

# SOFiA

## Exploring Values, Meaning and Spirituality

### From the Theologians' God to a Mysticism of the Present Moment

*Dietrich Bonhoeffer has a much-quoted statement about God: Der Gott, den es gibt, gibt es nicht. I think this is best paraphrased as follows: The God, of whom people say, "There is a God", does not exist. After a long discussion for and against the view that God exists, Eugen Drewermann concludes that this gets us nowhere and moves sideways into a mysticism of love, emptiness and the present moment. The following are his concluding words on a mysticism of the present moment.*

*The Editor*

The whole time we have been striving to solve a problem that Christian theology has posed again and again and yet has never been able to really answer: how is it possible to unite the humanity of the God image with the inhumanity of "creation?" As we saw, this question is necessarily unanswerable as long as we give validity to the judgement of rational understanding. This rational understanding, above all in the form of modern science, paints a picture of world reality that cannot be reconciled with the religious expectation of a sympathetic, good God.

Our conclusion from this fact...consists in not looking for the root of religion in the logic of rational understanding, but in what Kant characterised as "practical reason". In this way, we came to **emptiness** as a blanking out of the world of rational understanding, to **love** as an attitude of basing our humanity in the absolute, and to **existing in**

**the moment** as the absence of the compulsion of the past and of fear of the future. What is so extraordinarily difficult in the tradition of "Christian" theology (to renounce rational understanding), belongs naturally to the basic exercise of religion in Asian piety.

Paradoxically, therefore, it is really only a "Buddhist" attitude that can solve the problem that "Christian" theology as a "science" has created for itself. If you let rational understanding loose on the Bible, it immediately begins to research the past using historical criticism, completely eroding religion. If you let rational understanding loose on the God question, it sketches a God that plans and shapes the future, but this God is necessarily rejected by the progress of science in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century....

But now there is the stillness of the Buddha! For him it is not about the past or the future, about knowing or planning, he is simply there. Nothing is there of the strained "humble" kneeling and hand-wringing pleading of the Roman Catholic faithful's prayer attitude, nothing of the remorseful breast-beating and confessing of past sins. Here is a person who is simply together. And this simplicity of existence in the moment, beyond the activity of rational understanding, that is available to us as the third decisive category of the religious.

There is a very eloquent image of this piety of the moment, which seems to be common to various religions: the

“proclamation” of simple showing. The domain of Christian proclamation is the “word”, bound mostly to the reflective “word” of theology, which is a hindrance to all poetic language. It is reported of the Buddha, that one afternoon, although he was a master of poetic speech, he spoke not a word of instruction and simply showed his disciples a flower. Karl Kerényi has pointed to the fact that this gesture finds a parallel in the ritual of the Eleusinian mystery cult: at the culmination of the celebration a cut ear of grain is shown without any accompanying words.

It is the same image when the priest shows the bread during a Catholic mass, holding it over the cup – a symbol that corresponds to the Egyptian image of Apis, the bull god, who carries the sun disc between his horns. But where in Christendom is there a stillness that would be able to adopt such momentary scenes as images of eternity?

*Eugen Drewermann Der Sechste Tag. Die Herkunft des Menschen und die Frage nach Gott. (The Sixth Day. The Origin of Humans and the question of God). Glauben in Freiheit (Believing in Freedom) Vol 3/1, p 428-9. Translated by the Editor.*

## Euthanasia Go-ahead

On 7 November 2021, the End of Life Choice Act took full effect, after being passed in Parliament 69 to 51 following a referendum at which about 65% voted in favour. The NZ Medical Association and Hospice New Zealand were opposed, as were most churches.

This act makes assisted dying possible, though there are many restrictions:

- The request can come only from the patient
- The patient must have an incurable disease
- The patient must be expected to die within 6 months.

