Sea of Faith *MAGAZINE*

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DISBELIEVING OUR BELIEFS

Mysticism & Transience ; One View of Truth

Learning to swim in the Sea of Faith

" exploring and promoting religious faith as a human creation "

Sea of Faith Network (founded 1989)

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SEA OF FAITH NETWORK

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DISBELIEVING OUR BELIEFS

Andrew Anderson

In his book on the quest for the North-West Passage Pierre Berton describes the remarkable illustration in the memoirs of the Arctic explorer, Sir John Ross, of an encounter which took place on 10th August 1818 between two British naval officers and a band of Greenland Eskimos :

> "The most striking thing about this drawing is the contrast of cultures it depicts. The Eskimos are dressed, as one might expect, in jackets, trousers and boots made from fur and seal skin, perfectly adapted for the harsh climate of Ultima Thule. The two men who greet them are attired exactly as they would be had they been envoys to some palm-fringed island in the South Pacific or off the coast of Africa : there they stand, resplendent in cocked hats, tail coats and white gloves, swords dangling from their waists, the points of their buckled shoes that once trod the parquet floors of Mayfair sinking into the soft snow - costumed actors in a savage land.
>
> Behind them, against a magnificent backdrop of chiselled mountains, their two ships float at anchor - square-rigged vessels of the kind that defeated the French at Trafalgar but which will prove hopelessly unfit for Arctic channels. The seamen aboard are shivering in regulation wool and broadcloth, since no exploring nation has yet recognised the need for special Arctic clothing.
>
> Officers and natives are equally startled by this unexpected encounter. The two peoples view the world in ways as different as their appearance. Almost a century will pass before either recognises the need to understand or learn from the other.
>
> The British officers have until now met only one Eskimo, the Anglicised interpreter John Sacheuse, whom they call Sackhouse. The Eskimos here, on the rim of Melville Bay on the western shore of Greenland, have never before seen a white man. To the naval officers, who stand peering at the strange squat creatures, muffled in furs, the moon itself could scarcely seem more remote than this bleak, treeless shore. To the Eskimos, their astonishing visitors must be celestial beings. In a dialect Sacheuse can hardly understand they ask, "where do you come from, the sun or the moon ?". "(1)

The reason for this unlikely naval expedition was a *belief*: a belief in the existence of an Open Polar Sea linking the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans, opening a route from Europe to the East. It was a belief that was to claim many lives ; in the case of Sir John Franklin's party, to lead to the loss with few traces of the expedition. Modern polar equipment is based on Eskimo technology unknown to sailors like Ross, but who can fail to recognise, in Berton's description of men "resplendent in cocked hats, tail coats and white gloves", the mitres and copes of the bishops of the present-day Church of England ? "Costumed actors in a strange land" would be a good motto for the Decade of Evangelism.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines belief as "the mental action, condition or habit, of trusting to or confiding in a person or thing", "assent of the mind to a statement, or to the truth of a fact beyond observation". Why do we need beliefs ? Why, moreover, do we demand that others share them and, if they will not do this voluntarily, apply stronger means of persuasion ? Historically, beliefs have been the engine of human corruption, greed, extortion, hatred and vice. Beliefs motivated the Crusades, the Inquisition, the persecution of the Jews, the burning of witches and heretics and a long list of cruel, largely ineffective medical treatments. Beliefs that some animals are evil or unclean has led to the barbarous treatment of snakes, crocodiles and sharks. At a political level, beliefs have been the cause of unnecessary and destructive changes in society, up to the present-day.

The Open Polar Sea sought by Ross and others *did not exist.* Eskimos, whalers, freelance explorers could have told the Navy so, decades before the North-West Passage was finally discovered, a small, tortuous waterway suitable only for shallow draft vessels, by Roald Amundsen in his epic voyage of 1903-06.

Why do women and men need beliefs, especially when faced with the historically lengthy list of beliefs which are seen, with hindsight, to be absurd ? What led people to believe that the earth was flat, that mental illness was caused by demons, that God is male and that only men can be priests - a debate which, if it did not cause such pain to the participants, would be laughable ? What led the Pope to excommunicate Galileo for holding a different view about planetary motion ? We no longer believe the sun revolves around the earth, see angels, hear heavenly voices, have dreams which foretell the future and if we claimed to, we would rightly be regarded as eccentric if not insane. The right to hold

absurd beliefs is now the sole privilege of politicians. It was a belief which produced the Poll Tax.

Help in understanding our addiction to belief is to be found, I suggest, in a book outside the closed circle of theological speculation, Desmond Morris' **The Naked Ape**. Religion, for Morris, is a "strange pattern of animal behaviour". He says :

> "It is not an easy subject to deal with, but as zoologists we must do our best to observe what actually happens rather than listen to what is supposed to be happening. If we do this, we are forced to the conclusion that, in a behaviourial sense, religious activities consist of the coming together of large groups of people to perform repeated and prolonged submissive displays to appease a dominant individual. The dominant individual concerned takes many forms in different cultures, but always has the common factor of immense power. Sometimes it takes the shape of an animal from another species, or an idealised version of it. Sometimes it is pictured more as a wise or elderly member of our species."

Morris could have quoted examples of the Queen and the Pope here. He goes on with a description familiar to all churchgoers :

> "The submissive response to it may consist of closing the eyes, lowering the head, clasping the hands together in a begging gesture, kneeling, kissing the ground, or even extreme prostration, with the frequent accompaniment of wailing or chanted vocalisations. If these submissive actions are successful, the dominant individual is appeased. Because its powers are so great, the appeasement ceremonies have to be performed at regular and frequent intervals, to prevent its anger from rising again. The dominant individual is usually, but not always, referred to as a god."

Morris then turns to the underlying question of beliefs. "Since," he asks, "none of these gods exist in a tangible form, why have they been invented ?" To find the answer to this he suggests that we have "to go right back to our ancestral origins".

> "Before we evolved into co-operative hunters, we must have lived in social groups of the type seen today in other species of apes and monkeys. There, in typical cases, each group is dominated by a single male. He is the boss, the overlord, and every member of the group has to appease him or suffer the consequences. He is also most active in protecting the group from outside hazards and in settling squabbles between lesser members. The whole life of a member of such a group revolves around the dominant animal. His all-powerful role gives him a god-like status."

So much for the early days of religious life. Morris goes on :

> "Turning now to our immediate ancestors, it is clear that, with the growth of the co-operative spirit so vital for successful group hunting, the application of the dominant individual's authority had to be severely limited if he was to retain the active, as opposed to passive, loyalty of the other group members. They had to want to help him instead of simply fear him. He had to become more 'one of them'. The old-style monkey tyrant had to go, and in his place there arose a more tolerant, more co-operative naked ape leader. This step was essential for new type of 'mutual-aid' organisation that was evolving, but it gave rise to a problem.
>
> The total dominance of the Number One member of the group having been replaced by a qualified dominance, he could no longer command unquestioning allegiance. This change in the order of things, vital as it was to the new social system, nevertheless left a gap. From our ancient background there remained a need for an all-powerful figure who could keep the group under control, and the vacancy was filled by the invention of a god. The influence of the invented god-figure could then operate as a force additional to the now more restricted influence of the group leader."

The Christian religion alone of all the great faiths has managed to have it both ways : a god-figure *and* a group leader. For Morris the success of religion, the power of belief is

> "simply a measure of the strength of our fundamental biological tendency, inherited directly from our monkey and ape ancestors, to submit ourselves to an all-powerful dominant member of the group. Because of this, religion has proved immensely valuable as a device for aiding social cohesion, and it is doubtful whether our species could have progressed far without it, given the unique combination of circumstances of our evolutionary origins .... but it has led to a number of bizarre by-products, such as a belief in 'another life' where we will at last meet up with the god figures. They were, for reasons already explained, unavoidably detained from joining us in the present life, but this omission can be corrected in an after-life. In order to facilitate this, all kinds of strange practices have been developed in connection with the disposal of our bodies when we die. If we are going to join our dominant overlords, we must be well prepared for the occasion and elaborate burial ceremonies must be performed .....
>
> Religion has also given rise to a great deal of unnecessary suffering and misery, wherever it has become over-formalised in its application, and whenever the professional 'assistants' of the god figure have been unable to resist the temptation to borrow a little of his power and use it themselves .....
>
> Despite its chequered history [religion] is a feature of our social life that we cannot do without. Whenever it becomes unacceptable, it is quietly, or sometimes violently, rejected, but in no time at all it is back again in a new form, carefully disguised perhaps, but containing all the same old basic elements. We simply have to 'believe in something'. Only a common belief will cement us together and keep us under control. It could be argued that, on this basis, any belief will do, so long as it is powerful enough ; but this is not strictly true. It must be impressive and it must be seen to be impressive. Our communal nature demands the performance of and participation in elaborate group ritual. Elimination of 'pomp and circumstance' will leave a terrible cultural gap and the indoctrination will fail to operate properly at the deep emotional level so vital to it."

