SOFiA

Exploring Values, Meaning and Spirituality

Reflections on Death

The subject of death might just be the last remaining obscenity. In a hyper-sexualised society in which virtually nothing is still taboo, death continues to be something that people in polite society prefer not to talk about. Carefully sanitised death in action-adventure movies, yes, deaths in the Ukraine war, yes, but death as something we all inevitably face, no. Death has also not been a theme in SOFiA meetings or conferences to my knowledge, in spite of the advancing years of our members. It seems that we prefer to talk about ideas that we can keep at a safe distance rather than those that are close to the bone and might disturb us emotionally.

Freud thinks that we are fundamentally incapable of conceptualising our own death; there is always an 'I' there observing that death. But we also live mostly in a way that denies death; we realise that other people will die but resist the conclusion that we too will die.

In such a situation, the gross and offensive imagery of the Hearse song (https://www.studenthandouts.com/texts/poetry/worm-hearse-song-lyrics.htm) can be a welcome shock that awakens us to the reality of death.

Your editor was in a therapy group in Germany, when one of the group became very distressed and explained that she was very afraid of dying. I wondered what to say to her. Anything I thought of seemed abstract and wooden and powerless to engage with how she actually felt. At the same time, I was thinking that I, as an ordained minister, surely was supposed to be the expert in such matters. After all, people turn to the clergy when it comes to organising a funeral service. I felt impotent and quite unable to respond adequately to this person and was grateful to the leader and others in the group for their responses. Accordingly, it was of great help to read *Staring at the Sun* in preparation for this issue. Its author, Irvin Yalom, is a well-known existential psychotherapist who has made therapy of those afraid of death or avoiding death an important part of his work.

We could begin a reflection on death with Lloyd Geering's (in)famous statement, "Man has no immortal soul." This statement caused outrage among many and revealed the great gap between modern theology and the piety of many churchgoers. Scholars nowadays recognise that the notion of an immortal soul is part of our Greek heritage (most famously in Plato's account of the death of Socrates) rather than something to be found in the bible. The bible talks of resurrection and does not have the idea that a part of us is inherently indestructible. Consequently, Karl Barth advocates a Ganztodtheorie, the idea that it is the whole person, body and 'soul', that dies (see page 8).

Following the Geering controversy, Lloyd attempted to bridge the gap between academic theology and the ordinary churchgoer by reflecting on what resurrection can mean for us today in his book *Resurrection a Symbol of Hope* (see page 2). I wonder how many of his opponents in the Presbyterian Laymen's

Association actually read this book. I suspect very few.

If we don't have an immortal soul, what can we affirm in the face of death? We could begin with the ideas of Epicurus, whose philosophy aimed to help us overcome the fear of death. He wrote the following to Menoeceous:

> Death, the most dreaded of evils, is therefore of no concern to us; for while we exist death is not present, and when death is present we no longer exist. It is therefore nothing either to the living or to the dead since it is not present to the living, and the dead no longer are.

This is a simple but elegant argument. As long as we exist, death is not there. Once death is there, we don't exist any more. So we and death have nothing in common. The only trouble is, the argument might make logical sense, but it doesn't make existential sense. Death exerts its influence on us long before the moment of death. We are aware of death throughout life. That is something that distinguishes us from animals (see page9). The emergence of self-awareness includes an awareness that our life will come to an end. As a result, death isn't just something that comes at the end. Rather, it casts a long shadow into life.

Some strive for a sort of symbolic immortality, whether by great achievements, through having children, or simply being part of a cultural achievement that outlasts a human lifespan. I've just visited the recently opened museum of Friedensreich Hundertwasser. This gives this pioneering artist a kind of immortality, providing a memorial for his views and achievements. But such recognition is only available for very few.

After trying to digest what theologians have to say about death, it is in many ways a welcome relief to turn to Irvin Yalom's book *Staring at the Sun* (see page 8). Here we have many examples of people who were afraid of death and Yalom's efforts to provide them with therapy and to overcome the terror of death so that they are left with a simple fear of death, which they can live with. As an existential psychotherapist, Yalom does not sit serenely above his clients, untouched by their issues. Rather, he too has death anxiety and has to work on it.