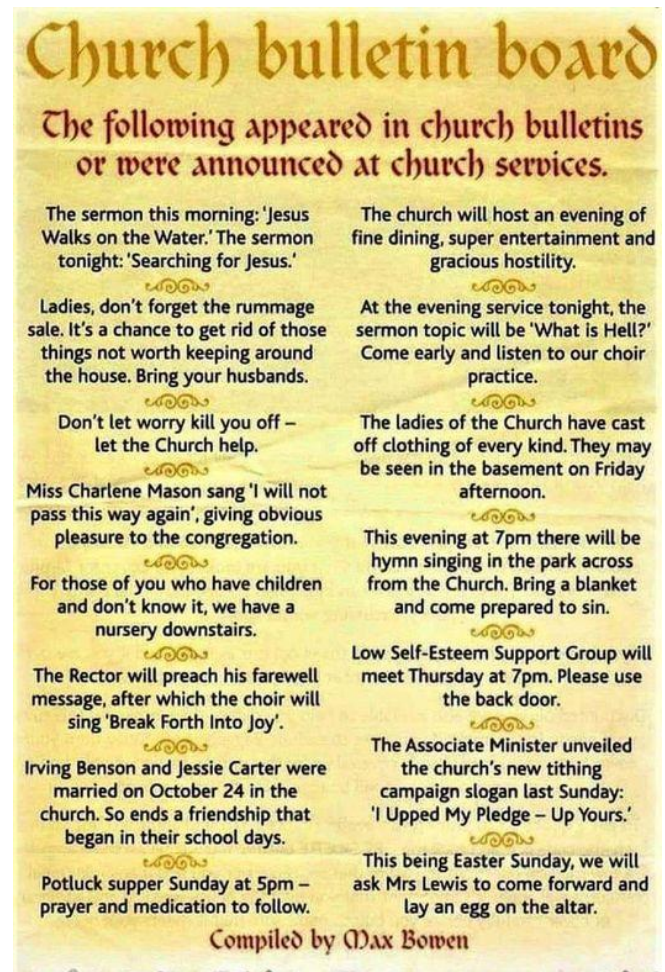
Your editor regards this as another example of progressive legislation that enhances our freedom:

1893: women obtained the right to vote

1986: Homosexual Law Reform Act  
 2003: Prostitution Reform Act (passed by a majority of one vote!)

Concerns remain, in spite of safeguards and well-thought-out processes. Conscientious sufferers might feel obliged to end things early to lighten the burden on others. Government might reduce expenditure on palliative care, making life really unpleasant for those with terminal conditions.

*The Editor*



## Interesting Texts

### The Death of God

God [was] disembowelled by Machiavelli in sixteenth century Florence, assassinated in eighteenth-century Paris by agents of the French Enlightenment, lost at sea on a voyage to the Galapagos Islands, blown to pieces by German artillery at Verdun, garrotted by Friedrich Nietzsche on a Swiss Alp, and the body laid to rest in the consulting room of Sigmund Freud.

*Lewis Lapham*

# 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 February 2022.

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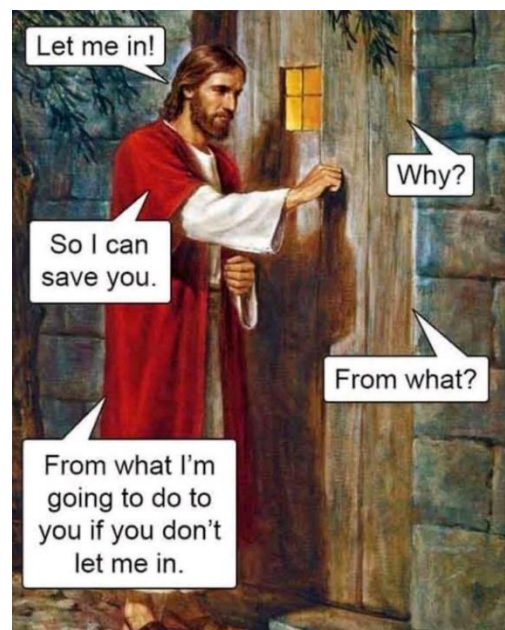
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The above is a rather unfair satire on the painting by William Holman Hunt, which was prominently displayed in the Sunday School of the church I grew up in. Christ is patiently waiting for the soul to open the door, which cannot be opened from outside.

*The Editor*



# SOFiA News

## AGM 6 November

The SOFiA AGM was held via Zoom from 10:30 am. There were some 19 participants with only minor difficulties unmuting audio.

- Annual reports were received as a block.
- Ian Crumpton, Brian Ellis and Steve Collard stood down as they have completed their term of service. Pete Cowley, Philip Grimmett, John Thornley and Mary-Ellen Warren were elected to the new Committee.
- Doug Sellman made a strong plea for us to take bold action against climate change and to commit to virtual conferences via Zoom in the future.
- Yvonne Curtis pointed out that members who receive the printed newsletter were unable to access the reports, agenda, and minutes of the AGM.
- Marion Hines said that the Auckland group has had some success publicising the group to churches, so that new members have come, but it is still a difficulty getting them to take a second step and join the national SOFiA. Pete Cowley offered to send print copies of the newsletter for use in publicising the national group.