Surely, here, we have a reason for the continued existence, in spite of the expense, of the English Cathedral. Morris is not, as far as I know, a churchgoer but his views are important in understanding why the Decade of Evangelism looks likely to fail. He says :

> "Certain types of belief are more wasteful and stultifying than others and can side-track a community into rigidifying patterns of behaviour that hamper its qualitative development. As a species we are a predominantly intelligent and exploratory animal, and beliefs harnessed to this fact will be the most beneficial for us. A belief in the validity of the acquisition of knowledge and scientific understanding of the world we live in, the creation and appreciation of aesthetic phenomena in all their many forms, and the broadening and deepening of our range of experiences in day-to-day living, is rapidly becoming the 'religion' of our time." (2)

Against this opposition how can the church with its trivial, sentimental sub-culture compete ? What is intelligent and exploratory about present-day hymns and stained glass ?

If belief as a reason for living the religious life is unsustainable ; if belief is motivated by fear of death and the unknown ; if belief is a defensive ploy, what religious idea if any is worth our time and trouble ? Is there any authentic place for churchgoing in the 1990s, not only by ourselves but by others - Eskimos and naval officers ? I suggest there is, but *belief* must be replaced by *perception*, *creed* with *axiom* and that, instead of looking at the church as a *belief-system*, we have to see the Ship of St Peter for what it is and must be - a *value-system*, values which change but, while changing, heal and restore.

Perception is "the intuitive recognition of a moral or aesthetic quality e.g. the truth of a remark, the beautiful in objects", "the neuro-physiological processes, including memory, by which an organism becomes aware of and interprets external stimuli or sensations". An *axiom* is "a self-evident proposition, requiring no formal demonstration to prove its truth, but received and assented to as soon as mentioned". *Value*, as a noun, is "that which is worthy of esteem for its own sake ; that which has intrinsic worth". (3)

What values can we discover in the world as it exists, not as we believe it to be ? What do we perceive when we stand, like Ross, in a cold spiritual climate facing thoroughly acclimatised inhabitants who think we have come from the moon ? What can be perceived ? What axioms are, in the terms of the definition, "self-evident" ? Only if we replace "belief" with "perception" and "creed" with "axiom" are we able, I suggest, to see the world around us and how it is but also, through radio, newspapers and TV what is happening to it, the incessant litany of man's treatment of man and the fellow animals, plants and minerals with which he shares his home.

The overriding task for churchpeople today is to perceive what is happening to them and the world, and to discover axioms and values they can hold in common with the five billion other inhabitants of the planet. In **Beyond the Frozen Sea** Edwin Mickleburgh writes of another naval explorer, Captain Cook.

> "Sailing around a pre-industrial planet he was in no doubt that nature held sway beyond the immediate scope of European civilisation. Indeed Cook's voyages are a graphic reminder that wilderness prevailed throughout the world at that time and the peoples and cultures he encountered were essentially nature-centred in their relationship with the surrounding environment. The history of the last 200 years has been the history of the destruction of that global wilderness by the predatory expansion of European man. The principal agent of that destruction has been the irreversible momentum of his man-centred science and technology inspired by the belief that it was his god-given duty to achieve total domination over the natural world. With such powerful means at his disposal that mission has been overwhelmingly successful. We are left now with only shrinking enclaves of natural habitat which, lacking anything more substantial, we are proud to call wilderness in memory of something that has gone forever.
>
> Before its colonisation the North American continent was entirely wilderness. It was however a wilderness inhabited by people who understood, valued and respected it. The North American Indian was at home in this wilderness ; his love and comprehension of it we began to appreciate only when we had all but destroyed both of them. In just 350 years over three and a half million square miles of natural forest, plain, marsh and mountain have been recreated in man's image. Today less than two percent of that original wilderness remains. A similar story can be told for much of the rest of the planet and destruction continues unchecked. In whatever perspective one chooses to view it, human beings are clearly overwhelming the earth." (4)

In the world described by Edwin Mickleburgh what we believe has become irrelevant. What matters is the value we place on life ; not just our lives but the life of the earth itself. There is nothing more inimical to the church's attempt to increase its numbers than the lack of interest shown by the existing membership in the pollution and destruction of their maker's handiwork, and the terrestrial future of the lords of creation they believe themselves to be.

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1. **The Arctic Grail**, Pierre Berton, Viking 1988

2. **The Naked Ape**, Desmond Morris, Cape 1967

3. **Oxford English Dictionary**, OUP 1989

4. **Beyond the Frozen Sea**, Edwin Mickleburgh, Bodley Head 1987

LETTERS

RECALLING PETER MUNZ

from John Challenor (Cardiff)

Don Cupitt on the New Zealand connection (SOFMAG #7) makes me want to add the name of Peter Munz. While at the University of Wellington, he wrote **Relationship and Solitude** (Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1964) which impressed me greatly at the time, and still does. It is a naturalistic account of religion and philosophy, in the widest terms of space and time, which locates the origins of the religious 'supernatural' and the philosophical 'supernatural' (metaphysics) in our mythology and in our experience. It is a sort of Sea of Faith project before the time.

I'm encouraged to mention the book by finding it recommended by Daniel Liechty in his **Theology in Postliberal Perspective**. He notes sadly that Munz's book was largely ignored. Perhaps the title is unhelpful. Munz writes in fact about absolute love and absolute detachment, as two ethical ideals each offering a way of overcoming evil and attaining freedom.

On quite another subject - divorce, and judging not. Do you know the one about the Rabbi (told by Lionel Blue) ? The Rabbi hears out the woman's story of why she had to divorce, and tells her "You are quite right". Having heard next the husband's account, he tells him "You are quite right". A by-stander in the synagogue calls out, "Rabbi, he can't be right, if the wife was right !" The Rabbi tells the by-stander "You are quite right".

ON HIDING LAMPS UNDER BUSHELS

from Michael Stewart (Farnham)

John Coombes (SOFMAG #7) sums up the dilemma facing those of us who profess membership of church communities - whether or not to stay in, and if we stay in whether or not to conceal our dissent from much of what is going on. And as far as I can judge, his standpoint on these questions is very similar to my own. What I find totally unacceptable - in his current practice, and also in my own - is the contented embracing of a self-centred quietism, on the ground that open declaration of our radical views "could give offence and lead to isolation" and "Life seems too short for that". Did that deter Jesus of Nazareth ? And how, believing what John does, can he say he no longer has a message to preach ? If one really believes the world today desperately needs the new radical gospel, one must surely have what one participant at SOF IV has called "an evangelistic zeal for this radical faith".

And yet of course in a way John is right. What, in the vast majority of cases, can it serve for the individual to 'come out' and say "I do not believe in your God, but I wish to continue attending your services provided that I am free to interpret the words as I choose" ? The usual reaction will be one of rejection or, at best, incomprehension. What the situation calls for is, as John himself says, the development of a 'ginger group' - made up initially of SOF members - within the wider body of the Christian church, to help nudge, prod, shock and finally, it is to be hoped, transform it so that it can at last proclaim the Good News in words that will speak to 20th (and 21st) century men and women of all sorts and conditions throughout the world. But how are we to get from one to the other, from individual insight to collective action.

Some years back those who felt uneasy about certain aspects of the annual Remembrance Day ceremonies were invited to 'come out' by wearing white poppies instead of the traditional red ones. One does not see so many white poppies now on Remembrance Day, even among committed pacifists, but by this simple act of individual and collective witness those concerned had made their point and made it possible to gauge the measure of general support for their views.