Death is not only about extinction or nothingness; it has a bundle of aspects: pain that may be associated with the process of dying, the loss of relationships and the ultimate aloneness that dying brings with it.

The Editor

The Dance of Death

The dance of death (Danse macabre in French and Totentanz in German) is a theme that emerged in the Middle Ages, reaching its pinnacle in a series of woodcuts by Hans Holbein, created during the Reformation around 1523.

The woodcuts portray Death as a skeleton claiming its victims, each of which is a member of a specific social group, beginning with the pope, followed by the emperor and proceeding right down to the poor peasant at the bottom. The intention is to critique the pretensions of the rich and powerful and to assert that in death we are ultimately all equal. Interestingly, heaven and hell play no role in these woodcuts.

The Editor

The King, portrayed with a gluttonous excess of food and drink

About SOFiA

SOFiA (The Sea of Faith in Aotearoa) is a network of people interested in the non-dogmatic discussion of values, meaning and spirituality. We want to explore for ourselves what we can believe and how we can find meaning in our lives.

SOFiA is not a church: it is a forum for discussing ideas, experiences and perspectives. SOFiA itself has no creed; its members come from many faiths and from those with no attachment to any religious institution.

If you are in sympathy with our aims, you are most welcome to join us; receive our Newsletter, attend a local group and/or come to our Conferences.

We follow similar organisations in the UK and Australia in taking our name from "Sea of Faith", the 1984 BBC TV series and book by the British religious academic, Don Cupitt.

Committee

Our national Committee oversees the work of SOFiA.

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Life Members

Sir Lloyd Geering ONZ, Don Cupitt (UK), Ian Harris, Suzi Thirwell, Yvonne Curtis and Peter Cowley. Also (deceased): Fred Marshall, Noel Cheer and Norm Ely

Publication deadline for the next Newsletter is 7 August 2022.

Contents

I am looking forward
To become humus myself
Buried naked without coffin
Under a beech tree planted by myself
On my land in Aotearoa

The interment should take place
Without a coffin, wrapped in a shround,
In a layer of earth at least 60 cm thick.
A tree should be planted on top of the grave
To guarantee that the deceased will live on
symbolically as well as in reality.

A dead person is entitled to reincarnation
In the form of, for example, a tree
That grows on top of him and through him.
The result would be a sacred Forest of Living dead.

A Garden of the Happy Dead.

Friedensreich Hundertwasser on his burial

SOFiA News

Conference 2022

We are now back on track to have an annual conference:

Spirituality for a Sustainable Future

7-8 October 2022. St Andrews on the Terrace, Wellington.

A flyer and a registration form have been sent out with this newsletter.

Future Planning Responses

The Management Committee reports on responses between December 2021 and May 2022.

Names of individuals & home area

David Chilvers, Christchurch: drawn to Buddhism that emphasises 'right living' rather than 'a set of beliefs'. Favours more use of Zoom meetings rather than trying to maintain SoF branches – which is a real struggle.

Noeline Watson, Central Otago, likes: 'Is Science the new Religion' and recommends the DVD from 'Living the Questions' stable of DVDs.

John (and Judy) Keall, Hamilton: Thanks the Management team 'for the good work u guys are doing'. I would like to see a spiritual basis for all topics: or it just becomes secular debating.

Brian Ellis, Auckland: (sent 2 responses covering material wider than future programming). Very positive about Newsletter and says it needs more marketing – more freely available, sample copies and articles sent to churches, libraries, bookshops. Four key roles for SOF: 1: Newsletter 2. Support local groups 3. Organise events where members can meet together e.g. conferences 4. Ensure membership remains sustainable. Topics for future confs: My pennyworth would be: Future Church: How does the church need to change to face the future?

Stephen Warnes, Auckland: Hope I don't sound negative but here goes: Oldies organising a conf. for young ones is naïve! You sign yourselves as the SOFiA national committee and insofar as *Sophia* =wisdom, then all topics are fair game – so long as they have potential to impart wisdom of some kind. Do oldies want to travel the length of the country for one overnight conference – not me! However it is quality not quantity that counts, so even I might travel a long way to engage with a mind from which I felt I might gain some wisdom. I would like to be encouraging, but in this I think I have failed.