## AGM Documents

Any SOFiA members who did not obtain the AGM documents and want them are asked to contact Pete Cowley (prcowley@gmail.com or 13 Leith St, Gisborne 4010). Please indicate whether you want electronic or paper versions.

## The Hawkes Bay Group

This group had the following meetings:

### Liberation Philosophy in the Holy Land

Steve Liddle, a Napier-based teacher and lecturer, who was a visiting teacher at a University in the West Bank and participated in an archeological dig near

Nazareth, spoke on the **differing paths to human liberation** in Israel and Palestine.

## Stewardship

Martin Manning, an adjunct Professor at Victoria University in Wellington, who was also a Director of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change when it won the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize, spoke on **stewardship of an entire earth system: biosphere, climate, and society.**

*The Editor apologises for the delay in publishing the above.*

## Lady Shirley Geering

Shirley Geering died peacefully, with Lloyd at her side, on Friday 1 October 2021. She was 94 and provided valuable support to Sir Lloyd Geering.



Mary-Ellen Warren (Auntie ME) wrote the following:

- Shirley inspired Lloyd to write *On Me Bike*
- She was a wonderful hostess
- She gave me personal encouragement
- Thank you, Shirley for all that you have done to make the world a better place

## Spong's 12 Theses

### 1. God

Understanding God in theistic categories as "a being, supernatural in power, dwelling somewhere external to the world and capable of invading the world with miraculous power" is no longer believable. Most God talk in liturgy and conversation has thus become meaningless.

## 2. Jesus – the Christ.

If God can no longer be thought of in theistic terms, then conceiving of Jesus as “the incarnation of the theistic deity” has also become a bankrupt concept.

## 3. Original Sin – The Myth of the Fall

The biblical story of the perfect and finished creation from which we human beings have fallen into “Original Sin” is pre-Darwinian mythology and post-Darwinian nonsense.

## 4. The Virgin Birth

The virgin birth understood as literal biology is impossible. Far from being a bulwark in defense of the divinity of Christ, the virgin birth actually destroys that divinity.

## 5. Jesus as the Worker of Miracles

In a post-Newtonian world supernatural invasions of the natural order, performed by God or an “incarnate Jesus,” are simply not viable explanations of what actually happened.

## 6. Atonement Theology

Atonement theology, especially in its most bizarre “substitutionary” form, presents us with a God who is barbaric, a Jesus who is a victim and it turns human beings into little more than guilt-filled creatures. The phrase “Jesus died for my sins” is not just dangerous, it is absurd.

## 7. The Resurrection

The Easter event transformed the Christian movement, but that does not mean that it was the physical resuscitation of Jesus’ deceased body back into human history. The earliest biblical records state that “God raised him.” Into what, we need to ask. The experience of resurrection must be separated from its later mythological explanations.

## 8. The Ascension of Jesus

The biblical story of Jesus’ ascension assumes a three-tiered universe, which was dismissed some five hundred years ago. If Jesus’ ascension was a literal event of history, it is beyond the capacity of our 21<sup>st</sup> century minds to accept it or to believe it.

## 9. Ethics.

The ability to define and to separate good from evil can no longer be achieved with

appeals to ancient codes like the Ten Commandments or even the Sermon on the Mount. Contemporary moral standards must be hammered out in the juxtaposition between life-affirming moral principles and external situations.

## 10. Prayer

Prayer, understood as a request made to a theistic deity to act in human history, is little more than an hysterical attempt to turn the holy into the servant of the human. Most of our prayer definitions of the past are thus dependent on an understanding of God that has died.

## 11. Life after Death

The hope for life after death must be separated forever from behavior control. Traditional views of heaven and hell as places of reward and punishment are no longer conceivable. Christianity must, therefore, abandon its dependence on guilt as a motivator of behavior.

## 12. Judgment and Discrimination

Judgment is not a human responsibility. Discrimination against any human being on the basis of that which is a “given” is always evil and does not serve the Christian goal of giving “abundant life” to all. Any structure either in the secular world or in the institutional church, which diminishes the humanity of any child of God on the basis of race, gender or sexual orientation must be exposed publicly and vigorously. There can be no reason in the church of tomorrow for excusing or even forgiving discriminatory practices. “Sacred Tradition” must never again provide a cover to justify discriminatory evil.

