jesus is offered by Margaret Vernon in **Jesus and the Aquarians**. As the title suggests, the author writes "from the perspective of 'New Age' spirituality, also taking into account Liberation, Creation and Feminist ideologies". She adds: "I claim no religious or moral authority". Books like this (available at £4.40 from 31 Sandstock Road, Pocklington, York YO4 2HN) will never have a wide readership, but every personal pilgrimage is worth recording in this modest, undogmatic manner. John Hemming's **On the Contrary**, published by the Quaker Universalist Group (83 Oak Lane, Wilmslow, Cheshire SK9 6AF) at £2.30 is another written with wit and poetry. John sadly died a week after finishing this pamphlet.

More substantial than these and deserving a far wider readership than it has yet had is Alison Leonard's **Telling our Stories** (Barton, Longman & Todd, £8.95). This too is a "personal pilgrimage" account, but one by a professional writer (and another Quaker) who knows that all exploration is linguistic. We understand and come to terms with the turning points of our life by finding a fitting language to express them. "What I have learnt about a language for my spiritual journey is that, though I may articulate my journey in different words from those that other people find for theirs, the differences can co-exist. There may be occasions for speaking the same words together, but the basis is a search for the words that each of us can use authentically. An essential component is the respect that we have both for our own words as they emerge and for the words of others. The search for words turns out to be a search for our identity as individual human beings, and for authentic relationships in community. It requires both that we speak our truth and that we're heard, and that we listen to other truths and take them on board in a spirit of acceptance. It is, at heart, about being honest and receptive". Great stuff, and Alison's honesty about herself, her friends, God, sex and the universe is refreshing, stimulating and productive ■

A Reasonable Faith: Introducing the Sea of Faith Network was published last summer as the first of a new series of SoF pamphlets and books. How is it faring out there in the great market-place of ideas? And what else is SoF Publications plotting?

A Reasonable Review?

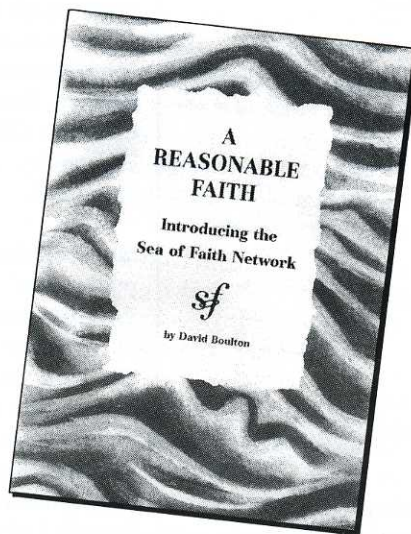
SIX MONTHS AFTER PUBLICATION, *A Reasonable Faith* is still attracting interest. Every week brings a fresh order and, more often than not, an appreciative comment. Like this one from Humanist writer Margaret Chisman:

"I have read your *A Reasonable Faith* and feel I must write to you straight away. It is marvellous! I have been on my pilgrim's path for many years and it has answered questions I have been asking for decades. I like your masterly simplicity and the various apt quotations you insert. I have written to the Network Secretary for extra copies to give to some friends who are tentatively interested in the SoF but need more information."

Not only the text but the graphic design of the pamphlet (by Graft Publications) has come in for praise. "It feels good, looks good, and gets away from the suffocating good taste of most religious literature", wrote one member. "You discuss very complicated ideas in words even I can understand," wrote another, "and present them in the most readable form."

Outside the Network, reaction – as is to be expected – has been more mixed. There have not been many reviews in the religious press, but the Quaker weekly *The Friend* carried a brief notice (with the puzzlingly inaccurate information that SoF has no membership: wishful thinking!), followed by a major critical article headed "Quakers, Faith and Humanism". The writer, David Hedges, began by agreeing that the pamphlet "rightly describes religions as essentially human creations", but went on to question the "continual stress" on the argument that

"...I have been on my pilgrim's path for many years and it has answered questions I have been asking for decades"



"all aspects of spiritual experience are also human creations, subjective products of the human mind".

He continued: "Most of the text depends solely on reason...The Sea of Faith appears to be seeking to force the genie of humankind's spirituality into the rather small bottle of the human mind. This booklet describes a significant narrowing of our spiritual horizons. It offers an intellectual, not a spiritual faith"

But another Quaker journal offered a different view. Rodney Hooper wrote in

Universalist: "I do not recognise the book in those comments [in *The Friend*]...The book's purpose is not to convert but to provide information for those who, like myself, find its premisses a better foundation for a faith which can remove the division between religious and secular, the spiritual and the material".

A more cautiously sympathetic review appeared in the humanist *Freethinker*, where Daniel O'Hara wrote that both *A Reasonable Faith* and *Sea of Faith* magazine "will be of interest to Secular Humanists, as they provide remarkable testimony of a growing convergence – or at least an overlap – between the ideas of two groups which might have been thought less compatible".

Daniel O'Hara came away with a very different impression of what David Hedges had called *A Reasonable Faith's* "strong sense of certainty". "David Boulton...begins by noting that, while most of us may think of ourselves as seekers after truth and purpose in our lives, the SoF offers no absolute truths or moral certainties: rather we must make our own meaning, create our own purpose, find ways of working out our own salvation". While there were "fundamental differences [between Secular Humanists and SoF] which cannot be dissolved or denied... we should salute and encourage those who are honestly trying to address these issues" ■

'A Reasonable Faith' is available from the SoF Network Secretary (see page 2 for address) at £2, or free to genuine enquirers. Why not order some for your local group, or make its question-and answer format the basis for a group discussion?

NEW PUBLICATIONS FROM SoF

...and two to come

Meanwhile, two more SoF publications are now in preparation. The first, of which you'll soon be hearing much more, is **Agenda for Faith** by Stephen Mitchell (chair of the steering committee) which takes a non-realist look, in turn, at "Real", "Book", "History", "Self" and "God". Stephen finds "liberating and creative advantages in seeing faith as a human creation", but says "there are hard questions to be faced. Can faith and art transcend their culture? Is faith only a human creation or does each generation attempt to depict some eternal, unchanging truths and realities? Is there a core of essential beliefs that are to be found in the faith of every age? Are there no boundaries for faith, no criteria by which to judge interpretation of the tradition? And if not, where is the moral driving force of religion?". We hope to have the book out in time for the July conference.