Shirley Dixon, Wellington, endorses points made by Stephen: My feeling is that the clientele of SoF is what Spong called the Church Alumni society, and, as very few of the younger generation ever belonged to a church, much less left it, then they are unlikely to come across or to want what SoF has to offer. I recommend concentration on the concerns of the elderly. As death advances with increasing rapidity I find I am increasingly interested in such issues and appreciate the mental and spiritual stimulation provided by SoF (and the Ephesus groups to which I belong). Very supportive of the Newsletter.

John Warren, Hawkes Bay: Good keynote speaker a good idea. I like previous format at conferences: group discussions after keynote talks, report back, final summary including feedbacks and presenters' thoughts. Issues? Should religion be divisive or inclusive? Silos of denominations or otherwise? Future of institutional religion only maintained by Roman Catholics and Muslims, favouring a very literal and fundamentalist faith – but they are losing members. Unitarian church does have strong faith focus, but their numbers are very small and aged, like rest of us. Endorses what both Shirley and Stephen say: that young people will not be attracted to SoF talkshops, as they are not living the consequences of being brought up with a belief that they have now rejected. The topics listed under 'Being Human' seems a good focus. But we should be sure to have that mean that to be human is to be a part of the ecosphere and part of Gaia.

Maureen and William Roxburgh, Paraparaumu: As a couple of 'oldies' we

would prefer the topic 'Being a Human', but we appreciate that if you are trying to attract the younger generation, 'the internet/digital world' would be more suitable.

Brian Lilburn, Christchurch: A list of current thoughts on 'Life in this world'

NZ politics should be peace-making and non-aligned. We have to wind down capitalism and unite in a 'new' re-formed communism that would prevent the collapse of civilisation and relieve the 'weight' we are putting on the planet's capacity to preserve life. Some influence of India on early Christianity and the Bible? 'The wise men from the East!' Although Catholicism can change (and in Germany it certainly is!), I believe the 'best' to be found in Christianity is in Gnosticism. Buddhism could well be 'modernised' somewhat, with a greater emphasis on Zen and the Tao. Respectful criticism should not come too hard on the worth of Islam, and in the way the Prophet Mohammed was inspired by what came to him 'from above' – thus for him to write the C'ran. His writings formed a centre of reference for the development of the more broadly humanistic Sufism, impressive in storytelling, humour, and wisdom!

Margaret Springett, New Plymouth: So, for me, What is the focus without a God? How can life be meaningful in such a destructive world, where power-over seems to be its focus, even in our own country? What's happened to love your neighbour? Is the 'Be Kind' a replacement? What can be done in such a violent world? When you're getting old, or are old, you want it all to be over. Life appeared to be so different when we were young. What's it like when you're under attack either in Ukraine or Russia! I thought we'd got all past that. But I digress. For the time being, I shall continue gardening and painting and have coffee with friends, to keep my sanity. 'Go well for all manner things shall be well' – so long as you don't read or watch the news!

Pete Cowley/Bev Smith, Gisborne: group is looking at keynote speakers who might be guests on Zoom talks. Anne Salmond was a possible speaker suggested.

Summing up the key issues raised:

Can we find topics that both elderly and young would find relevant to their lives?

There is significant overlap in our 3 themes: Science/Internet world/Being Human.

How to allow members to access and participate in their learning? 'Online' and 'Live' both have a place.

Notes by John Thornley (Secretary, Management Committee)

Zooming in on the Auckland Group

You are now able to attend meetings of the Auckland group virtually, using Zoom. This will be of particular value to those whose local group is no longer meeting.

Sunday 19 June 4 pm
Science and Faith with Dr Harold Coop

Sunday 21 August 4 pm. A video from the BBC TV series Sea of Faith, featuring Don Cupitt

In contrast to previous years, you will be able to attend by Zoom, either from home, or from your local group.