Is it possible to imagine something similar for bringing to the attention of the different denominations the extent of adherence to the kind of vision SOF represents, and at the same time allowing those of us who wish to remain church members to do so with integrity ? It is of course difficult to see how this could be done without reaching agreement, in sufficiently broad yet positive terms, on just what it is that constitutes the Christian kerygma. And we know that the task of drafting a statement that will satisfy all of us, or even the majority, is no easy matter, and is indeed held by some to be undesirable as imposing the straitjacket of formalism on what should be a living, open growth.

However, even if no credal statement can have more than transient and relative validity, what is at stake is

surely of such importance as to make the attempt to find at least a broadly acceptable formulation worthwhile. Such a formulation might well be based on one or other of the definitions or statements of intent which have already been put forward and found widely if not universally acceptable among us, but would also convey the heart of the distinctive - I hesitate to use the word "unique" ! - Christian message without which humanism can so easily become in Lloyd Geering's words, "flat, mundane and altogether uninspiring".

BE HONEST

from Adrian Worsfold (Clowne)

I was very disappointed reading the article by John Coombes, not as such in his decision to stay in his church but to remain completely quiet about his views whilst staying in. I think that this is representative of the viewpoint of a number of people in Sea of Faith ; that the music is enjoyed, that the humanism of Jesus appeals in some continuing way, but that absolutely nothing will be done to move on any of the theological baggage presented. Why not ?

My own view was to leave. In fact, to a great extent, I was thrown out first. It is not as though I am inexperienced or even unsympathetic regarding **The Question**. But there are a number of issues involved here.

Those who stay in, whilst strongly disagreeing with the supernaturalism, look like entryists of the Trotskyist mould in the Labour Party. In my view the Labour Party is quite right to root them out because they are not properly democratic, as defined by the party. They have their own agenda and seek to overturn the party in its structure and being. Of course the difference is that SOF does not hold a position on this issue, unlike the decision making Trotskyism the body of first allegiance - it is simply a matter for individuals and their conscience.

So some individuals choose to be entryist. Alright, but then they counteract their own entryism by saying and doing nothing at all. This seems absurd, like living a double life. It is, in my view, deceptive and extreme (at least the Trotskyist in the Labour Party tells you what she believes even if she doesn't tell who she represents). The result of this barmy, even incomprehensible, position is that nothing is done and the fundies carry on their march unimpeded. And will this same silence be practised when only highly sectarianised churches exist ?

Also, I do not understand what good work the churches now do. The greatest moral strides recently, if only to get people thinking, have been made through the media in secular responses to human needs around the world. The churches are full of excess baggage and self-contradiction, an authoritarian language leading to a confusion of messages and attitudes I do not want to be associated with, either openly or in self-sustained silence.

For me, now, the only position is to take account of the political influence of a church in wider society. I think they are pretty irrelevant now and can be left to go their sectarian ways (and I include my old denomination, Unitarianism, only apparently liberal in its self-definition). Of course, if the churches had some wider effect on society I would have to be in opposition to them. Then I might join simply to swerve one the other way, or I might be part of a secular opposition which has, in Western Europe at least, helped to cripple and fossilise dominant and socially influential churches - a very necessary historical process for healthy liberal democracy.

Of course I still retain an interest in ideas of symbolism and means to find a sense of self direction, and it was indeed the fact that I did openly express my views that led to my fate. So people who speak out must expect social isolation, loss of training, loss of posts. But then the churches are what they are ! So at one time I was prepared to develop my ideas of symbolism and believing inside a church. Now, sufficiently happy that I have discovered enough that the churches cannot be reformed, my argument has adapted to one of watching them kill themselves.

That's their problem. Yes, it deprives me of a place to go. That I understand. It's a loss. I could develop a theology of crucifixion on this ! Some urge may change my mind, of course. Where I must be consistent, however, and especially in the matter of religion which claims honesty as a key tenet, is that inside such an institution one does not cover up. Let it show itself as two faced, and don't let it affect individuals who do not want to be like that into doing the same.

SPEAKING UP

from Keith Whyte (Wokingham)

Much as I appreciated the article by John Coombes, I am sorry that he no longer feels able to preach. He says he no longer has a message, but I am sure he is wrong. In any case, let me add my voice to those who must already have asked him to reconsider his decision. If those who feel as we do are not prepared to take an active part in the churches we belong to, giving voice to our insights and understandings whenever we have the opportunity, we will be abandoning organised Christianity to the dead ends of sentimentality, superstition and naive unthinking fundamentalism.

One of the benefits of the SOF Network is in giving us the strength to continue despite the fact that in our own local churches we may feel dreadfully alone, with many if not all of the sermons no longer having any meaning. As John Coombes says, SOF can be a ginger group within the Church helping to shape its future, as well as a support group for those of us who are disillusioned by the way the churches seem to be going.

So, if any readers of this magazine have experiences to relate or advice to give on how to include 'non-realist' theology in public worship, please let the rest of us know. A starting point for those who are able to influence the content of sermons might be the current interest in the theory of evolution shown by a new biography of Darwin, Steve Jones' Reith Lectures and Richard Dawkins' Royal Institution Christmas Lectures. The Church has never really been able to come to terms with the implications of evolution. Perhaps we can help it to do so.

A CYNIC IN THE NETWORK :

DO FAITH / ACTION DISJUNCTIONS MATTER ?

Stephen Warnes

Diogenes the Cynic is reputed to have masturbated in public, as an expression of ... what ? His 'cynical' attitude to life ? His disdain for convention ?

Diogenes held worldly goods, including human repute, to be of no account. (In the quest for virtue, it is of very little help that one is held in repute among people.) He sought to be free from desire of the external goods that are the gift of fortune and are therefore precarious.

The Cynics of ancient Greece - among whom Diogenes was a leader - proposed that individuals should eschew what is independent of the will, or of our own efforts. "Only subjective goods - virtue, or contentment through resignation - are secure, and these alone, therefore, will be valued by the wise man." (Bertrand Russell, **History of Western Philosophy**, p 255)

The principal question which I ask in this piece, and to which I can only give my own personal answer, is this :

Is it a form of moral and/or intellectual masturbation (sleight of hand !?) to say one thing and do another, regardless of disjunctions between the saying and the doing ?

I work as a parish priest in the Church of England ; and in that capacity I engage in liturgical performances, exercise pastoral care, perform certain administrative functions, and (the nub of the matter as far as the argument of this article is concerned) I preach and teach. In the parish, I neither preach nor teach the non-realist opinions which draw me to the Sea of Faith Network.

The people in the parish are satisfied if, through the style of liturgical performance and effectiveness of the pastoral care, they are able to feel 'an ache in the right place'. Church superiors are happy if, with the satisfaction of the parishioners and the efficiency of the administration, quietness abounds, and finance with it ! The Cynic is satisfied if the contentment of parish and diocese do not distract from the personal quest for creative human freedom.

The parish where I work lies in a reasonably well-to-do part of the country where the majority of the people are ardent capitalists. I meet with them socially, and the discussions range over a wide variety of issues - some of which are political. In such situations I do not proclaim my socialist opinions.

Arguments are conducted without tempers flaring ; and people are pleased to have enjoyed a stimulating time without politeness having been offended. Again, the Cynic is satisfied because the quest for creative human freedom has not been hindered in this process ; and, indeed, can be said to have been enhanced by victory over any desire for successful human argument and by indifference to that particular, but precarious, worldly object.

In my case, the disjunction is between the 'radical' things that I say (at least in private), and the 'conformist' things I do (in my public persona). It is a disjunction between my private radical non-realism and my public behaviour as a parish priest ; and a disjunction between the radical socialist views that I privately hold, but to which I make no public reference among the capitalists who are my neighbours (and friends).

My argument is that the apparent contradictions between the opinions we hold and the expression we give (or fail to give) to them are not only defensible, but are morally and intellectually 'virtuous'. I use the idea of 'virtue' for the creative human freedom which I seek. Other Cynics prefer other virtues (e.g. pleasure, contentment through resignation, or some other subjective good) ; and on that basis say one thing and do another, thereby getting more pleasure (for example) than if they were constrained to consistency and constant displeasure (from others) or discomfort (for oneself).