Can a new Christianity for a new world be forged on the basis of these Twelve Theses? Can a living, vital and real faith that is true to the experience of the past, while dismissing the explanations of the past, be born anew in this generation? I believe it can and so to engage this task I issue this call to the Christian world to transform its holy words of yesterday into believable words of today. If we fail in this task there is little reason to think that Christianity, as presently understood and constituted, will survive this century. *Bishop John Spong*

# In Memoriam

## Again– Bishop Spong

There are those who think nothing in the church must change, there are those who know it has to. American Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong, who died on September 12 aged 90, was emphatically one of the latter.

Many New Zealanders know that well. He visited four times between 1991 and 2001, speaking to appreciative audiences and stirring hostility among those who prefer not to be disturbed by new thinking.

Spong has long been in the forefront of such thinking, but he didn't begin that way. Early influences in his North Carolina home were Presbyterian fundamentalism and high-church Anglican fundamentalism, and he grew up absorbing all the prejudices of his time and place about blacks, women and homosexuals.

Driven, however, by a deepening understanding of Christian faith, an uncompromising intellectual rigour, and a discipline of study from 6am to 8am every day, he became over time a champion of racial justice, women's equality and homosexual liberation – especially in the church.

Spong was acutely conscious of the huge expansion of human knowledge in recent times, and the need for Christianity to take account of that if it is to be relevant to men and women of the 21st century. This led him to probe beyond interpretations cemented into traditional church life and find a way of understanding scripture, for example, that is in sync with the world we actually live in.

His motivation was to go deeper into the heart of the tradition in order to identify and affirm more appropriately its core. He was willing to explore beyond creedal formulas about God, the work of Christ, the church, prayer, worship: if they don't connect, they are not much use. Biblical literalism appalled him.

A living religion is in a dialogue between spiritual insight and new knowledge, he

said. It is therefore always in flux and always evolving. Arrest the process and it slowly dies: "The heart cannot worship what the mind rejects".

Spong was prepared to follow the evidence wherever it led. He abhorred dishonesty and anything that stood in the way of expansion of life. A key to this was "Christpower", a term that summed up for him the sense of love, forgiveness and expanded being associated originally with Jesus. Christpower offers the ability to change, to grow and to embrace the radical insecurity of life as free, whole and mature persons, which is the essence of faith.

A major contribution was Spong's exposition of the Jewishness of Jesus' life, reflected also in the gospels and Paul's letters. Early in his career it spurred him to reach out in dialogue with the local Jewish community. Breaking down barriers became a central theme.

The responsibility he felt as a leader – he was Bishop of Newark, New Jersey, from 1979 to 2000 – prompted him to share the insights of his studies more widely through a succession of books. He wrote 26 in all, introducing his theological hot potatoes with "A bishop rethinks the meaning of Scripture", "A bishop rethinks the Virgin Birth and the treatment of women by a male-dominated church", "A bishop rethinks human sexuality".

Spong saw himself as struggling for a Christianity of integrity, love and equality. While many responded with warmth and gratitude, antagonism from the church's conservative wing gradually led to his disillusionment with its institutional workings.

"The church of my dreams and visions," he wrote, "the church I had glimpsed periodically, the church I loved, was being drowned in a sea of dated theological irrelevancy undergirded by biblical ignorance."

In his later years Spong's prime audience became those who were open to a new Christianity for a new world, an audience of "church hangers-on and dropouts, atheists and agnostics, anyone on a spiritual journey who is seeking meaning, integrity and God".

Always he knew how to ask the right faith questions. Inevitably, this stirred controversy. And anger: “Burning you at the stake would be too kind.” And appreciation: “You have made it possible for me to remain in the church.”

I honour Spong not for having all the answers for a church in transition, but for his commitment to spurring it on that journey, mindful of what it’s really about: “True religion is, at its core, nothing more or less than a call to live fully, to love wastefully, and to be all that we can be. That is finally where life’s meaning is found.”

The fact that secular audiences could hear him gladly but many in the churches could not is worth reflecting on.

*Ian Harris. Reprinted from Touchstone Magazine*

## Hail, Full of Grace!

*A Remembrance of Things Past: Dominic Kirkham explores Egyptian origins and biblical beliefs.*

In the Cairo Museum of Egyptian Antiquities there is a small statue of Isis, seated on a chair holding the infant Horus. Her posture, seated on a chair, seems oddly familiar.