To join a SOFiA Zoom meeting:

https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82726506291?pwd=djllMDcwSlpOVkh5aUJ2bXdtRE40Zz09

Meeting ID: 827 2650 6291

Passcode: 003765

Remembering Daniel Phillips

Daniel was a long-standing member of the Sea of Faith. About 30 years ago, there was an Invercargill group of about eight (who'd have thought it in conservative Southland!) in which Daniel was active. He was also briefly on the national committee and active in U3A. He worked as a pharmacist at Southland Hospital. We remember him from national conferences as a really nice and friendly person.

Theodicy, Dinosaurs and Hubris

I have been watching the excellent series of university-level lectures presented by Professor Matt MCormick from the Department of Philosophy at California State University, Sacramento, which I access at: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL5QAvmnRlfhYN3acEc50HuSJa58fCvazV.

The subject of the twenty-six lectures is: "God, Belief and the Philosophy of Religion" which is an overview of the views people take about God (or no God). While I say that I have been watching these lectures, studying would perhaps be a better descriptor, as I take notes, re-read, re-watch, think about, and try to absorb the information.

The content of and questions posed in these lectures has really made me think and I would love to have someone with whom to seriously discuss ideas that I am grappling with. Each day, when my husband was alive, we read together a chapter from a book of religious philosophy and followed this by discussing ideas that had arisen. But, now that I am a widow, I don't have that special 'someone' on hand, so I hope some readers of this newsletter will respond – perhaps by a letter to the Editor - and help me out.

My first question arose from McCormick's lecture that dealt with the philosophical arguments for the existence of God of Richard Swinburne (born 1934), who is an Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at Oxford University. In discussing the creation of the world and of humans, Swinburne accepts the process of evolution as an explanation of how life developed within natural law. However, he has serious doubts that the world could have evolved as it is without the guiding hand of God. He says that we could not expect any of this to occur by random chance, as the odds are astronomically small that they would. Swinburne appears to be implying that these natural laws and processes were made intentionally by God to allow the evolution of life and human beings. And I agree that the odds of this would seem to be incredibly small without a guiding hand.

However, how do we know that human beings (among other things) were the intended outcome of the process of evolution? Swinburne seems to beg the question; after all, random chance would result in *some* sort of outcome, and the odds would be small only if you had a preconceived expectation of a particular outcome. What if the evolution of humans was not 'planned', that evolution wasn't guided by the hand of God, and that we are just the serendipitous outcome of the processes and circumstances?

So, how do I resolve this dilemma?

A second question arose from Matt McCormick's lecture on theodicy - the problem of evil. The proposition is that if God exists, and he is omnipotent, omniscient & omnibenevolent, how does one explain the presence of evil that causes pain and suffering in sentient beings in the world?

Sentience is the capacity to experience feelings and sensations, including to feel pain and to suffer. McCormick noted that there are a lot of beings other than humans that are prone to suffering. This means that it has not been only during the comparatively small number of thousands of years that homo sapiens has existed, but for millions of years, that animals and proto-humans have experienced pain and suffering. McCormick gave the particular example of the dinosaurs which had the neural structures that enabled them to experience pain. McCormick then posed the question as to why God would tolerate dinosaur pain? At first I was puzzled, but then realised that this was a very important question in relation to the theodicies humans develop.

Christian theodicies are largely based on the formulations of Irenaeus (early C2-early C3) who proposed that the existence of evil is necessary for humans to achieve moral perfection. He argued that, as humans have free will, evil exists to allow humans to develop as moral agents. In C20, John Hick (1922 – 2012), a very influential

Christian philosopher, developed Irenaeus's 'soul-making' theodicy and argued that human goodness, which enables the following of God's will, is developed through the experience of evil and suffering. Therefore, suffering is not truly bad as it is through the evil of the suffering we experience that makes our souls better.

Which brought me back to the question about why God would tolerate dinosaur pain and suffering. I was faced with the problem that dinosaurs, though sentient, were (I presume) not developed enough to have a moral sense, or to consciously exercise freedom of choice. Following what I saw as a logical train of thought, I theorised any explanation of theodicy should thus apply to sentient animals as well as to humans. I know what hubris is, yet am faced with the realisation that two thousand years of Christian theodicy, and the formulations of all those philosopher and theologians, has brought us no closer to understanding the problem of evil.