This argument is consistent with the Cynic distinction between external goods which are the gift of fortune, and therefore precarious, and the subjective goods (virtue which holds worldly goods of no account) which alone are secure and therefore to be valued by the wise.

External or worldly goods such as ecclesiastical preferment or some 'party' appointment (e.g. a school governorship), are certainly precarious gifts of fortune. Public conformism might attract the offer of these delights ; but the Cynic holds them of no account and seeks to be free of any desire for them. It is the desire for these attractions that enslaves because it instils an anxiety or fear that one may not attain them.

Bertrand Russell says of Cynicism that it was a doctrine "to appeal to weary men, in whom disappointment had destroyed natural zest. And it was certainly not a doctrine calculated to promote ... any useful activity except one of protest against powerful evil." (ibid)

To protest against powerful evil is regarded as a virtue by many. There are those for whom it is an expression of virtue to "go boldly into the lions' den". They might say it was the style, not so much of a Cynic, as of a hypocrite, to do otherwise : they require private opinion and public manifestation to coincide. They would regard it as a proper quest that Marxists in a Tory heartland should not remain publicly silent, but should speak that which they believe. They would say the same of radical non-realists in the churches, whom they would encourage to advertise and to proselytise.

And yet, merely to protest (however so loudly) against powerful evil would be regarded by others as an easy option if it does not lead to action against that evil ; whether overt or undercover, as in subversion.

Don Cupitt says that "subversion is not truthful enough". But is truth really the virtue of our common quest ? Or even that 'usefulness' which Russell seems to extol ? There are other virtues that appeal to the Cynic :

* for some, it may be pleasure ;
* for Diogenes, it was contentment through resignation
* for me, it is creative human freedom.

Bertrand Russell writes as follows of the way in which the relation of the intellectually eminent to their contemporary society has been different in different ages :

"During the period of ecclesiastical domination, from the fifth century to the fifteenth, there was a certain conflict between what was theoretically believed and what was actually felt. Theoretically, the world was a vale of tears, a preparation amid tribulation, for the world to come. But in practice the writers of books, being almost all clerics, could not help feeling exhilarated by the power of the Church ; they found opportunity for abundant activity of a sort they believed to be useful. They had therefore the mentality of a governing class, not of men who feel themselves exiles in an alien world. This is part of the curious dualism that runs through the Middle Ages, owing to the fact that the Church, though based on other-worldly beliefs, was the most important institution in the everyday world." (Russell, **A History of Western Philosophy**, p 252)

This seems to exemplify my viewpoint well - that disjunctions are not unknown ; are not necessarily dysfunctional ; and do not have to be resolved either intellectually, morally, or psychologically.

The attempt to achieve an unnatural consistency between thought and act, between a system of ideas and a pattern of behaviour, impedes creative human freedom and social development of the individual ; the concerted attempt by others to impose such consistency is a form of totalitarian terrorism and leads to bondage. "An ideologically bent society," said Matussek (**Slant** # 20, p 25), "is unable to resist the temptations of power and enforcement, even if it means the curtailing or annihilation of creative human freedom. The history of the church and the communist party could provide us with some examples to substantiate this claim."

FANCY EDITING SOFMAG ?

Clive Richards will be stepping down from the editorship after the Summer edition (#10) in July. Would you like to consider taking on this fascinating and important job within SOF ?

Previous editorial experience isn't necessary but you will need enthusiasm and commitment to SOF and access to a personal computer and a good quality printer.

If you think you might be interested, why not find out more about just what's involved by writing to Clive at the address on page 2 ?

COMING OUT

Norah Gutteridge

I am no academic, just an ordinary person. I am widowed, my eldest son is a scientist and a Non-stipendiary Minister, my second son died of cancer recently, he was a teacher, my youngest son is a chef and is Homosexual and my daughter runs her own café and is Lesbian. Just an ordinary family, the same as many others who have children who are different. So what has this got to do with Radical Christianity ? Well I'll tell you.

No-one, unless they have experienced the emotions of coming to terms with problems of homosexuality, can appreciate the mental turmoil. On discovering my son's, and later on my daughter's, sexual orientation, suddenly my life was changed. This was in 1969, one year after the Act of Parliament was passed giving sanction to consenting adults.

I was to go through every kind of desolation rising eventually to anger, chiefly at the attitudes of society, but most of all of the Church. My love for my children became stronger so I had to try and educate myself on the subject from the sparse amount of literature which was available in those days. I had to come to terms with it, stifle my own guilt because of the Church's teaching which said that my son and daughter were sinful and finally heal myself by becoming a counsellor to other parents.

I myself had received no help from anyone, least of all the Church (which I left for thirteen years), until I became involved in one of the first self-help groups to be formed, called Parents Enquiry. There are now a few more groups of parents in various parts of England who are willing to help by just listening and giving understanding. It is not easy to hear a father sobbing on the telephone, or a mother's trembling voice, when they hear of their child being Gay, because one re-experiences their sorrow.

One of the first denominational groups to be formed to help homosexuals was one by the Quakers. A few years ago there came The Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement which is doing fine work in spite of opposition from a minority of clergy, and other denominations are becoming involved. All that is needed is a caring attitude and I feel that Radicalism has great potential in this respect.

My own pain must have been as nothing compared to the trauma that my children must have experienced, but, nevertheless, it was devastating and worst of all was the secrecy, not being able to confide in anyone, as twenty years ago the subject was rarely mentioned in public.

After twelve years my husband died and, as I had been speaking to various organisations in other parts of England, I decided to 'come out' to my friends. My son was already being open among his friends, so with the agreement of the whole family I consented to appear on television on a subject which dealt with the difficulties that parents of Gay children were experiencing.

After bringing up my son and daughter thinking that they were heterosexual I had to completely turn around my whole thoughts. When I experienced the release of my burden I was then able to become myself again, a woman with nothing to hide and who could stand up and be counted. Even so, although I myself am heterosexual, I still have to face up to the criticism of homophobics, and I ponder the challenge of Aids. But how does this relate to Radical Christianity ?

Radicalism is similar, the process was almost the same in my case. First there arose doubts about what one had learnt in the past about Religion, then came the suspicion that some things did not add up, for instance the Resurrection and Virgin Birth. Next began disillusionment with the Church, with its dogma, with its creed, and its insistence on guilt and sin. Then came the internal arguments regarding women priests and, more importantly to me, its indecision regarding Homosexuality. Finally I discovered the sincerity of other faiths and cultures and began to think with Meister Eckhart that "the eye with which I see God and the eye with which God sees me, is one and the same eye". Therefore I had to undergo a complete turn around in my thinking for the second time in my life. It is known as *metanoia* translated as 'to take a new view of things', 'change direction', and I decided once again to stand up and be counted and joined the SOF Network.

For fifty years, apart from an absence of thirteen years, I had attended my village church. This has now become fundamentalist and I have had to leave it and found one where the theology taught is more radical. I consider that I am very fortunate in being able to find one even though it entails travelling seventeen miles each Sunday.

I still call myself Christian because I believe in Christian ethics and am also bound by my love of humanity in the broadest sense of the words and I am still a member of the Church of England. Possibly this is because I have in the past had inexplicable experiences and have received strength from Something subjectively experienced outside myself which is

incomprehensible and I am still occasionally overwhelmed by the mystery and power of prayer.

When I am conversing with others at the conferences, and sense the frustration, anger and anxieties that they are experiencing, I feel their relief at being able to share their problems with another who also grapples with the same ideas. There is also the strength and purpose of the groups, very similar to the sharing which takes place when I am counselling the parent of a Gay child, the empathy which takes place with another.

In moments of reflection I know that I have had to throw away much which cluttered up my faith to attain liberation, but I still retain my Joy at being alive in an amazing world. I do not pretend to understand the mystery of Life but Radicalism gives me the opportunity to delve into the ebb and flow of my inner doubts. I wonder how many others are wanting to change their own way of thinking, and also how many will dare to 'come out', stand up and be counted - and become liberated. How many will be able to be Radical Christians - and proud of it ?