What's YOUR story?

Our third book is as yet no more than a gleam in a few eyes. Provisionally called **This is My Story: Adventures on the Sea of Faith**, the idea is that it will take the form of an anthology of personal "Here I stand" pieces by a representative fifteen or twenty SoF members. If you would like to contribute your own experience in 1000-3000 words, please write with a short precis (around 300 words) covering your background, the subject of your proposed essay, and a clear indication of how you propose to deal with it. It will probably not be possible to commission a piece from everyone who offers, but we'll do our best to cover as broad a range of SoF experience as we can, with a mix of both experienced and less experienced writers (for whom editorial help will be available). Your precis must be typed or word-processed and should be sent to David Boulton, Hobsons Farm, Dent, Cumbria LA10 5RF, to arrive by the end of May.

...and more to look forward to

Apart from the publications under our own Network imprint, more books and booklets by SoF members are said to be "coming shortly!". David Hart's **Linking Up: Radical Christianity and Sexuality** is featured elsewhere in this issue. Jude Bullock is rumoured to be pregnant with a major work. David Boulton's pamphlet **The Faith of a Quaker Humanist** is about to be published by the Quaker Universalist Group, and the book he and Anthea Boulton have written drawing the links between 17th century radical Quakerism and 20th century religious humanism and nonrealism (**In Fox's Footsteps**) will be published by Sessions of York before the year end.

And, of course, there's Don Cupitt's new magnum opus, **After God: The Future of Religion**, out next month (April) from Weidenfeld and Nicholson in the UK and Basic Books in the USA. It is being translated into five languages. We plan to give it some space (but only in English) in our next issue!

'Famous Five' bat for Non-realists

God and Reality: Essays on Christian Non-realism

Edited by Colin Crowder, Foreword by Rowan Williams
Mowbray, 1997, 178 pages, £14.99

THIS COLLECTION OF ESSAYS WAS PUBLISHED IN November 1996, despite the 1997 date inside, about six months later than originally expected. Its editor is Lecturer in Theology at the university of Durham. He locates its conception at the Sea of Faith conference in Leicester in 1994 and says that later that year Judith Longman, then of Cassell, and he agreed that there was "need of a new kind of book on the non-realist debate, which would emphasize the internal diversity of Christian non-realism itself and of the critical response it has generated over the last few years".

The resultant book has twelve contributors. Five (they bat first) are described by the publishers as leading non-realist writers (but see below). The other seven are categorized as some of the most influential critics of their work. All twelve explore non-realism from a variety of perspectives and the publishers see the book as an introduction to the contemporary debate and a contribution to its future development as a constructive theological dialogue.

The five are Don Cupitt, Anthony Freeman, David Hart, Stephen Mitchell and Graham Shaw.

The seven may not all be so familiar to this magazine's readers and so I give a little more information about them: Jeff Astley (Director of the North of England Institute for Christian Education), Daphne Hampson (Senior Lecturer in Divinity at the University of St Andrews), Fergus Kerr OP (Honorary Senior Lecturer in Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Edinburgh), George Pattison (Dean of Chapel at King's College, Cambridge and editor of *Modern Believing*), Peter Selby (Professional Fellow in Applied Christian Theology at the University of Durham and honorary assistant bishop in the dioceses of Durham and Newcastle), Denys Turner (Professor of Theology at the University of Birmingham) and Graham Ward (Dean of Peterhouse, Cambridge).

In a foreword, the Bishop of Monmouth writes that the central question is not, "Does God exist?" but "*How* does God exist?". I look forward to detailed reviews and from them to the constructive dialogue that is so badly needed within the churches and elsewhere. Meanwhile I content myself with an appreciation of the editor's introduction. He seems to me to have done his homework on the Sea of Faith Network well. In particular, he writes (page 3), "I ought to stress, however, that many members of the Sea of Faith Network, and even some of the writers named above ['the five'], are reluctant to be described as 'non-realists'.

As one who had only a brief dalliance some years ago with the term non-realism, I am glad that the book safeguards the outlook of those SoF members who, while in sympathy with non-realists, find the term itself negative and unhelpful (Sorry, Don!). I personally like Lloyd Geering's preference for saying that to use the term "God" is to use *symbolic language*. I write this, not to promote two camps in the network, but to clarify two legitimately held viewpoints within it. Both can be enriched by the fruitful debate which I hope this book will encourage ■

Ronald Pearse

Why I'm sticking to the

Old, Old Story

(...because it is a story!)

by John Macdonald Smith

AMONG THE ITEMS ON THE SoF agenda is that of persuading the church to accept nonrealism as a viable way of being Christian. Here are some thoughts.

I came to accept what subsequently became known as nonrealism in the seventies when I read Karl Popper's *Logic of Scientific Discovery*. If science is but a collection of *ad hoc* more-or-less inspired guesses about the way the world is put together, then theology as a description of reality is simply unbelievable. If the essential thing about the truth claims of relativity, quantum mechanics and the like is that these are falsifiable then there clearly isn't a one-to-one correspondence between scientific statements and the world they purport to describe. Not one that can be justified, anyway. In that case, the last thing theology could do is describe any sort of state of affairs, for it has been falsified. If science was offering simply the best guess yet in a series of guesses which came from who-knows-where, then a description of the way things are couldn't possibly be given by theology.

The old "warfare" between science and religion crumbled and nobody won. The "uneasy truce" which followed was a consequence of the fact that neither scientists nor theologians really understood what they were doing. The scientists thought they were applying the method of induction to build up a soundly based body of knowledge without realising that

"You either dump the lot or you keep the lot. I kept the lot. Trinity, incarnation, real presence, seven sacraments, miracles, you name it. Since it wasn't supposed to be factual, why not?"