So how do I resolve this dilemma?

Shirley Dixon

You are warmly invited to comment on either of the two dilemmas that Shirley poses. *The Editor*

Poetry, Please

Philip Grimmett invites you to submit any poems you have written. You can email him at grimmettphil@gmail.com or mail them to:

P Grimmett
34 Madras Street
Khandallah
Sellington 6035

If you would like to discuss anything with Philip, contact him at 021977834.

Expect more poems in future newsletters.

Book Reviews

Resurrection a Symbol of Hope

By Lloyd Geering. 1971

This book was published shortly after the Geering controversy found its provisional resolution when the Presbyterian General Assembly distanced itself from his views. The book is Lloyd's response to the controversy and his aim is to explain the problems with the traditional Easter message as revealed by modern biblical scholarship and to explore how it can still be a symbol of hope. A great gap has emerged between academic theology and the person in the pew and Lloyd wants to explain that theology to the ordinary person.

In Part 1 he explains how the traditional doctrine of Jesus' bodily resurrection has collapsed. By carefully looking at Paul's writing and Mark's gospel (the oldest), he reveals inconsistencies that point to the development of a tradition that began with appearances rather than an empty tomb and that was not wedded to a bodily resurrection, as later became the standard version. It is no longer possible to regard the empty tomb story as resting on a firm historical basis.

His conclusion is that "in the Gospels we have four versions of a developing legend which grew up as a consequence of an Easter faith which was already held" (p 61). There were different views of resurrection in the NT; a physical, bodily resurrection and a more "spiritual" resurrection of a glorified Jesus. Christianity can live without a rigid and materialistic view of resurrection, making us free to explore its meaning.

In Part II he reveals to us that resurrection is not something that suddenly arrived with the Easter story, but that it was a widespread idiom common to ancient Near Eastern cultures. It was something connected with the harvest, which was experienced as a kind of dying at harvest time and rising again in Spring, which brought about the blossoming of new life.

Ancient Israel initially had no hope for an existence after death; the dead had a shadowy existence in Sheol, the underworld.

This was a surprising contrast especially to Egypt, which was preoccupied with the issue of death.

In ancient Israel, born of the devastation of the Babylonian exile, this mythological theme was transformed into a hope for the revival of the people of Israel. Israelite thinking was corporate in nature, so that this hope referred to the people as a whole rather than to any particular individual.

A belief in a general resurrection at the end-time emerged even later and at the time of Jesus was accepted by the Pharisees but not by the Sadducees.

Lloyd carefully examines the biblical Easter traditions, with a result that they do not provide us with a uniform picture. There were no witnesses to the resurrection itself. Some have a more physical picture, while others have Jesus going through locked doors. The gospel accounts of the appearances of the risen Lord cannot be reconciled with one another. The apocryphal Gospel of Peter provides more detail about the resurrection, giving credence to the conclusion that an original tradition was embellished.

Lloyd's background in Old Testament and also (which I only learnt about recently) his teaching of religious studies in Australia enable him to provide a richly detailed and illuminating account of the background to the resurrection idiom. He also shows himself to be knowledgeable in New Testament and the early thinkers in the church. It is only at the end where he tries to make a case that the resurrection of Jesus and the resurrection in the end-time can be a symbol of hope that he seems to me to be making a strenuous but not very successful attempt to breathe new life into a theme that he has rationally rejected. It seems petty-minded to pick holes in a work that far exceeds my own abilities, but I note that there seems to be no mention of the mystery religions, which provided their adherents with an experience of transcendence. Also, Jurgen Moltmann's Theology of Hope is not mentioned, though it is concerned with exactly his theme; resurrection as a symbol of hope. This book was very influential, but perhaps Lloyd found it too abstract and theoretical.

You can download this book for free: see https://www.religion-online.org/book/resurrection-a-symbol-of-hope/

The Editor

Staring at the Sun

Overcoming the Terror of Death by Irvin Yalom

It is a relief to turn to this book after reading the intricate abstractions of the theologians (whether Geering, Barth or Moltmann). Irvin Yalom is an American psychiatrist and an existential psychotherapist for whom death, along with the other themes of human freedom, individuality and the meaning of life, is a central issue that belongs fundamentally to existence. His therapeutic aim is to transform what for some people is a terror of death into an ordinary anxiety. The book consists of many beautifully written case studies of clients that have come to him for therapy, as well as reflections of his own and philosophical thoughts about death. It is a deeply personal book which I found illuminating and easy to read.