*Isis suckling – an Egyptian Fresco*

In fact not only is it a posture common among medieval portraits of the Madonna, Mary and the child Jesus, but is almost identical with the statue of Our Lady of Walsingham, once the most significant medieval shrine to Our Lady in Christendom. The resemblances were so

striking that one could easily be mistaken for the other:



*The Seal of Walsingham Priory*

Yes, remembrance of the past can be unnerving! We like to remember the past in so far as it confirms the present, or at least our understanding of the present. But often it does not.

Not only does the past challenge our understanding, it has the capacity to challenge the identity we build around that understanding: a flint blade, a piece of broken pottery, a decayed inscription, a fragment of parchment can be sufficient to bring down whole metaphysical systems of speculation and theological edifices.

For me, mention of the little statue of Isis recalled something from my own past — that is how remembrance works, one thought triggering another. Some thirty-five years ago, I was a member of the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary and would often meet with other like-minded devotees to discuss Marian themes.

On one occasion we invited the Earl of Lauderdale to address us. This may sound esoteric but the 17th Earl had been restoring an ancient chapel on his estate in the Scottish Borders to the south of Edinburgh as a focal point for ecumenical Marian devotion. A central feature of the chapel would be a small effigy of a Madonna, previously discovered in the grounds, showing a seated mother cradling a child in her arm, very reminiscent of Our Lady of Walsingham. (Readers might also like to know that some fifteen miles to the west lies another chapel at Roslin which twenty years



later would acquire global fictional fame as the epicentre of *The Da Vinci Code*.)

In a fascinating slide show, which took place one winter's evening in the chapel of the great Norman castle of Arundel, Sussex, the Earl beguiled us with a story of mystery and enchantment. For the little effigy turned out to be from Egypt and had found its way to Scotland in Roman times, (It may be remembered that the Romans did briefly occupy Scotland in the second century AD, building the Antonine Wall across the Central Lowlands.) But an effigy of what? Was it Isis or Mary? No one could really be sure.

At the time I was a theological student with an interest in Marian devotions. I lived in a monastery dedicated to Our Lady of England, which was also a Marian shrine. One of the things that had caught my interest was the origin of the rites surrounding the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary into Heaven. This great feast, celebrated on the 15<sup>th</sup> August, particularly throughout the Mediterranean world, had its origins in Ephesus where tradition tells us that Mary spent her later years with the apostle John and which also happened to be the centre of the cult of Artemis (twinned with the Roman goddess Diana), the great huntress and goddess of fertility. This ancient cult stretched back to the matriarchal societies of Mesolithic times and beyond to the enigmatic "Venus" cults of the Old Stone Age, focused on the fertile womb; a time when men had their uses as hunters but women were revered as the givers of life.



*The Temple of Artemis in Ephesus*

As the social psychologist Erich Fromm wrote of this period: "The mother, as goddess (often identified with Mother Earth), became the supreme goddess of the religious world,

while the earthly mother became the centre of family and social life' (*The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. Pimlico, 1973.p. 214). Fromm introduced an interesting nuance preferring the word 'matricentric' rather than 'matriarchal' because the latter implies that women ruled over men rather than alongside men, with a dominant role but not a role of domination: the patriarchal societies of male domination and aggression, which we now call civilisation, would come later.

Though nothing remains of what was once the greatest temple in the ancient world at Ephesus and one of the fabled Seven Wonders — save a solitary broken column. However, what does remain are some parchments of the ancient liturgies of the patronal feast celebrated there on the 15<sup>th</sup> August.

And the curious thing is that those for Artemis (Diana) and those for Mary are in many places identical. Indeed, it would not be stretching credulity to say that the latter were copied from the former: the enthronement of the fruitful mother who bestows blessing to the Earth. It was at the Church Council of Ephesus in 431 that Mary was proclaimed *theotokos*: god-bearer/mother of God. Once again one can detect a process of displacement or replacement. Once again one is left wondering which was which, of what exactly one is looking at.

As with the cult of Isis, so with the cult of Mary. They inhabit not so much a physical space as a psychic space, a place in the mind which explains the order of things and the nature of the world. In ancient Egypt that order was incarnated in the person of the pharaoh. Such a role made him more than a man. It made him a god, an essential link in the cosmic order enacted in ritual.