Hume had demolished the underlying philosophical justification years before, and that what was really going on was the deductive testing of more or less reasonable hypotheses. The theologians banged on about the historical in the New Testament (having forgotten they had abandoned any pretence to it in the case of Genesis) and their Platonism formed the basis for putatively factual assertions about creation, redemption, grace and so on. This conflict between realisms led, for instance, to modernists denying the virgin birth altogether as an impossibility while Thomists invented the bizarre idea that *all* of Jesus' chromosomes somehow arose from a single ovum in Mary while a further miracle ensured the substitution of a Y for an X chromosome. These theological genuflections to a science which didn't know where it was at either, are *recent*. Add the inevitable cultural influences on both science and theology and their interpreta-

tion, and it isn't hard to see why this hilarious muddle was more or less inevitable.

I had never been happy with demythologising: for one thing it seemed to imply that whatever it was that got said didn't mean what it plainly did mean. Appeals to Barthian, Papal or Biblical authority left me cold as ways of copping out on the obligation to exercise the autonomy which I knew I had a duty to exercise. Thomism, and for a number of years I had been a Thomist, was intellectually consistent and very convincing. Like mathematics it was an elegant way of juggling a symbolism. Dump Platonism and that's what it is.

My reading of Popper meant dumping the Platonism. Reichenbach had accused Popper of turning science into poetry and there were plenty of people making horrified noises at the idea of losing their metaphysical refuge in induction. But it had to go; science is a kind of poetry and much of the ecstasy over the dubious theory of the Big Bang origin of the cosmos shows it to be. (It is more likely that we live in an infinitely old, infinitely large universe; it's the theological realists like Stephen Jaki who want to keep the Big Bang). And if science is poetry, so much the more is religion poetry. If science can dump induction, then religion can dump Platonism, for each performs a similar function in gluing a symbolism



photo: The Independent

together into a realist account of “how things are”. That is where I found myself.

At the time I was a parish priest. I shared this with the people who would be able to understand where I was, because I wanted their help. I offered an introduction to the way I was going at a University Lecture Sermon at Exeter and it aroused some interest.

What it meant for me was this. Popper made me see that science is a matter of the deductive testing of theories and hypotheses. These don't quite come from nowhere but from a culture, a praxis, experience, a milieu. But fundamentally they just happen because there is no inevitability about it. In a somewhat similar fashion, it seemed, a glorious spiritual hypothesis had emerged from a first century culture and had been worked over down the ages until we received it. As a factual account of reality it was rubbish and however much you trimmed and altered it, it would never be anything else. I was convinced that anybody who altered the Christian faith in that sense, to marry it to the spirit of the age, was only making sure it would be a widow very quickly.

You either dump the lot or you keep the lot. I kept the lot. Trinity, incarnation, real presence, seven sacraments, miracles, you name it. Since it wasn't supposed to be factual, why not? I suppose I became a sort of late-arrival Catholic modernist. Sermons got shorter and became incorporated into the symbolism of the Eucharist because it was all symbolism anyway. It was all exactly what we said it is, because we were there, saying so. We had a very beautiful hope-inspiring story about the ultimacy of love; and within that story we had subsidiary stories from the Old and New Testaments which illustrated, not the main story as a story, but its point and purpose in terms of spirituality, sharing and mutual support. It wasn't perfect and if other people had stories which made money or sex ultimate instead of love, that was their business. When Authority sent silly forms to fill in about numbers of communicants I binned them – this had nothing to do with the main issue.

The real issue is that I cannot express the things I want to express concerning my feelings at the lot of the millions in the world today or my longing for peace and justice or my anger at hypocrisy

without telling the story. I must tell the story to say what I mean in the way that I mean it, because unlike huffing and puffing or moral exhortation it stimulates the imagination in a unique way. For this reason it is not open to modification or compromise for it stands or falls as a whole. But I am “allowed” to say this because it is a story. As a factual account, modification to the point of abandonment would be inevitable.

I'm reminded of the Bairnsfather cartoon of two World War 1 privates in a shell hole, where one of them is telling the other to “Go and find a better 'ole”. But I very much like a quote from Paul van Buren's essay in *Talk of God* (Royal Institute of Philosophy Lectures, Macmillan, 1969) who says:

“Theology is that activity of men struck by the Biblical story in which they undertake to revise continually the ways in which they say how things are with their present circumstances in the light of how they read that story.”

That will do for the moment ■

John Macdonald Smith is a priest, scientist and author.

Science and the Sea of Doubt

by Lorna Marsden

"What is it that charges with meaning this incredible and terrible existence, that awakens within the consciousness of humanity a recognition within the visible of the Invisible – an echoing dichotomy of celebration and sorrow that is the very beat of our life?"

RECENTLY A RADIO PROGRAMME was broadcast purporting to examine religious conviction today. It offered discussion by various scientists, theologians, and one or two others, who presented informally their own attitudes to religious ideas, including their responses to such things as "miracles" as these are presented in the Bible. In this discussion there seemed to be a kind of generalised avoidance of searching thought, and a good-natured tolerance wherein two thousand years of Christianity was left, apparently, to dissipate itself into a kind of inconsequence.

At this perhaps historically critical moment it may be questioned whether it is appropriate to conduct such a public discussion without reference to anything more searching. The impression was given that to these people the spiritual and imaginative responses on which the vitality of any civilisation is based had drained out of the contemporary community. A residue of interest was there, but no sense of deprivation.

There did appear, perhaps a slight, a very slight, undercurrent of nostalgia. There was certainly no conviction towards the future.