A CONTRIBUTION TO A MODERN SPIRITUALITY

DONALD RUTHERFORD 1928 - 1991

Introduced by Reg Snowdon

Donald Rutherford, who died unexpectedly last summer, was a member of the SOF Network and the author of a small book called **A View from the Hill** which is not, perhaps, as well known as it deserves to be.

Donald was born and grew up on Tyneside. After graduating in Politics and Economics from Durham University, he became a farm-worker for two years as a conscientious objector to military service. He eventually gave up his pacifism, but he never lost his fundamental conviction that moral truth was the essence of religion. It is many years now since Donald said to me that on at least one crucial respect Don Cupitt had got it right : religion was a spirituality - an ethic and a way of life - or it was nothing.

In England, Donald's career as a teacher was interrupted in the Fifties to train as a Methodist minister at Richmond College, London, although he did not go on to be a full-time parson. Instead, he went to India to work in teacher-training. He was ordained into the Church of South India and, in September and October 1963, he gave a series of eight sermons at Egmore Wesley Church, Madras. The subject was the then Bishop of Woolwich's book **Honest to God**, which had come out earlier in the same year. Donald said that to him the book came as a breath of fresh air, making him feel in less of a false position in the church, less isolated.

But, to commend **Honest to God** publicly, at that time and in that place, must have been quite a brave thing to do, I think. I remember his conclusion. Donald predicted that even the radical views of the author would provide no final resting place. When I read this, some years after the event, I remember feeling uneasy - my complacency threatened, I suppose. But, he was right.

In 1968, believing his views to be unorthodox, Donald resigned from the ministry. Immediately prior to his death he was collecting material for a book to which he had given the working title : **A Post-Christian View of Jesus, Paul and the Church**. It was very early days, of course, but my feeling is that, in Donald's mature thought, the church was not likely to appear in a very attractive guise. In an alternate working title the term "Post-Christian" became "Agnostic".

The five extracts assembled here, however, are from a different kind of book, written four years earlier. Essentially, **A View from the Hill** is about how we ought to face death without the support of a traditional religious faith. At first, these passages may appear too simple. This is deceptive. They are a real contribution to a modern spirituality. And they have a lifetime of thought and experience within them.

THE MEANING OF LIFE (from Chap. 2)

"What is the meaning of life ?" is not the sort of question that commends itself to people. Professional philosophers find it variously meaningless, tiresome, and irritating and it is so obviously what philosophy ought to be about but is not, that those who ask it are usually perceived as ignorant and ill-mannered. Most of us find it faintly uncomfortable, like someone suddenly saying "let us pray" in the middle of a party. If it has a proper context, you would say that it belongs with dim lighting and an alcoholic haze, where instant matiness and instant profundity go hand in hand. For that is its problem - it is a question both awkward and personal. It is not seen as a question remote and abstract but as one which requires me to sum up *me* - difficult at any time, dangerous perhaps, possibly distasteful and not normally to be done in company. There is an unpleasant hint that if one were to get near an answer one would only discover that it cast an unkindly light on whatever course of action or style of life one was pursuing at the time.

And there are those who think that asking the question is a waste of time anyway. After all, life is for living, not talking about. Words are sometimes a substitute for life, an evasion. Some people will do anything to avoid decisions, action, encounter - and that is where life is. Look at professional philosophers, they say, or academic people generally - there is no evidence that cleverness leads to happier, wiser, saner lives. All of which one would grant. Talking about life *can* be an attempt to escape from it. But not always, and there is at least an initial case for supposing that if we can frame the question and *feel* it, we should at least attempt an answer .....

It needs to be said that the discussion of fundamental questions is not best left to academic people. In these matters there are no specialists. The meaning of life is as accessible to shepherds as it is to wise men. Indeed, in so far as pride is a notorious hindrance in the search for the truth, the wise men often have a hard time of it. They lose their way, mistaking their own glitter for stars .....

Part of the resistance to the question about the meaning of life arises from those who dimly discern that the question as it is posed is the short form of another question : "what is the meaning of life if soon we are to die ?". The resistance is instructive. It reminds us that we all have a wish to consider that life is the norm, being alive is what counts. But the truth is that mortal life, finite life, is the norm. It is our mortality we wish to forget.

Wisely, you might think. Can any good come from thinking about our mortality ? Certainly there is little point in making plans for after our death - then we shall be disposees rather than disposers.

Yet the picture of life within which we plan our actions should be as real, as life-like, as possible. And to forget our mortality is to falsify it.

FACING THE UNKNOWN (from Chap.4)

Ideas of immortality, or eternal life (beyond resurrection) can distort our understanding of the human condition, just as the apparent security of modern life can. We can actually begin to think of having endless time, time that does not need to be counted. But this is a false view. A man is born and dies. If he rises again it is in such a different form and in such a different world as not to affect our understanding of the basic fact - he is born and dies and the time between the two events is measurable and not far from the biblical three score years and ten. To forget death, to think too much of eternal life, is to forget how time-bound, limited, rationed, life is. And the strangeness is, when we think of it, that the idea of endlessness does not enhance our experience of life but diminishes it. If there were an infinity of Christmases, each would be less remarkable - and primroses for ever might seem less beautiful .....

We are going to die, and in a few years' time. Our instinct, of course, is to stay alive. Our bodies and minds fight for life, take precautions, leap out of the way of buses. But no amount of agility will avoid the last enemy. Not that we have really worked out the implications of life for ever - would we defeat aging, or simply go on getting older - or would we prefer to stay alive at a certain age ? Forevernesses are decidedly less attractive when we try to see them in detail.

The life we know and the life which, deep down, we approve of, is one of ceaseless change, of comings and goings, meetings and partings - and with them joy and sorrow and beauty. This is life - the only life we know - in which we grow old and die. And because, whatever darknesses we have known, we love this life, then the thought of leaving it forever causes us grief. This is the starting point of our thinking .....

When we were young we knew that life was wonderful but took it as our due. Now that we are older we see that all the wonderful things that have happened to us were not of our doing - they came, they happened, they were given to us. Whatever we contributed depended on the gift of our talents and skills - nothing ultimately was ours. We were the receivers of gifts. I say nothing about the giver, if indeed he should be personalised - that is another story. But that we have received gifts seems undeniable. And this must be the second point of our understanding .....

If we have received so much, then, there can be only one feeling which dominates our outlook, our attitude

- that of gratitude. It is not merely that we feel grateful but that with our minds, as we seek to understand where we have been, where we have come from and where we are going - with our minds, we know that we should be grateful. It is not merely the passing feeling but the cast of all one's thinking. So conscious and deliberate must it be that it must almost be vocal, spoken - explicitly understood.

HORIZONS (from Chap.5)

The present is full of our anticipation of the future and one problem that could bother us in later years is : what can we hope for ? So much of our mental well-being, our frame of mind, our peace, depends on what we look forward to, on our horizons. As we grow older, death looms larger - a blight on our hopes. What shall we hope for as time visibly shortens ?

It is right and proper that a rational man should approach his final days with a considered attitude. We know nothing of what is beyond our last breath but it would seem reasonable to approach that entry to a timeless future on the basis of all our previous experience. And if, looking back, we see so much to be thankful for, how can we not look forward with hope ? What other attitude would be reasonable ?

It may well be that the hope of immortality is our last hope, a hope rather than a belief, and a hope based on the fact that we go to join the dead (to rest with our fathers) and on the happy remembrance of life received with them. It is obviously a selective hope - it is the good and happy we hope to see again, just as it is the good and happy if life we remember.

At the end of life, hope (which is forward looking) and gratitude (which is backward looking) come together. At the end, to have a hope which is full of immortality is an expression of thankfulness. And if we ask whether this hope is real enough to support us through our final days, then we have to affirm that the truly generative power to live comes only from a grateful heart, because it is unthreatened by anxieties for life, by the need to grasp, to hang on. It has received fully and can accept release from life whenever the time comes. Gratitude is the purest motive for living, the least self-interested, the most assured and confident. It can take risks and accept great odds for its targets are all achieved, leaving only joy to be expressed and songs to be sung.

AN ADEQUATE ANSWER ?

(from Chap.7)

Not all who die before their natural time go in peace. For many the yet unlived years are a source of bitterness. So much might have been but now cannot be. It scarcely matters that some of the dreams were only that. The opportunities will never come. And since so much was yet to be, and will not be, how can anyone feel gratitude ? It is not difficult to be grateful at the end of a long and happy life. But how can one be grateful for that which never came ?