And Isis was the lynchpin of this cultic world, not just for Egyptians but throughout the classical Greco-Roman world. The name itself was a Greek rendition of the more ancient Egyptian word *Ese*, which, curiously enough, does not refer to a person but to a chair and, in its hieroglyphic form, a throne. As with the Madonna at Lauderdale and at Walsingham, the one who is seated on the



throne brings forth the king. In the case of Isis the infant she nurses is Horus, the god of the heavens and protector of the pharaohs, whose presence they claimed to incarnate and whose eternal destiny Horus ensured, leading the dead to the afterlife.

The Bible presents a strange and strained relationship between the peoples of Israel and Egypt, much of which hinges on the epic of the Exodus, the monumental figure of Moses and the origins of monotheism. A little piece of pottery was found at Kuntillet Arad in the northern Sinai desert in the 1970s. This ancient travellers' way station is now scarcely accessible, being in the militarised zone between Egypt and Israel, but was excavated briefly in 1975/6 by a team of archaeologists from Tel Aviv University.

In two rooms of the fortress-like building dating back to the ninth century BCE the walls contained a number of enigmatic inscriptions in early Hebrew and Phoenician script invoking various gods: Yahweh, El and Baal, One was to 'Yahweh of Samaria and his Asherah' (consort or wife), another to "Yahweh of Teman and his Asherah', Perhaps these were invocations for a safe journey. But they were also the deities of different regions, suggesting the origins of the travellers whose gods had equivalent status. As such, they provide an insight into the nature of belief in ninth century Israel and the surrounding territories.

As significant as the names of the gods, if not more so, is the mention of their 'Asherah' — consorts or 'queens', the mother goddess, This word is almost identical to the Ugaritic 'Atirat', the proper name of the consort of El, and related to the Akkadian 'Asratu' and Hittite 'Aserdue', In Sumer she is the consort of the chief god, Anu.

Thus we are taken back to the very earliest identifiable pantheons, ruled by the Queen of Heaven. This is the title also given to her by the prophet Jeremiah (Jer 7. 16-18) — not in appreciation or devotion but rather outraged denunciation, as the idolatry which is the source of Judah's woes. But the people were having none of it, insisting on the contrary, that it was only 'since we gave up offering incense to the Queen of Heaven

and pouring libations in her honour, we have been destitute and have perished either by sword or by famine' (Jer 44. 17-19). The prophet seemingly had a very different view of deity focused on a supreme and solitary male, Yahweh, who alone should be worshipped.

All this is perplexing. Clearly a new concept of deity had evolved in Judah, identified with the cult of a single male god Yahweh. Reviewing what we now know of this process, the archaeologist Amihai Mazar in *The Quest for the Historical Israel* (SBL Press, 2007) writes that 'during most of the monarchic period, Israelite religion, though centred on the national god Yahweh, was based on Canaanite myths, beliefs and cult practices, and a great goddess was worshipped alongside the main male god' (p.177). Within this context and with specific reference to Kuntillet Arud, Mazar notes, 'While the worship of Asherah was condemned by the Jerusalem prophets, they probably represent the new theology that was emerging towards the end of the monarchy (7th century BCE) among the Jerusalem intellectual elite' (p.175). As Mazar comments, this is all substantially different from the pure monotheistic religion that is preserved for us in the Bible.

You can say that again! In fact, I doubt if any ordinary churchgoer or believer would even recognise such a picture, and here I would have to include, for most of my life, myself. The biblical text is in no doubt about the sublime origin of this transcendental concept of monotheism in the revelation to Moses on Mount Horeb (Ex. 19).

The theophany at the burning bush and revelation of the divine name, Yahweh, is immediate, explicit and compelling (Exodus 3). It was not intended, and indeed has never been understood, as a pious story retrojected on the past in the light of a different state of consciousness that only emerged some five centuries later.

There are many questions raised as to how a seemingly supreme and solitary male god came to dominate our imaginations. In the work previously referred to, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, Erich Fromm reflects on the changes in human thinking

and behaviour that were taking place in Near Eastern societies in the second millennium BCE, associated with what we call the rise of civilisation, On the changed view of the place of women in society, Fromm observes:

No longer was the fertility of the soil the source of all life and creativity, but the intellect which produced new inventions, techniques, abstract thinking, and the state with its laws. No longer the womb, but the mind became the creative power, and simultaneously, not women, but men dominated society (p.224).