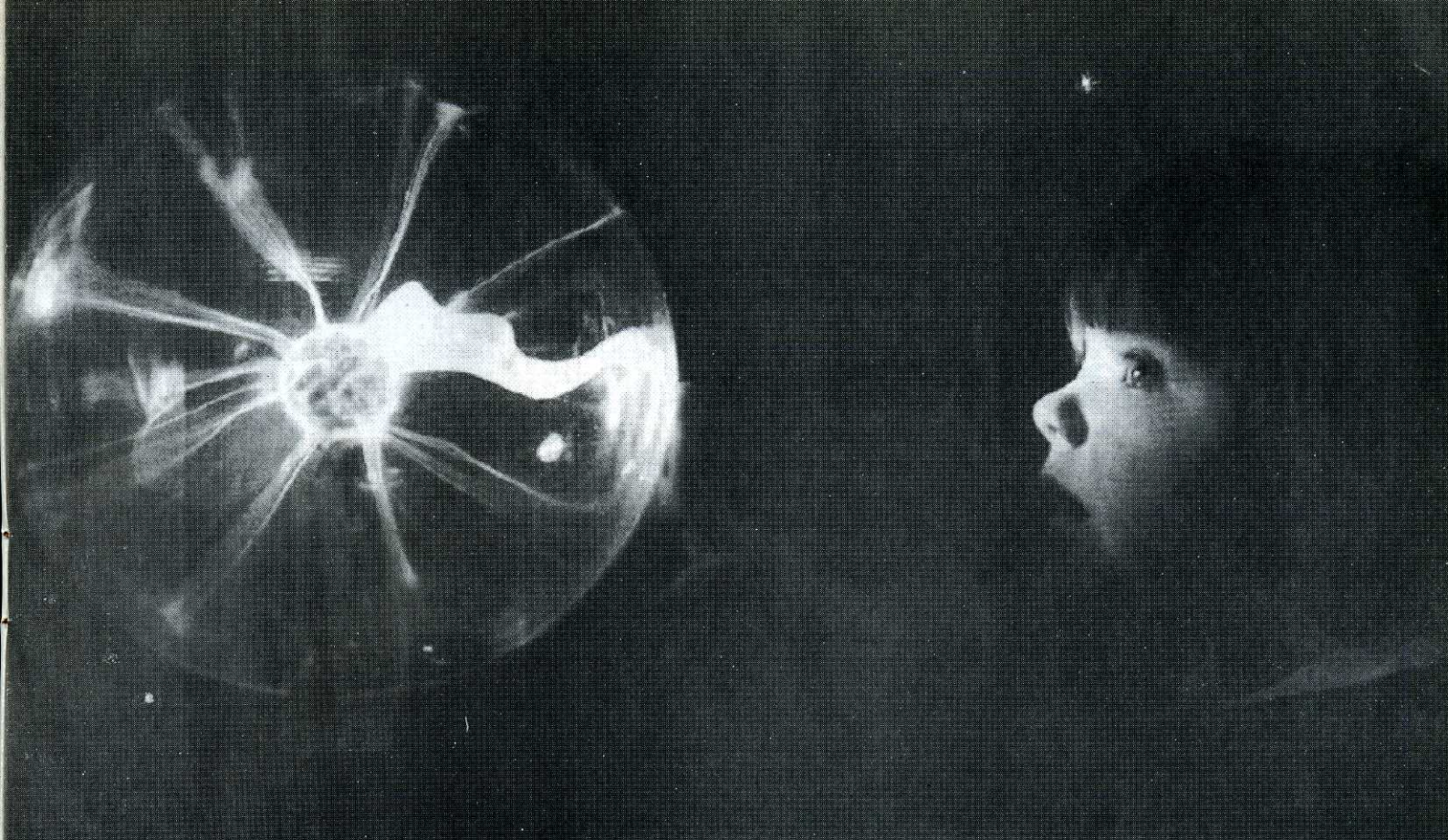
Yet, one may ask, is there an unacknowledged significance in the fact that at this moment the broadcast occurred at all? Is its appearance an indication of change at work below the surface? Is there at work, below the openly acknowledged level, a rising questioning as to the provenance of what may be called spiritual experience? Or of intellectual experience in its full and not castrated sense – that is, where its workings find their origins in the imagination? In fact, such hidden activity may well be of great importance for the future even in relation to science, or even

especially in relation to science. One might go so far as to postulate the possibility that in religious matters the emptiness into which we are in danger of falling itself evokes a reawakening which could rescue our civilisation from its dangerous misdirection; much as a swinging pendulum demands a return.

Also, if the ideas discussed were shadowy and inexact compared with what they would have been a generation ago, it could be argued that the attainment of exactitude is not the point in an intellectual climate where the embracing of relative values is rife; where, also, the uncertainty principle in contemporary physics has opened the door of the allegedly rational mind on to regions of thought which are inching their way towards a new borderline. This borderline has for a very long time separated science and spirituality. Is it now moving dizzily under our feet?

When the self-designated scientist speaks of God as though he, she, or it is seen in personal terms – an assumption generally declining – we are left as though cliff-hanging on to a past that is presented as though still possibly of account. This inconclusive wavering was evident in most speakers on that radio programme. Yet no one appeared to see this as a challenge. In terms of thought the impression given was one of muddle.

No one appeared moved to acknowledge that "the mind has mountains; cliffs of fall... sheer, no-man-fathomed" (Hopkins) or that the shape we give to the world is arguably the creation of our own responses (or lack of them). This is a postulate not only implied in phenomenology but already approaching the mental horizon of some contemporary pioneering scientists. Nor is it alien to the assumptions of many visionaries over many centuries.



Kirsty, a two-year old with impaired sight, using a plasma sphere
photo: Carl Rutherford

Moreover, in connection with the question of legendary miracles, Biblical or otherwise, quantum theory itself has now brought us not only to an acceptance of the uncertainty principle but also to the acceptance of communication over separating distance, which may well relate to various forms of human extrasensory perception.

To accept that the reality or otherwise of the alleged experience of divinity (or of the "spirit") is not open to proof, that the form given to any such experience is of necessity provisional, is no denial of its probable profound meaning for the human psyche. It is not a precautionary "extra", as it were – as it appeared in the discussion, where it was so equivocally dealt with. The idea of the spiritual has been for humanity a perennial haunting.