It is difficult, not being in that place, to speak of it. It is easy to say that in so far as there were expectations, grounds for hope, there must at least have been some things to have been grateful for, the grounds of those expectations. But in the bitterness of a future swept away, how easy is it to feel gratitude for the past which gave hope ? Even so, what we have had, and what we hoped for, both were gifts and not possessions. It can be a snare as we look forward to unlived years to see them as years of possession, as things we have. But as we know from looking back, we pass through them and do not possess them. Even brilliant futures must be given up, and become remembrances and thanksgivings. If they are seen as thanksgivings from beyond, why not from before ? Is it not possible to be grateful for an unlived future as well as for a lived past ? I do not know. The words may be easy, the reality not.

CONCLUSION (from Chap.8)

In the last resort the picture we draw of life and death, the meaning we give to them, is our responsibility. The meaning does not lie wholly there - outside - but is partly in us to create. How can one generalise from one's own small experience about all mankind ? Yet the truth is that praise and gratitude have come from the most unlikely situations. Wretched men have praised God, and the painfully dying have given thanks. And there lies our last freedom. No matter how constrained our circumstances, no matter how confined our bodies or wearied our minds, whether we shall praise or condemn is ours to choose. Both are our assertions against the world and bring their own rewards. I will sing a new song unto the Lord, wrote the psalmist, and whether we have a God to sing to or not, the song is the privilege of us all, the poetry of humanness. We alone decide whether it shall be of lament or praise, a dirge or thanksgiving.

Selective quotations above are from :
Rutherford, Donald. **A View from the Hill**, Souvenir Press, 1987, vi + 60pp. £5.95 h/b, by kind permission of the publishers.

DON CUPITT'S NOTEBOOK (4)
MYSTICISM AND TRANSIENCE

(another in our series of talk outlines)

REASON AS LONGTERMISM

Civilization requires people to work under rule for long periods to complete large-scale projects. And perhaps too it has to have fictions of unchanging truth, value and authority. That which lasts longest and is least corruptible has the highest value : gold, diamond. The transient is regarded as relatively shallow, selfish, hedonistic and 'materialistic' ! The pleasures of sense are considered to be not truly satisfying to the soul.

AUTHORITY AND OBJECTIVITY

Religious and social authority always tends to be 'realistic' : it represents itself as going back to the beginning, as unchanging, as metaphysically-backed, and as teaching objective truth. What is 'real' or 'natural' is what is entrenched, part of the order of things and not negotiable. Thus the more authoritarian the religion, the more 'realistic' it is in its doctrinal claims. It offers the absolute security of absolute knowledge of absolute Reality.

MYSTICISM AND AUTHORITY

Authoritarian, realistic religion seeks security and tends to be fetishistic. It fears time and loss. Mystical religion, by contrast, emphasises that all religious views are relative and all images inadequate. It finds salvation not in security and staying still, but in non-attachment and moving on. It is light-footed and evasive. It tries to use language, not to fix Truth, but to liberate us from the desire for Truth, Reality etc. All things slip away, including the self. There is no real self, and there is nothing to cling to. Let go. When we become completely non-clinging, we will become anxiety-free, compassionate, self-less.

TRANSIENCE AS THE VOID

In northern Buddhism, the Void = universal transience, the slipping away of everything. Fully to accept this is liberation - though not as doctrine, but as practice that leads to 'traceless Enlightenment'.

> NAGARJUNA : Nirvana (religious deliverance) is not something beyond Samsara, the cycles of birth and death. They coincide.
>
> DOGEN : Impermanence is Buddha-nature. (And consider Japanese art). Compare in the modern West, our love for late Impressionism, abstract painting, music.

JESUS AND NON-REALISM

Many Buddhists have expressed admiration for Jesus' teaching, especially such sayings as : "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath", "Take no thought for the morrow", "Resist not evil", "The Kingdom of God is within you". There has always been a possibility of anti-longtermism in Christianity. Blake suggests we may conjoin humanism with a mysticism of the fleeting.

ONE VIEW OF TRUTH

Harold Steel

> Pilate : You are a king then ?
>
> Jesus : King is your word. My task is to bear witness to the truth. For this I was born, for this I came into the world, and all that are not deaf to truth listen to my voice.
>
> Pilate : What .... is truth ?

What follows was prompted by a number of things, but an invitation to take part in a discussion with the minister at the church I attend one Sunday evening, (substitute for the sermon), and the question of what to discuss, triggered off assembling this collection of ideas - which in the event were deemed to be a bit over-the-top for the normal Methodist congregation. If you read on, I think you will see why. Let us start with a list. A bit naive, perhaps, but one has to start from some initial premise.

Truth, initially, is what we are told as little children. Truth is revealed in part by education. Truth is affected by only a partial knowledge of the facts. Truth is modified by such influences as (a) the section of society in which we mix, (b) the attitude we take to life and (c) our individual financial and domestic circumstances. Truth varies for the subject matter (eg maths, science, culture, religion etc.) for which truth is sought. Truth is influenced by individual bias and varies with your point of view ; there are two or more sides to every question. Truth can depend upon the interpretation of myth/allegory/metaphor/ story. *Truth is therefore subjective as much, if not more so, than it is objective.* Truth is, therefore, for us, what we want it to be. Indeed, you can take elements of a number of the preceding points and form an amalgam which will be true for one individual and him/her alone.

The religious debate is concerned with what is true about what stands for us as God. But it is impossible to come to a 'true' conclusion, if only by definition, because of the terms in which God is described. She is beyond knowledge. Some of us are reminded of the idea in the hymns of Christian worship. Attributes are ascribed to God, but those attributes are ascribed on the initial premise that a realist God exists, which in turn rests on traditional arguments for the existence of God. The conclusions drawn from those arguments are not verified. We are told to take it on trust. Have faith. Why should we ?

The traditional religious person will, (probably), claim revelation, in respect of knowledge of god, (we are now down to a small 'g'), and in respect of scripture. All sorts of wonders are claimed to support this idea. But in the light of current understanding those wonders themselves raise serious questions. There are quite a number within the church's ranks who cannot take literally ideas like virgin birth and physical resurrection. These are true for those who wish to believe them ; they are not true for those who don't. Nobody can resolve the matter absolutely one way or another which brings us back to the point about truth being subjective, not objective.

On the philosophical angle, we have much to thank Wittgenstein for, with regard to the philosophy of language ; and Cupitt leans fairly heavily on him in some respects. (I must ask at this point that you bear in mind that I am an engineer, not a philosophy student !) Cupitt would argue that there is nothing outside language. That is to say there is nothing of which we can have knowledge, or engage in the study of, that is outside language ; on the basis that we think in words. We are taught from the cradle to name things ; mummy, daddy, dog, cat, table, etc. ..... and our thought processes develop using ideas forged by and described in words. We have to be able to match ideas to word patterns, which are recognisable, and therefore communicable, and it works because it is drawn from the culture of which we are a part.

In that sense we are creatures of our culture. Now in this context the word "god" conveys an abstract idea, of which we only have knowledge from the notions our own culture has ascribed to her/him. It is a one-sided picture, because we cannot get around the back to see what is on the other side, so to speak. It is an idea which sits on the periphery of language, rather than one which is surrounded by language. Indeed, traditional theology would seek to put god outside language altogether, as being over and above it.

This, Cupitt would no doubt argue, is a direct child of Platonic philosophy where there was the Good and the Forms, which were over and against the created universe as understood. The only comprehensible argument for such a 'being' is to explain the unknown and inexplicable. Which brings us to the concept of the void. To those grounded and brought up upon the idea that god made everything and is the origin, purpose and end of all things, the thought that the universe as currently understood has no known origin, no known purpose, (and while its demise is a matter of some speculation), its demise to what and why is equally unknown, is very hard to accept. That, crudely, is the void. Which is where the non-realist steps in.