In fact, women are just as capable of using words as men and in some areas, such as feelings, they are often more articulate. Perhaps it was male jealousy of women's power to deliver new life that made men claim the power of the word *logos* — as exclusively their own. Just as, to combat insecurities about biological fatherhood, men in marriage became the legal owners of their children, to the exclusion of the women who had conceived and given birth to them. But now the logocentric patriarchal state, characterised by the word of command and law, had arrived.

Some consequences of this momentous change are explored in Leonard Shlain's intriguing book *The Alphabet and the Goddess: The Conflict between Word and Image* (Allen Lane, 1999). His argument is that the advent of literacy led to a denigration of femininity. It is a conflict that has endured and we still see all around us: in the destruction of the female images by the so-called Monotheistic Brigades of Islamic State (ironically also called ISIS) with a zeal equalled only by the scripturally inspired iconoclasts of the Reformation whose belief was in *sola scriptura* — the word alone. We see it in the great shift that took place in Judean thinking during the seventh century BCE to a solitary male deity with the creation of the Bible. We see it in the rise of the medieval universities which totally excluded women from any form of academic life and consequently of public office. We see it in the current suppression of even debating the role of women at the altar in the Roman Catholic Church, despite the clear evidence for their clerical and even episcopal status in the early church.

The happy destruction of historical sites by ISIS is but one example of the determination to render the past suitable for the present. So clerics, mullahs and rabbis together seek a place under the so-called great canopy of the Abrahamic faith, secure in their convictions against the questioning tide of secularisation, happy not to know and determined in their attempts to shape the world by the male word of command. Yet little pieces from the past will always prompt other thoughts; a buried effigy, a broken shard, a ruined chapel, a defaced fresco the historical evidence. Our understanding of the past will continue to be shaped by what we choose to remember, which in turn will shape the future. And the future may not be as certain as we might like to think!

*With thanks to Bev Smith. This article, by Dominic Kirkham, first appeared in the UK Sofia magazine No 130 Christmas 2018.*

## Demythologising to Remythologising

As covered in earlier issues of the Newsletter, I (John Thornley) was scheduled to give three talks in the Palmerston North City Library during 2021, covering three styles of African American music – Blues, Soul and Gospel. Covid-19 meant the last talk, on Black Gospel, did not take place. It was put off twice, following which I felt the burnout that concert and theatre performers experience after months of preparation and promotion - all for nought!

But I will share the Gospel talk at our city library early in 2022, as soon as the masks can come off! It's been good preparation for my talk at our annual conference in Wellington, March 25/26.

I'm fortunate to have made online contact with Anthony Heilbut, New York. He is a writer and producer of Black gospel artists, including many of the great gospel singers in the mid 20th century. His book *The Gospel Sound* (1970) was warmly welcomed by the writer James Baldwin: 'It's a very beautiful book, with love and precision, no pity – a little like a gospel song...I didn't know that

anybody knew that much about it, or cared that much or could be so tough and lucid.'

One of the vinyl recordings produced by Heilbut, that I share in my Black Gospel talks, is titled Mother Willie Mae Ford Smith: 'I Am Bound For Canaan Land'. I'll write about two of the songs found on this record, in the course of which I'll say more about Anthony Heilbut.

Mother Smith was born in 1904, granddaughter of slaves. She was one of the first to sing in the Blues-influenced gospel songs of Thomas Dorsey (1899-1993), starting in the 1930s. Anthony recorded the greater part of this collection in a live worship setting, when the singer was 79 years old. There is some illustration of the heightened vocals of the 'gospel shout', which carried over into soul vocalists such as Aretha Franklin. But in the title song, 'I am Bound for Canaan Land', Mother Smith is restrained when she recalls the family being reunited after death - a poignant theme when we remember that the African slave family was broken up on the auction block. The litany of the family members who will be reunited - mother, father, brother and sister, each named with congregational responses in support - is a moving affirmation of whakapapa in the African-American story.

The second song 'I've Got a Secret' on the vinyl collection was written by Anthony Heilbut, and recorded in a studio. With bass, drums and keyboard, the enhanced ambience of the studio gives a wonderful example of what we name as the 'gospel blues' style.

Anthony is an atheist, though his Jewish ancestry has given him an open and enquiring mind and heart about the diversity of faith and philosophical traditions. He has little patience with the dogma and power games of denominations, but if 'religion' is giving support and help to others in need he would share that spirit. What appeals to him most is the enjoyment of gospel song, and it's easy to agree on that one!