Also, the arising within the human imagination of such ideas as incarnation, resurrection, grace, etc., is not an arbitrary imposition from without but the fruit of the impact of an inward experience that prints its identity, its self-discovery, on the receptive world. Symbolism, imagery, rise from the depths of the human response to life. They have been shaped and re-shaped throughout human experience in every quarter of the world, and always in related forms. Whatever distortions or enervations they are subject to, their creative power is our inheritance. They are a lan-

**"Already we are seeing a
physicist...stating that science is
closer to art than to philosophy."**

guage – a language as authentic as the signs of mathematics.

In its earlier days science was never far from this territory, despite what, in terms of centuries, are the now crippling aspects of the Enlightenment – and its consequences. In the as yet unfilled space between classical physics and quantum theory, are we about to see illumined before us a horizon where the active imagination of mankind can newly fill the caverns of the mind which are and always have been the source of wisdom – of whose echoes the ancient religions of the world are the enigmatic proclaimers? Today, some scientists are bringing Plato's name into the margins of that waiting space where the future gathers. Behind Plato, for the West, stand the pre-Socratic Greeks for whom the mind as the mirror of all things was an undivided unity.

Have we now to acknowledge that *homo faber* is himself but one aspect of a greater whole? For the achievements of technological man are double-edged unless they are cleansed by the breath of

the Word. In changing form is this Word once more becoming audible on the shifting air that surrounds the struggling of the dangerous contemporary world? If so, it may well be the herald of more than we can yet conceive. Out of our lost direction can we already hear the rise of the wind of the spirit exposing new land as the sea of doubt withdraws?

What is it that charges with meaning this incredible and terrible existence, that awakens within the consciousness of humanity a recognition within the visible of the Invisible – an echoing dichotomy of celebration and sorrow that is the very beat of our life? Every race of mankind has named this the presence of divinity, of God, of the gods. If our artefacts are to be emptied of any relevance to the sanctions of that creative power we have called the spirit they will destroy both ourselves and our world.

Is science now approaching this frontier of awareness? It seems so. For already we are seeing reductionism out-manoeuvred and a physicist (Freeman Dyson, in *Nature's Imagination*, OUP 1995, pp8 and 11) stating that science is closer to art than to philosophy ■

Lorna Marsden is a Quaker writer whose last two books were The Descent of the God, 1991 and The Singing of New Songs, 1995 (Sessions, York)

Do I still believe in Jesus? Which Jesus?



OFTEN, IN THE PAGES OF THE SoF magazine, it has been remarked that many of its contributors are "advanced" in years although one should add that in many cases the tone of their contributions has a fresh youthful feel! But should this surprise us? As I rapidly approach the special-rates-for-OAPs stage I look back on my life and realize that while physically I had been growing towards old age, mentally I had remained stunted for quite some time. Why was this? Had my religious background anything to do with it?

I reckon the Christian religion played a greater part in my life than I suspected. It began back in the last war in a Scottish Presbyterian boarding school. I recall a sort of liquorice allsorts mixture of bible stories, in which unreal people behaved in the most unreal ways, dreary hymns and prayers addressed to a god who came across as anything but all-caring and loveable. This divine being, who had to be spoken to in a special sort of "thee, thou, hast vouchsafed" sort of language, presented a god who in no way matched the realities of my life. Odd what religious experiences one remembers from childhood. Mine is a memory of our wartime pangs of hunger extremely aggravated at Harvest Thanksgiving when the windows of the church we attended were overflowing with fruits and vegetables of all kinds and we never got so much as a bruised apple. We sat during the service with mouths watering and I wondered where it all went afterwards. I expect to "the poor and hungry".

I passed the 11-plus at that school and was due to go to Watford Grammar but then my local parish priest told my mother that I had been baptised in the Catholic church and therefore should attend a Catholic grammar school. When I informed the ex-Black Watch warden of my Scottish school that I would be leaving and going to a Catholic school his only comment was, "Stinking Catholics". What did he mean by that? Did Catholics not wash, I wondered.

"The Sea of Faith was like a breath of mountain air. It gave me the opportunity, with no condemnations or tut-tuts, to work out my own philosophy of life."

Like being thrown into the deep end of a swimming pool, I was plunged into "the Catholic faith" with its "Hail Marys", holy water, rosary beads, the "Sunday Missal" (Latin down one side and English down the other), Litanies of Mary, Joseph and the saints. Strange though all this was to me after my cold Presbyterian beginnings, in which even crucifixes were looked on as idolatrous objects, it appealed to me in a curious way. Was it its quality of "tangibility"?

I made a decision at the age of 14 to become a priest and a few years later entered a seminary. I have written a book about my experiences there. They were happy times, days full of fun and laughter but it was the beginning of my doubts. Various lecturers were hinting in very carefully disguised language that if Jesus was around today, he would have kicked over more than a couple of tables in the present day church.

After four years, I called it a day, much to the disappointment of the parish priest and the Italian nuns attached to my parish church, whom I feel sure regarded me as some sort of fallen angel. I decided to take up teaching as a career and finished up a Head of a Catholic primary school. After 23 years of worrying – not that I wasn't getting the Catholic message across to young children but that I was stuffing their little heads with nonsense – I took the bull by the horns and decided to publish an article on original sin. Quite simply, I just did not believe in this doctrine any longer and refused to teach it to children. There's one thing about the Catholic church: you can choose not to believe in any of its teachings – contraception, rejected by many of the faithful, is a

good example – as long as you keep it to yourself. Write something on paper and have it published and by jingo, an ecclesiastical weight of enormous proportions comes crashing down on your head.

It was very frustrating. My researches had shown quite clearly that Augustine had concocted the original sin theory partly to explain his own well known sexual problems. The theory also ensured the church of absolute control of the faithful from the cradle to the grave. "There is no salvation outside the church" he wrote. He was condemned in his own time by many of his contemporaries but he had his way in the end.