Having taken the view that traditional ideas are subjective truth, masquerading as objectivity, and moreover a system which does not work for me, I now have to put something in its place ; it is often easier to knock things down than build new ones. Don Cupitt believes that the New Testament story is capable of being bent sufficiently to accommodate a non-realist viewpoint. Perhaps one reason for this is the fact that the gospels contain a lot of material which critical study cannot attribute to Jesus, and a lot more which is dubious in origin. From what I know, I would suggest that the four gospels deal more with the kingdom of god on earth than in heaven. But Dennis Nineham (at SOF I) expressed the view that the non-realist position requires a *new* story, and that indeed would be difficult.

Clearly, if one is to be a Christian non-realist the story has to stay. But it has to be interpreted and to a greater degree than currently undertaken by liberal theologians. It would retain all the gospel teaching as to how we should deal with our neighbour ; but not those writings which perpetuate sexual discrimination, particularly as found in the writings of the Pauline school, who were probably the best exponents of discrimination one could find, and not just in the matter of sex. But then one must concede that they were people of their day, which is very different to our day.

The view of truth as subjective and a non-realist attitude to god attracts various reactions - as seen in SOF's conferences - there are those who openly take that position, those who sympathise but take no active part, those who go part of the road but not all, those who disagree, those who violently disagree, and those who would have you hung, drawn and quartered. But the non-realist case, because it does not recognise one over-riding and absolute truth, is by nature tolerant. This is unlike the right wing of the traditional church, and to a lesser degree the balance of the traditional church, which believes it has an absolute truth to proclaim and will not have anything else. Two points come to mind here : (a) the foregoing is perhaps a harsh judgement in some respects and (b) the non-realist would see it right that those who believe the traditional faith should follow its tenets, even when it means that the non-realist comes under attack.

To pursue (b) a bit further. If you believe that you hold a truth, and moreover a religious truth about the life hereafter, that is not something that you stick under a bushel. And if you are a caring soul you will not want to see others damned in hell. Now that is a rather stark scenario ; it supposes that the whole church rushes round rather like the more extreme of the 'evangelical' groups, and clearly it does not. Most adherents of the church would seek to attract others to the church by being the kind of people they are. They do not attempt to drag others to worship by dangling them over hell, and I would stick my neck out and suggest that this is because the idea of hell does not figure very large in the thinking of the majority. So we can therefore detect a shift away from the basic tenets of the early Christian fathers. The impression is gained that for the majority of those who attend church the idea of hell is no longer *true*.

However, if the idea of a real devil is being lost to sight, then its counterpart is still alive and well. Most adherents to church still hope for heaven and the thing that gives them that hope is the belief in a realist god. The situation can now be seen to be out of balance ; for it would appear that only one side of the argument is being considered. Perhaps universalist ideas are in part to blame for this state of affairs. There is a streak of universalism, so I'm told, in Wesley's 44 Sermons. Allegedly compulsory reading for all trainee local preachers in the Methodist Connexion. For if god is eventually to save all his children, by a means not yet clear, why should they worry about hell ? So we forget hell and try to encourage people to be good, so that they will go to heaven.

Here we have a paradox. Originally the whole object of the exercise was to save people from hell ; let's qualify that - the whole object according to the early fathers was to save people from hell. They gave us the myth of god incarnate, whose death and resurrection on our behalf, by faith, saves us from our sins for eternal life. Yet James comes along and tells us that faith without works is dead ; and a dead faith will save nobody so we busy ourselves with good works, to the degree at which it appears to be in contravention of Paul's words to the Ephesians. Now that line of argument is a bit specious, but the point is to illustrate that the first principles on which the early church set out to conquer the world are gradually receding in the intensity in which they are held ; or to put it another way, *they are not as true as they used to be.*

For all the fact that, particularly at communion/ mass/eucharist, the traditional words are used, their meaning is being interpreted ; they are seen as symbolic ; they are being softened to the point at which it is the lifestyle that is adopted which is more important than what the individual holds as a particular set of doctrines above all else. One should love one's neighbour, even if one's god is not what she used to be. And those of a non-realist or radical persuasion, and have got there through or despite church and Christian influence, wish that those in the church for whom they hold such an affection would cut the umbilical cord, and as they see it, stand on their own feet. However, as stated at the outset, the non-realist has to take a tolerant view, on principle, not having claim to an absolute truth with which to beat people about the ears. Hence she/he can only quietly put a point of view and wait and watch.

Earlier it was suggested that to say that the church has an absolute truth to proclaim and that it will not have anything else is a bit harsh. It is a bit harsh when you consider those of the calibre of say, John

Robinson or David Jenkins. Liberal theology has unhooked itself from a lot of the things that push people in the non-realist/radical direction. But it has not yet trusted itself to the void. God still retains his otherworldliness, and is real. The debate between the liberal and the radical hangs, to some degree, on how the evidence is interpreted.

Both agree that some things can be treated as myth ; and largely both would support the work done by critical biblical scholarship in helping to sort out what is reliable and what is not, as far as the Christian story is concerned. For the Christian non-realist still draws on that story for a lot of the material with which he/she will work, even though the choice is selective and is not exclusively biblical. In fact the more scholarly of the radicals will pull ideas from a wide range of sources. Perhaps this is why some of them distance themselves from the liberals, as they see the liberal taking too narrow a view, constrained by the limits of scripture ; whereas radicals will survey the human state and trace the march of human thought, drawing from the great thinkers of every age. It is not without significance that the leading figure of radical/ non-realist thought in this country earns his daily crust lecturing in the Philosophy of Religion, while still being a Church of England priest.

For where the traditional Christian teaching draws on the ideas of Plato and Aristotle, and has not really shifted for nigh on 2000 years, the radical will take account, as far as she/he is able to keep up with it, of current philosophical and religious thought. And the question comes, which is true ? I would argue that the balance must come down on the side of the radical if for no other reason than the current state of knowledge is far greater than in the day of Plato and Aristotle. What would they have been saying if they had been able to study in the equivalent of a modern day Cambridge ? And we must not think that we have got to the final truth for one thing is certain and that is that the more we learn the more we realise that we know comparatively little. Hence the idea of achieving knowledge of absolute truth becomes a will o' the wisp.

In a sense truth is like a snap-shot of the moment. It is true at that point in time and often at that point in time only. An obvious example would be if I were to say that I am 55 years, 3 months, 28 days, 7 hours, 3 minutes and 57 seconds old ; by the time the typewriter keys have hit the paper it is no longer true. Clearly it is a matter of degree. The world was thought to be flat for a long time before it was thought of as round, and even that term is relative, for it is no sphere. But even at such an extended time scale there is movement. You can see that yet again we are moving back to the discussion on how we use words and language. And truth is only what is understood to be true in that culture, at that time, and in that place. Things are always on the march. The only thing that seems to display any degree of permanence is mathematics and even that I would treat with caution.

So Jesus stands before Pilate, and claims to be bearing witness to the truth. Pilate, on the other hand, stands out as a man before his time, and asks what truth is. Perhaps he was wiser than he was given credit for.

LEARNING TO SWIM IN THE SEA OF FAITH

Rosemarie Wedell

This article consists of thoughts and clarifications arising from a weekend with Don Cupitt at St Katherine's Community, London, in October 1990. But first, some biographical notes.

It is over twenty years now since I had my first introduction to the other great World-Religions by Professor S.G.F. Brandon and his younger colleagues, one a convert to Zoroastrianism and one to Buddhism, in the Department of the Study of Comparative Religion in the University of Manchester. The latter subject has been taught at Manchester since 1907, and I have always felt that I am in the right place in Manchester.

I was fortunate to be a "visiting student" in Brandon's department and on his course. He was an excellent teacher. His famous book **Man and his Destiny in the Great Religions**, published by Manchester University Press in 1961, is well worth reading. Brandon had been a priest in the Anglo-Catholic wing of the Church of England. His truthfulness and curiosity gradually took him to the study of, and The Chair in, the Study of Comparative Religion, created by Manchester University in the Faculty of Theology on his account. By the time I met him he had acquired an international reputation and published many books. I owe him a great debt of gratitude and friendship and illumination. Alas, he died at only 63, in 1971, much mourned by the world of scholarship as an outstanding historian of religion but little appreciated by his church and fellow-theologians.

I have been teaching World Religions on and off since 1973 at the Manchester College of Adult Education, in Brussels at the European School and, since my retirement from the College in 1987, I have carried on with The University of the Third Age.