If I have trouble deciphering the singer's words, he will email them to me. The words are important though in some of the deepest moments, when the singer resorts to

improvisational vocalising in 'wordless, hummed portions' and an involuntary testimony in praise slips out, 'singer and listener alike may reach their own particular Canaan'. The quotations are from the sleeve notes written by Anthony.

Here, in reference to 'Canaan', the writer is 'remythologising'. The history of Jewish people, from slavery through wilderness to the promised land in Canaan, provide metaphor or symbol for Black freedom struggles in 19th century spirituals and 20th gospel songs. Others of differing faiths, in a religious or secular framework, 'may reach their own particular Canaan'.

'I am bound for Canaan land' is a collective hymn from the 1940s, appropriate to congregational worship. The late 70s 'I've got a secret' is more personal. The words by Anthony Heilbut reflect the harsh realities of life in the poverty of inner-city living which was the personal experience of many Blacks in the latter decades of the 20th century - and, sadly, such suffering continues today. The blues music and culture, usually associated with male performers, but also found in women blues artists such as Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday.

Here, in words by Anthony Heilbut, we have the fears and anxieties of urban life: homelessness, work insecurity, backstabbing and betrayals by family and friends, all common themes in the blues, to express a remythologising of gospel testimony in a blues framework: 'I've got a secret/It's between me and my Lord':

I've got a secret  
It's between me and my Lord,  
I've got a secret.  
Nobody listened and nobody heard,  
but he knows what's in the heart  
I don't have to say a word.

When trouble came to my house,  
all my friends moved out.  
When trouble came to my house,  
all my so-called friends moved out.  
But the Man stood beside me,  
Thank God, he brought me out.

I can't trust nobody  
He told me to cast all my care on him.  
I can't trust nobody



He told me to cast all my cares on him.  
So I'm leaning and depending  
on my one and only friend.

Last verse: humming moan

## Taking off the masks!

Some time in 1999/2020 I reread this title off my shelves, *Radical Theology and the Death of God*, including an essay by William Hamilton (1924-2012), 'The Death of God Theologies Today', 1963. It supported my faith journey through Theopoetics – a theology based on story, song, poetry, drama, and other artistic genres. It certainly affirmed my vinyl talks in our city library! I had to find the occasion to share it:

'The death of God Protestant, it can be seen, has somewhat inverted the usual relation between faith and love, theology and ethics, God and the neighbour. We are not proceeding from God and faith to neighbour and love, loving in such and such a way because we are loved so much in such and such a way. We move to our neighbour, to the city and to the world out of a sense of the loss of God. We set aside this sense of loss or death, we note it and allow it to be, neither glad for it, nor insistent that it must be so for all, nor sorry for ourselves. And, for the time of our waiting we place ourselves with our neighbour and enemy in the world.

There is something more than our phrase 'waiting for God' that keeps this from sheer atheistic humanism. Not only our waiting but our worldly work is Christian too, for our way to our neighbour is not only mapped out by the secular social and psychological and literary disciplines, it is mapped out as well by Jesus Christ and his way to his neighbour. Our ethical existence is partly a time of waiting for God and partly an actual Christology. Our being in the world, in the city, is not only an obedience to the Reformation formula, from church to world, it is an obedience to Jesus himself. How is this so? How is Jesus being disclosed in the world, being found in the world in our concrete work?

First, Jesus must be concealed in the world, in the neighbour, in this struggle for justice, in that struggle for beauty, clarity, order. Jesus is in the world as masked, and

the work of the Christian is to strip off the masks of the world to find him, and finding him, to stay with him and to do his work. In this sense, the Christian life is not a longing and is not a waiting, it is a going out into the world. The self is discovered, but only incidentally, as one moves out into the world to tear off the masks. Life is a masqued ball, a Halloween party, and the Christian life, ethics, love, is that disruptive task of tearing off the masks of the guests to discover the true princess.'

*John Thornley*

*Note: In these times of COVID, taking off masks should be read metaphorically!*

## Beginning to appreciate

You I trust to guide  
Free of doubt or judgement  
We create  
Once upon a time  
A giving giving  
Deeper, much deeper than beauty  
Before and beyond the word  
Receiving and giving are one  
For you and me  
  
So happy to find  
It will still be  
It can not be  
Thank you  
No matter what  
I  
Rejoice in you

*Philip Grimmert*

Short creative writing pieces or poetry for publication in the newsletter are welcome and should be sent to [grimmertphil@gmail.com](mailto:grimmertphil@gmail.com) or to:

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