The whole doctrinal structure of the Catholic church is like the Forth bridge. The rivets are the dogmas. I discovered that a few of them were dangerously rusty and, while a bridge can to all appearances seem safe and solid, there will come a time when the corroded rivets will no longer keep the structure together. Sadly, many of the church's own surveyors who have tried to warn of the dangers are condemned for their troubles. Authority and power in the Catholic church override any other considerations. It is not so much "heresies" which are anathema but free thinking. Personally, I gave up the struggle and walked out of it. No-one wanted to listen or discuss. I was described as "paranoid" but it seemed to me that no institution is more paranoid than the church itself.

The Sea of Faith was like a breath of mountain air. It gave me the opportunity, with no condemnations or tut-tuts, to work out my own philosophy of life. Most importantly, I got the chance to start again, to view the whole thing from another perspective. It has been extremely refreshing. My fellow Christians love to ask, "Do you still believe in Jesus?". My reply is, "Which Jesus do you mean? The one put about by the institutional church or the one found by reading between the lines of the gospels?". The two persons are not the same ■

Derek Chorley



You're Telling Us!

In reinstating our Postbag feature we invite readers to write to us about whatever's on your mind. Argue with us and with our contributors! Tell us what you like and what really gets up your nose! Tell us about yourself and your own experiences! Help to prod the Network in the direction you would like it to go! But please keep your letters short and sweet! We have had to make some drastic cuts in some contributions, for which we apologise to the writers. But without the cuts, some letters would have to be left out altogether. Remember - the more succinctly you can make your point, the more likely you are to see the whole of your letter in print unmutated.

Send your letters to:

**Sea of Faith
Hobsons Farm
Dent
Cumbria LA10 5RF**

My story, my hope

I arrived at my second Sea of Faith conference buoyant with enthusiasm and came home deflated. It has taken me a long time to get back on to the waves. Why?

For the first 40 years of my life I was happily settled in Christian church circles, but always a questioner regarding doctrine. John Robinson's books made me take a step back from church and review the situation. Eventually I withdrew from membership. It was very, very painful but I could not continue with integrity. The complexities, complications and consequences were enormous.

There followed 22 years in a spiritual wilderness unable to find anyone even remotely on my wavelength. Although still in touch with church-going friends. Limited attendance at church services when I felt strong enough to perform the mental gymnastics we talk about in SoF.

But held by that "love that would not let me go". Searching, reading, thinking, praying about the future of the church I loved. A lonely path. Constantly aware of new ideas, I grab information about the book *God In Us* and read it the day it is published.

At last! Many of the points Anthony Freeman made I have been struggling with for years. I joined the Sea of Faith network. A network of mainly church people who want to get together to begin to reinterpret the core of Christian belief. Or so I imagined. But at conference and in local groups I do not find this is an option. Members seem to enjoy the debate and are on their personal pilgrimages. Am I wrong? I hope so. Do we really want to witness the "melancholy, long withdrawing roar" of our beloved churches which have been emptying out in my lifetime? Or are we going to start redefining and renewing.

I very much want to work with others to produce an acceptable faith for the future but (and this is a big but) I honestly cannot see a hope of even liberal radical Christians considering ideas from a non-realist standpoint. Thinking based on non-realism is not a faith and because we do not understand and have not sufficient language to describe our feelings of the spiritual, it does not follow that Transcendent Truth does not exist.

So what have I got to offer? I am a practical and I hope sensible 65 year old grandmother with a limited education and I offer the useful fact the I am an average person. I am also someone who has served a long apprenticeship and now feels able to say:

The Christian Church is beautiful - it is our heritage. It is worthwhile and perfectly capable of being the yeast in a troubled society. Sadly however, it strives with old-fashioned word-tools and scriptures that although loved and revered, are very, very ancient books indeed.

I understand that Jews have two types of synagogue, the traditional/orthodox and the liberal/progressive/reformed. Could not our mainstream churches work towards this, continuing to hold traditional services but a few beginning to use experimental and radical versions?

It has been suggested that I might collate a small book containing ideas and examples of alternative worship, and yes, I think I would like to make an attempt with help. I have a feeling that there is plenty of imaginative creativity bobbing about on the waves and, if there are members of the Network or readers of Sea of Faith who would be interested in contributing, please do contact me.

Doreen Calver

*28 Gwynne Park Ave, Woodford Green,
Essex IG8 8AB*

Spinoza's god of nature

Religious faith need not include a creator god. Spinoza's god is nature, meaning everything in the universe from the lofty to the banal, from the spiritual to the most unaesthetically material. All that we think to be bad and all that we think to be good is a necessary part of the fabric of nature. However, sometimes we are mistaken about how things are, and we feel rage and fear instead of calm acceptance. The more we understand about others' motives and about the necessary processes of nature, the closer we are to truth and the more we can dispense with unhappy emotions.

Being human, we can and do make voluntary choices since choosing is simply something that people do - and which some other animals do. We can also aspire to goods such as equality for all people, to justice and to mercy. They are all human qualities. God or Nature does not require to be worshipped. Petitionary prayers are effective only in so far as they are self-expressive, but no magical being will answer them.

There is no reward or punishment in an afterlife, since rewards and punishments are human activities. There is no loving heavenly Father, since love is also human. Neither is there a punishing vengeful Father in heaven.

I would like to ask Sea of Faithers if Christian symbols such as the Trinity, the Resurrection, the Virgin Birth or certain parables can help the human condition in an age of scientific materialism. Any answers?

Eileen Cameron

48 Bannton Park Ave, Edinburgh EH4 6HE

Learning through life

I am the child of a Lutheran vicarage in the fourth generation, and proud of it.

When I came to England in 1939, I left behind a terrible and brutal modern version of ideological authoritarianism. Here, I became aware of Protestant variations within Christianity and their estrangements which, however, began to be put right with the setting up of the World Council of Churches in 1948.

From the late fifties onwards, I have learned to accept the universal nature of religious and cultural pluralism. Lately, I have begun to grapple with the insights and contributions which the scientific mind and imagination are bringing to bear on the creation of human values.