The study of the History of Religion opens our eyes to the geographical, historical and cultural factors which contribute, very substantially, to the making of religi-

ous faith and theology and which continue to do so unabated. That nature and human life/history are in a continuous state of flux, movement and impermanence has been noted and commented upon by Taoists, Hindus and Buddhists for centuries before the Christian era. It is part of the truth of things to acknowledge this whether we Westerners, with our craving for uniqueness, like it or not.

To have this understanding of life, i.e. to accept that "Truth is a pathless land" (Krishnamurti) requires courage and faith. To find meaning in the midst of sorrow, loss, despair and horror demands an arduous commitment to the ethical teaching and values available to us all in the rich store of the world's ethical teachings. As a result of their study we realise that it is up to us, each one of us, to discover our own brand of meaning and significance. To 'make sense' of our lives, that is to find out what we are here for, involves our will, our imagination, our time and energy. Making sense of and giving meaning to our experience is a profoundly creative act performed by the human being, who shares his/her unquenchable curiosity with the animals, as they seek to understand their environment and accommodate themselves to it within the limits of their capacities.

However, unless the sense and meaning we glean from our observations, investigations and reflections acquire a distinctly human dimension and are directed towards our fellow human beings, unless they are concerned with the betterment of the society of which we are a part, unless we are committed to the safeguarding of our natural 'environ' which, with all human societies, constitute the 'reality' beyond our individual selves, we can end up in a state of disintegration, nihilism and self-destruction, a state of schizophrenia. More people than we care to know about live in that state today. They either cannot or do not want to face up to their responsibilities of living in the state of adulthood, do not want to accept the fact that the time has come for women and men to generate their own salvation in reverend mutuality with all human beings and nature.

This is what is meant by living in the Void. The Void, in Buddhism, means that human beings, as the highest form of Consciousness and born with the potential for Buddhahood (Enlightenment), are surrounded by impermanence and seeming emptiness. Although the Void is empty it is a living Void. Emptiness is not the same as nothingness. There is no such state/thing as nothingness. According to the Buddha, human beings give meaning to human life and history through the practice of Compassion, of the Eightfold Path which leads to Wisdom and through the overcoming of the Impurities and Suffering. In Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism, the universe has been conceived as of infinite and timeless proportions. Hence Hindus, Buddhists and Taoists never experienced the rude shock we, in the West, experienced in the last century when we began to realise how empty, vast and timeless space is.

However, we who live at the end of the 20th century are already familiar with the properties of the living Void. It pulsates, vibrates with electricity and energy, with countless atoms, particles and whatnots, with light and soundwaves. It is forever creating new patterns, is never the same for one instant, but it is void and empty of divine personal being and spirit. This living void has become, increasingly, the background of our lives. We are moving into, flying around in it, investigating and probing and landing, so far only on the Moon, and establish space stations in it. The void forms the backcloth to our human existence in the biosphere of our planet earth which is turning on its axis in the void, ceaselessly. We can learn to feel at home in it and with it and bring about a sense of unity between our inner and its outer space : an interpenetration of inner and outer space.

In the process of creating my own faith-language or faith-story in my meditation times, I find the notion of the Nooesphere, encircling our planet earth, helpful. It is vibrating and pulsating with the spiritual energy of the faithful departed from every faith-community and none throughout the earth ; with praises and thanksgivings for all human life and endeavour, for all sentient beings ; with intercessions and supplications for our fellow human beings in their various needs and for due reverence in our dealings with the phenomenal world ; with the holy dreams and visions of countless women and men in every faith-community and none throughout the earth, in every place, of a more humane world-society, one which is caring for the biosphere " ... as over each continent and island the dawn leads on another day voices of prayer are never silent, nor dies the strain of praise away ...". Prayer is the concentration of the human mind, in reverend attention to whatever need, problem and injustice has come to its notice.

Not to believe in God does not rob us of spiritual responsibility, energy and creativity. To the contrary, our self-generated spiritual energy, nourished by the teaching of the religious geniuses of the species, contributes to our human strength and self-reliance, to our determination to achieve universal compassion and wisdom.

It was Professor Wladimir Wernadski, living at the beginning of the century in Moscow, who invented/created the notion of the Nooesphere. He and Pavlev Florovski, who was a member of the Russian emigré community in Paris in the Twenties, corresponded about it. They conceived of it as being a sphere or crystallisation of human spiritual energy, emanating ceaselessly from the earth and, simultaneously, sending spiritual emanations back to earth as holy power, presence and energy. Teilhard de Chardin must have picked up the notion from the Russians in Paris and used it in his own thinking and writing.

How do I know this ? From Raisa Orlowa Kopolev's book : **Die Türen öffnen sich langsam** (The Doors slowly open). It is the account of her painful transition

VIEW FROM A YACHT AT SEA OFF DOVER BEACH

Yesterday there was a poet on Dover Beach, tall be-whiskered and tweedy. A woman joined him and they linked arms and left. We had a struggle not to be swept away down-Channel that evening. The tide was full on the ebb and our anchors dragged in the kelp. We beat all night against wind and tide, constantly losing ground. Did he see our small sail and understand our efforts out on the muddy waters of Dover Strait, or were we just part of the view ?

Today I saw a television crew on the beach. A theologian was talking into the camera. They stayed there for a whole tide, at first moving the camera up the beach away from the relentless advance of the seas, later edging back down again as the threat of flooding waters was replaced by a struggle to keep the retreating tide in-shot. The wind was strong, directly onto the beach. Well reefed down our yacht strained to claw to weather off the lee-shore. We were too preoccupied with working the yacht to notice when the men left the beach.

Tomorrow if the forecast is fair, I intend to land on Dover Beach. I want to see what they saw, standing there. It must be strange to stand full-square upon the strand, instead of at the helm of a vessel on the tideway. Are things more certain there ? At sea, we have nothing to anchor our bodies or thoughts. There is no purpose in the blowing wind or the set of the tide, other than the use they serve us in our journeys. The voyage is the purpose and the meaning of it all.

Roger Barnes

of having to leave Russia and her family with her husband Lev, who was expelled in the same manner as Solzhenitsyn. They settled in Germany with the help of Heinrich Böll, the German writer, and she had to learn and understand a foreign language and culture which she achieved and crowned with her book written in German. In this book she writes about Wernadski and his Nooesphere. Alas, she died of cancer four years ago. Her husband still lives in Cologne.

How does Jesus, the Christ, fit into this new vision of faith ? He was a prophet of the Old Testament Jewish mould and a religious genius whose message and example of living continues to be felt by his followers, by those who believe in a personal God at the centre of the universe and history who was once and for all time incarnated in Jesus Christ. The person, life and teaching of Jesus has inspired Western men and women with splendid, tender, and holy stories, pictures, ideas, dogmas and a systematic theology. Their meaning need not be lost, if the will to change their presentation, radically, can assert itself in the church and among theologians.

It is *meaning* we are after not "Truth". Truth like "God" is a word that has lost its former meaning. Both had meaning in the past, great and 'ultimate' meaning for me, once, also. Today each of us must choose their own metaphor, concept, symbol and create their own story, learning to share them with others in state of "frank and honourable exchange". This is the true way forward into discovering, in the words of a fellow-story-teller, a

> "thousand, thousand, thousand and one different currents/stories each one a different colour, weaving in and out of one another like a liquid tapestry of breathtaking complexity ... and because the stories held there, in the ocean of the streams of stories, are in fluid form, they retain the ability to change, to become new versions of themselves and so become yet other stories ...."
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> (Salman Rushdie in **Haroun and The Sea of Stories**, published in 1990.)

We Westerners, and that includes Jews, are so frightened of giving up the triumphalist truth-claims of our Judeo-Christian story and its uniqueness. This attitude of exclusivity has not only dominated our religion and culture but our nationalisms also. Overall, it has done as much harm as good in our world-region Europa, in the Near East and worldwide. In what sense would the world really be better off with a belief in God and the teaching of Christology ?

Christians and Jews have to address themselves to answering these questions in the light of the teaching of the other great Faiths, some of them more ancient than they are, and in the light of the research into modern sub-atomic physics and the structure and chemistry of the human brain.

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