The Editor

Karl Barth on Death

Nobody talks much about Karl Barth these days, and the assumption is that he is "neo-orthodox', by which people tend to mean that he is a reactionary conservative who reversed at least some of the gains that 19th Century liberal theology had brought about. They don't realise, for example, that he wrote *Protestant Theology in the 19th Century*, a comprehensive discussion of the great figures of the 18th and19th Century (including Ludwig Feuerbach and Friedrich Nietzche, so beloved by Lloyd Geering!). This showed that he had thoroughly studied and understood the liberal theology that he turned against.

Karl Barth became famous for his "Ganztodtheorie", the idea that it is the

whole person who dies, both body and soul. Barth opposed the view that humans had an immortal soul; instead, he declared that the early church did not live from a timeless truth but from remembering Jesus' story. I get lost in his complex and abstract thinking, but some things he says do resonate with me.

1. We worry about what comes after death but pay little attention to what came before our birth, even though the two are equivalent.
2. "The human being as such has no beyond and doesn't need one, for God is his beyond." That's at least worth thinking about.
3. The human being doesn't look forward to an extinction that will be replaced by an endless, immortal existence.
4. The human being doesn't hope to be saved from the finiteness and mortality of his existence, but rather for an eternalising that is a transformation through which the ego becomes identical with its life, which we could call eternal life.

If I've understood him right, he is saying that our life as a whole, the moments from birth to death, are summarised and eternalised, or taken up into the life of God. God who was our counterpart in life also serves as our counterpart in death.

It is really interesting that Barth has to admit that the biblical basis for what he has to say about death is very thin. That is quite devastating since his whole theology is based on the concept of the Word of God, of divine revelation, of God communicating himself to us rather than us ascending to the divine. He may be every bit as skeptical as Lloyd Geering; he just expresses himself more carefully and circumspectively.

The Editor

Judgement

Traditional Christianity thinks of life after death, divine judgement and heaven or hell as its unique property.

But ancient Egypt had its own pictures of human destiny. In particular, the picture below portrays its view of the last judgement. The jackal-headed god Anubis is weighing a human heart against a feather. The ibis-headed god Thot records the detail like a good scribe, while the evil-looking beast Ammit waits to devour those that fail the test. Those whose heart is lighter than a feather because it is not weighed down by evil deeds will pass the test and progress to the afterlife.

Traditional Christianity assumes that the death and resurrection of Jesus is something unique that provides the basis for a belief in an afterlife, but, as Eugen Drewermann argues, the New Testament actually has nothing new to say about death that wasn't already present in Ancient Egypt. Descent into the underworld, resurrection and ascension are all there, and make sense, whereas the views in the New Testament do not hang together well.

The Editor

Death for Animals

A poetic and meditative reflection by Eugen Drewermann on the meaning of death for animals. By contrast, with the emergence of reflective self-awareness, we humans know that death ultimately claims us all.

Somewhere on the prairie a herd of gnu and gazelle is grazing. A peaceful picture that knows no fear, and yet a cheetah is hiding in the bushes, ready to leap out at its prey. The animals see him in the distance, but they take no notice; the flight distance is too great. Admittedly, it is not so great that a predator with its speed couldn't overtake them – the cheetah is the fastest of all land

predators. In any particular case it is pure chance that determines which animal it chooses as its victim – one is a little bit further away from the others, another is turned away and can't see him, a third appears a little bit ungainly – tiny differences of this sort decide on the life or death of an animal.

Now the chase begins. The whole herd takes off in panic. From somewhere the signal to flee came, and all the animals join the flight of the others, in everything like them, an indistinguishable part of the whole, except for this one that is through some triviality different from them. The cheetah doesn't let that one out of its sight. It must chase it, without being distracted, to exhaustion. Then the vultures above and the jackals and hyenas below wait for the leftovers and the herd goes back to peacefully grazing the vast prairie, exonerated from death.