I am learning to see myself as a psychophysical organism among countless sentient and human organisms, living in the biosphere and as part of the ecosystem of this beautiful planet Earth, with the potential for psycho-mystical awareness in my relationships with nature, the universe and my fellow human beings.

My children and grandchildren will find it easier to live in their brains and get to know how it works than I can, since I have been used to living with my immortal soul and attending to it, thanks to the centuries-old teaching of the church and of Plato and Aristotle. I cannot and do not want to deny that their teaching and its influence on the European psyche, imagination and intellect has produced wonderful and remarkable constructs and imaginative flights of fancy in philosophy, religion and the arts, particularly music. They have enriched and ennobled European men and women. I am always deeply moved by Beethoven's wonderful scoring of the duets in "Fidelio" with Florian and Leonora expressing their most thrilling and ecstatic feeling of loving mutuality. Likewise, in the marvellous quartet at the end of his 9th symphony, Beethoven achieved a most sublime and blissful rapture in the male and female voices expressing their commitment to the Joy that resides in the Peace and Harmony between all human beings.

The Declaration of Intent of the Sea of Faith Network says: "A Network for exploring and promoting religious faith as a human creation". Today, I want to omit the phrase "religious faith", and say instead: "A Network for exploring and promoting the human potential for creating human values". Where do all these explorations and experiences leave me? In a state of wonder about the range of the human imagination and its rational mind, world-wide. In a state of thankfulness that human beings have evolved and are still evolving towards greater "complexity consciousness" and personal autonomy, accompanied by a greater willingness to take on responsibility for their natural, social economic and political environment.

Rosemarie Wedell

18 Cranmer Road, Manchester M20 6AW
This letter is an edited version of a longer paper by Rosemarie charting her own spiritual development and available direct from her.

Too intellectual?

I joined the SoF about two years ago and my experience of the Network has been akin to witnessing the first mild wind developing to displace a fog of mythology which has blurred the world's capacity to think clearly for over 2000 years. This year's conference cause that wind to increase its strength, and in particular, Don Cupitt's article on world religion rang out like a clarion call. For me the wind declared more of its purpose and strengthened.

But the rate of acceleration is agonisingly slow. My recently deceased brother was a long time Humanist. I did not join, mainly due to the fact that they had no ability to appeal to a large population. They were confined to being a small group of intellectuals who could only attract a small membership, mainly in the cities and larger towns.

We in SoF are currently locked in the same trap. And, until we can identify with the many in our population who, like me, do not consider themselves intellectuals, we are unlikely to become numerous enough to be a force for the enhancement of the world's environment.

It is essential that we reach out to each small parish. The new SoF logo is a start. A car sticker proudly proclaiming, "I love the Sea of Faith" might well prompt a few more people to ask, "What is the Sea of Faith?"

Let's throw down the gauntlet to our members. Who is going to be the first to

have a monthly local parish meeting of at least 10 members attending a service of popular music, human religious morality and inconsequential chat over tea and biscuits?

For those who wish to try, the steering committee might provide promotional material and other assistance and advice.

Rex Harper

9 Myrtle Grove, Auckley, Doncaster DN9 3HR

More than tricks

When I first encountered Don Cupitt's outright rejection of the supernatural and acknowledgement of the finality of death I felt a great wave of relief, that here was a very able, knowledgeable man who was still connected with the church, liberating us from the guilt of not being able to accept the picture of life, death and the after-life that the church took for granted.

I was very impressed by Don Cupitt's summary of what he calls "the old religions". He says there is "a small number of tricks and techniques of religious existence; ways of being a self and of relating oneself to the whole of which one is a part. These tricks can help us to love life and live well; that, now, is religion." I was deeply sorry that he chose the word "tricks" to describe what I prefer to call, with Paul, being "in Christ".

One technique that Cupitt mentions I have found immensely valuable. He calls it "The Blissful Void". This is to relax completely, "slowing oneself and one's passions down until the self is as it were dispersed into the fleeting insubstantial Emptiness of all existence. You must learn to experience nihilism as levity, lightness. the strange unexpected happiness this brings is a wonderful deliverance from the fear of death, loss and suffering."

This experience I would rather call losing oneself in the silence of eternity. I do not think of it as experiencing nihilism, but rather what T.S. Eliot calls "the point of intersection of the timeless with time". For me it gives meaning to the phrase "the ground of being". Far from experiencing nihilism I rather interpret it as a profound experience of reconciliation and acceptance. I was very glad that Don Cupitt mentioned this as one of the valuable techniques of religious existence.

Ian Alexander

Squilva, 7 Haymeadow Lane, Burghill,
Hereford HR4 7RZ

Postscripts

by *Seafarer*

Second coming

Well, it's good to be back. I was sad to have to give up the editorship a year ago, but it was a necessary sacrifice if I was to get a book and a couple of booklets done. As it happens, I actually find myself busier now I've taken up the reins again than I was when I let them slip, but Graft Publications are helping out this time, so the burden (a very pleasurable one) will be shared.

The Network owes a debt of gratitude to Antony Freeman, who was persuaded by silken tongues on your steering committee to be guest-editor of one edition, and then strong-armed into producing another three. Since this was on top of his main job as editor of the hugely successful *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, he is to be thanked by all of us for the time and effort he has dedicated to the Network.

Our facelift

Although Anthony changed the mix of contents, he did not change the form of the magazine. But the time does seem ripe for a change now. We hope you will like what we have done to it. Fewer long, academic articles and more short, popular pieces will be the hallmark for a while. Above all, we aim to produce a magazine which is not so much a house-mag for Network members but a good, stimulating read for those in and outside the churches who are looking for a modern, rational and imaginative faith-structure or world view, one which dispenses with supernatural powers, dogmas, hierarchies and transcendent gods and devils.

Do you know someone – a relative or friend, perhaps – who might be helped, amused, stimulated, enthused or infuriated by what we are doing? Why not take an extra copy of the magazine and pass it on? To put ourselves on a sound financial footing without pushing up the Network sub, we need to sell 1000 copies at around £2. Can you help – if you think the magazine is worth it?