In the life of animals, death is only an ambush, a moment in the coming and going, in the rhythm of the world. Only for us humans is the cheetah omnipresent, only we never find the way back to the security of animal instincts, only we feel secure when we have checked every bush and shrub for possible dangers and have ensured they are safe. We live continuously with death. But is that a life, always living against death?

Eugen Drewermann

A Post-modern Heaven

The last chapter of Julian Barnes's book *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* is titled 'The Dream.' The narrator dreams that he wakes up and finds himself in his own bed, but in a radically different world. All his wants and desires are fulfilled, without disappointment. He can eat breakfast for lunch and dinner, shop as much as he wants, play golf again and again. His nurse-stewardess provides encouragement and support. Although she is unwilling to have sex with him, another partner is quietly provided.

Gradually it dawns on him that he is in heaven. There is an old heaven, in which people praise God, but it has been in decline, so there is now a new heaven.

He expresses an interest in being judged, and the judge reads through everything he experienced in life, but comes up with the disappointingly bland verdict, 'You are OK'.

He learns that people eventually opt to end their lives, voting for oblivion. After a long but unspecified time, in which he gets his golf score down to 18, has tried numerous other sports, and met virtually every footballer, he realizes that it is time for him to begin to make his decision.

This cleverly written story reveals that while heaven may sound like a great idea, if you think out the reality, it loses its charm. Julian Barnes has thoroughly deconstructed the age-old human dream of heaven.

I am reminded of Peter Cook and Dudley Moore's film *Bedazzled*. There, when asked why he rebelled and was thrown out of heaven, the devil explains that he was expected to dance around God, praising and adoring Him without ceasing for an infinity of time. That turned out to cause him to become very angry with his heavenly Majesty.

The Editor

Internet Corner

The Internet revolution is as far-reaching and radical as the print revolution in the 16th Century, that brought about Martin Luther and Protestantism. So here are some pointers to valuable content among the enormous flood of material.

Religion Online

This website is a treasure-trove. You can find enormous quantities of books on religion here, including the following four from Lloyd Geering:

Resurrection: A Symbol of Hope

Fundamentalism: the Challenge to the Secular World

The World to Come: From Christian Past to Global Future

God in the New World

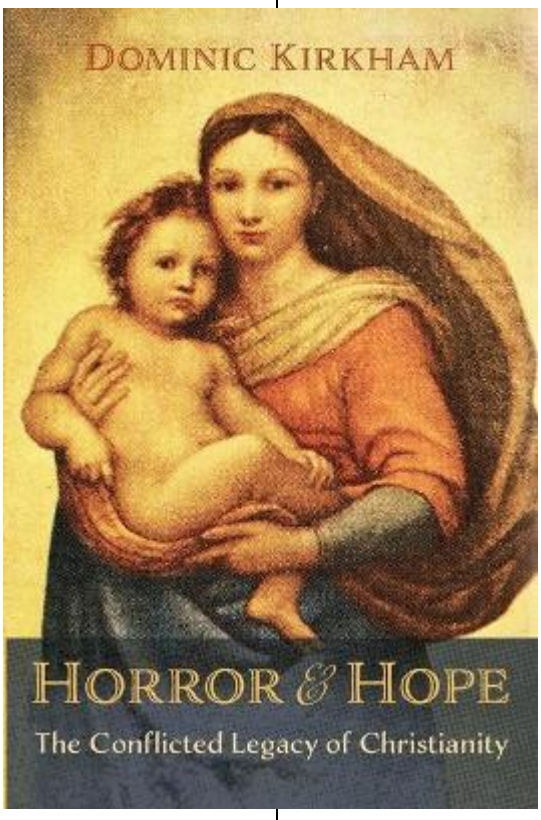
Horror & Hope

The conflicted legacy of Christianity

Dominic Kirkham's thoughtful account of humanity's present perilous position.