Belief and faith

Our indefatigable Network Secretary Ronald Pearse took James Wood to task for writing in the *London Review of Books* that Sea of Faith priests are “merely rationalists who have lost their faith”. Not so, said our Ronald. “I distinguish between belief and faith. Belief implies intellectual acceptance of concepts. Faith suggests a trusting outlook – trusting, for example, that we can create meaning and purpose in life. The story of Jesus, interpreted so variously in different ages and cultures, continues to provide us with a good vehicle for doing this. It offers a spirituality without contracts and with only its own rewards.”

Taking leave of Mystic Meg

Thinkers from Matthew Arnold to Don Cupitt – not to mention Meister Eckhart – may have helped us take leave of God for God's sake, but it isn't any longer God who is making the running in the old magic-and-mystery stakes. At the fag-end of the second Christian millennium, his place has been taken by an astonishing motley of New Age (but often age-old) mysticisms, feeding on the credulity of the naive, the under-educated and the wilfully blind.

Richard Dawkins hit out in last year's Dimpleby lecture at TV programmes like *The X-Files*, in which the rational regularly loses out to the supernatural. But *The X-Files* is mere fiction.

It has been followed by a flood of programmes, magazine articles even new magazines – which deal in “true tales of the supernatural”. The appetite for the tawdry stuff seems insatiable.

So-called para-normal phenomena, astrology, spirit-channelling, reflexology, aromatherapy, ghost-busting, communication with aliens, mind-reading, automatic writing, exorcism, exotic varieties of reincarnation and the whole rag-bag of so-called “spiritual” therapies and transcendental mysticisms: it's all very big business, great for circulation and ratings.

Much of it may be no dafter and no less dangerous than dogmatic mainline religion with its miracles, divine revelations and promises of eternal life, but its devaluation of reason and vulgarisation of imagination is ultimately dehumanising, degrading and reactionary. I suppose that will bring angry letters from SoF paranormals, sincere believers in hidden energies and nonrealist Wiccans, and if it does, I'll gladly print them. But I'd also like to hear from those who want SoF to take leave of fringe as well as mainstream occultism and stand for the wholly human spirit rather than the fraudulent holy spirits our magicians and divines have conjured up.

Nobody notices

Did you see the Royal National Theatre production of Caryl Churchill's play *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*? If not, you've almost certainly missed your chance: its national tour ends (at Kendal) in mid-March.

It's that rare thing, a play about radical religious ideas. It's set in the revolutionary years of the English civil war, the 1640s, when Levellers and Ranters dreamt of a new earth and a new heaven and tried to graft both on to Cromwell's republic.

Watching and enjoying it at the Cottesloe Theatre on the South Bank, I was reminded once again that many of the ideas we tend to think of as new and radical today were expressed clearly and powerfully by ordinary men and women three and a half centuries ago. God, they said, was in all things. He was Nature, Freedom, Reason. Heaven is here on earth. For them, the long-awaited second coming of Christ was a political and social liberation rather than a divine personal appearance.

When their revolution is crushed, Caryl Churchill's characters ask why it is that Christ failed to arrive on cue. “I think what happened”, says one, “was, Jesus Christ did come and nobody noticed. It was time but we somehow missed it.”



Non-theocratic non-socialism

I welcome the following words of Chris Bryant, Chair of the Christian Socialist Movement, writing in *Fabian Review*: "The Christian Socialist Movement has never thought that the Labour Party should be a Christian party. Nor does it wish to create a "Christian Britain" ruled by a clerical mandate, nor even a New Jerusalem in which we all are required by law to abide by supposedly Christian values. Such a theocracy would be an extraordinary instance of arrogance, for we live in a world of many faiths and none. It is only by accepting the multicultural reality of our secular world that Britain can hope to prosper."

Kosher nonrealism

Gail Vine's article on the Sea of Faith Network in *The Times Education Supplement* had some interesting reflections on nonrealist Judaism, citing Rabbi Professor Dan Cohn-Sherbock, who teaches at the University of Kent and is visiting professor at the University of Wales and Middlesex University. Cohn-Sherbock spoke of Reconstructionist Judaism, founded in the USA in the 1930s by Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan. "It is now a big move-

ment, there is nothing embarrassing about it, it is bona fide Judaism, sort of kosher. Its followers go to the synagogue, wear prayer shawls, yarmulke, celebrate all the festivals – you would never know they don't actually believe in God".

More recently, another nonrealist movement has sprung up within Judaism under the leadership of Reform Rabbi Sherwin Wine. "He is also a non-supernaturalist," says Cohn-Sherbock, "but he felt reconstructionism was misguided in retaining the traditional liturgy". In Wine's synagogue in Detroit, the Jewish festivals are still celebrated but the word "God" is not used. "This is arguably more consistent. You know what is going on." But both versions of nonrealism find acceptance in the Jewish community, which has not marginalised its radicals as Christianity has done.

Those godless vicars again

Vine's article also carried a good quote from Murdoch (no, not Rupert: Iris).

"I am not a believer in the sense of believing in God the Father or Jesus Christ as divine, but I believe that religion is terribly important in people's lives because it tries to look at the world not veiled by the

obsessions, fears and egoism of everyday life. Various priests now tell me that this is what they believe. If only they work fast enough, Christianity can become like Buddhism, before people forget it entirely."

Animal and Swampy

As I add these postscripts, the papers are full of the exploits of Animal, Swampy and their fellow-moles who tunneled under a motorway construction site, chained themselves to blocks of concrete, and ensured that green opposition to continuing destruction of the countryside made the front page of every newspaper and got top billing on every radio and TV news bulletin. How right the *Daily Telegraph* was to comment that their actions ran completely counter to common sense! But thank God Animal and Swampy had the guts to rise above the common sense of the rest of us.

I have no idea whether this particular group of roadies were anarchists or Earth-Quakers or libertarian humanists or panentheist pagans. But they did their bit towards creating human values. Of such is the republic of heaven.

Seafarer