When Boris Johnson addressed the Ukrainian Rada (Parliament) on May 3, 2022, he acknowledged that, "*The truth is we were too slow to grasp what was really happening and we collectively failed."*

Christianity is a global phenomenon that has affected the lives of millions of people and expressed itself in many ways over the centuries. Often these expressions have been at odds with the core values of the gospel and teachings of Jesus. Imperialism, colonization, anti-Semitism, racism, misogyny – name but some issues – have all been associated with this religion almost from the outset. They are part of a legacy that we can no longer evade in the face of the many questioning voices of the modern world.



But how has this curious and conflicted situation come about? And did Jesus even intend to found a new religion?

Drawing on modern scriptural studies, current academic-thinking, and several decades of personal religious and monastic life the writer seeks to find answers, examining the historical record of the past two millennia. In a world that is increasingly secular and sceptical of religious claims the answer to how the Christian legacy is to be presented in a post-Christian world is crucial for the future and the challenge this book seeks to address.

What I was challenged to follow up was Kirkham's mention of a book by the late Michael Goulder *'A tale of Two Missions'*. It seems many of us have grown up with the Pauline testament and taken it at face value. Historically and in reality Christianity began with two missions.

The Petrine Mission based in Jerusalem led by Peter and James (brother of Jesus) men who had known Jesus and who continued to observe the Jewish dietary laws, and the nature of Jesus' divinity.

As the years passed these divisions deepened to outright hostility and enmity between members of the two missions, so much that we find one denouncing the other as 'the devil's seed'.

The Pauline mission was focused on reaching out beyond the constraints of Judaism to the gentile world. This meant abandoning Jewish practices such as circumcision and kosher regulations. Paul was convinced that God had intervened in history through Jesus in a decisive way and that the end of time was imminent. Though he had never met Jesus there was never any doubt in Paul's mind as to his pre-existent divine status.

And on the subject of hope, Kirkham writes:

"One of the effects of COVID-19 is that it has challenged the long-standing hubris that we can manipulate nature for our benefit. It has also reawakened an awareness of the significance of the natural world for many suffering under the restraints of lockdown. There has even been a resurgence of neo-paganism with its appreciation of the natural rites and rituals attuned to the seasons of the year; of the natural forces or 'goddesses' so effectively excoriated from the biblical record."

Note: The book cover shows a detail from the painting by Raphael, *Sistine Madonna and Child.* You can use Google to view the complete picture.

Beverley Smith

Stations on the Road to Freedom

What an intriguing thought; death as a festival of freedom. Freedom as something that is developed through discipline, matured through courageous action as a co-conspirator in the plot to kill Hitler, then constrained through imprisonment in a concentration camp, then death in a final blow, completed by hanging just before the end of World War II. Apart from the prose poem below, Bonhoeffer also said "On the path to freedom, death is the highest festival".

Death as a festival of freedom is something, as far as I know, that has not been taken up by any theologian. The text below is only one of many poems that Bonhoeffer wrote in prison, even though he declared he was no poet and had produced no poetry before imprisonment. One poem is an absolute hit and sung practically at every New Year's Eve church service.

Discipline

If you set out to seek freedom, then learn above all things
to govern your soul and your senses, for fear that your passions
and longing may lead you away from the path you should follow.
Chaste be your mind and your body, and both in subjection,
obediently steadfastly seeking the aim set before them;
only through discipline may a man learn to be free.

Action

Daring to do what is right, not what fancy may tell you,
valiantly grasping occasions, not cravenly doubting--
freedom comes only through deeds, not through thoughts taking wing.
Faint not nor fear, but go out to the storm and the action,
trusting in God whose commandment you faithfully follow;
freedom, exultant, will welcome your spirit with joy.

Suffering

A change has come indeed. Your hands, so strong and active,
are bound; in helplessness now you see your action
is ended; you sigh in relief, your cause committing
to stronger hands; so now you may rest contented.
Only for one blissful moment could you draw near to touch freedom;
then, that it might be perfected in glory, you gave it to God.

Death

Come now, thou greatest of feasts on the journey to freedom eternal;
death, cast aside all the burdensome chains, and demolish
the walls of our temporal body, the walls of our souls that are blinded,
so that at last we may see that which here remains hidden.
Freedom, how long we have sought thee in discipline, action, and suffering;
dying, we now may behold thee revealed in the Lord. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*