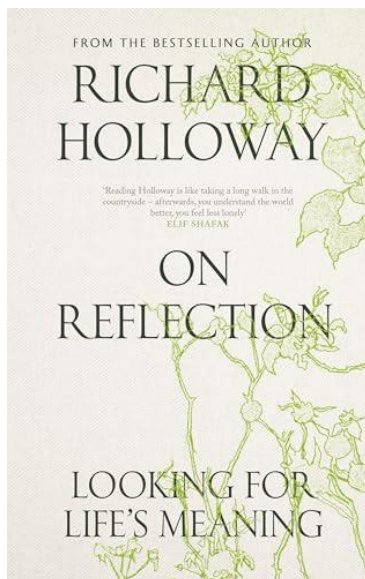




Limestone cliffs like those at Dover, scene of the poem “Dover Beach”

On Reflection; Looking for Life’s Meaning

Reviewer: Adrian Skelton



The best books are somehow like conversations, and this is one of them. Author Richard Holloway doesn’t get too far ahead of us, but leads us gently through his reflections, “looking for life’s meaning.”

This collection of essays by Holloway, former Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church, begins with a reflection on “the absence of God,” a theme which has haunted him since his withdrawal from officiating in the Church. He has written a dozen or so companionable books since that momentous event, including one of the best autobiographies: *Leaving Alexandria* (Canongate, 2012).

Although rich in melancholy, these latest essays are also comforting, in the sense of a realisation that this is as good as it gets... or “This is IT,” as one chapter proclaims. There is fundamental philosophy concerning “where all the ladders start.” There are theologies of forgiveness and of grief. And there are deep appreciations of cultural icons like Yeats and Auden, Copland and

Messiaen. Another theme which will be no surprise to those who know *Leaving Alexandria* is the importance of cinema: a parable is drawn powerfully from *Blade Runner* (1982).

A reflection on the Scottish character introduces a word new to me: 'antisyzygy' – "the contradictions of character...in...almost every distinguished Scot." Yet the message of Holloway, for all his Scots' pride, is universal advice: guard against religions overstepping their bounds. We may tolerate faiths that themselves are intolerant, only so long as their prejudices are contained within their own people. The issues which dominate this reflection are the liberation of women and the acceptance of gay people in secular society (but not yet into some conservative religions).

In the chapter on Secular Faith, there is a stark warning of the danger of what the 'Voice of God' in the head can lead to. The Voice telling you what *not* to eat is one thing, but the command to commit *genocide* is another.

He concludes with a plea "for modesty and humility in the claims we make about how we see things." And a sentimental note on the poetry of Christmas Eve. And finally, the importance of gratitude for the universe, even if there is no one to thank.

Adrian Skelton

Revisiting the '60s

I have long been fascinated by the '60s. It's not so much particular experiences in the '60s themselves as later reflection on that time. In particular, Theodore Roszak's book *The Making of a Counter Culture* helped to give me a theoretical perspective on the time. The younger generation rebelled against their elders, finding them slavishly conformist to tradition and subservient to a technocratic culture. The result was a new religious vision that for a tantalizing moment brought East and West together in a progressive cultural synthesis.

More recently, I've been stimulated by the thoughts of Camille Paglia on the time. She finds that there was a great renewal of interest in religion, particularly religion outside the conformist churches in the US at the time. Although that time had great promise, interest in it faded.



The Beatles in India with the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi 1968

She looks in detail at the reasons for that fading and examines any themes that survived. Often when she speaks her thoughts come too fast for her tongue to get them over her lips, but not when she delivers a prepared lecture. We are fortunate to have such a lecture easily accessible on the Internet. Just enter “Cults and Cosmic Consciousness” into the search bar of your web browser and you will likely see several results that you can download.

Her detailed research is astonishingly wide-ranging and is not limited to academic culture but is equally at home in the pop world. The first surprise is a comparison between the 60’s and the late Roman Empire:

“Cults multiply when institutional religion has lost fervor and become distracted by empty ritual. What commercialized Hellenism was for the Greco-Roman era, popular culture was for the American fifties and sixties...Cultic practice on the Roman frontier, I submit, paralleled that on American campuses in the sixties, when there was a syncretistic mix of drugs, Asian religion, and pop idolatry.”

Now Paglia lived through the 60’s but did not take drugs. She is also interesting because although she is an atheist, she believes that study of the major world religions should form the core curriculum for global education. She views this study as the key to politics as well as art.

Why did the religious impulse of the sixties fade? Paglia explores this from several angles.

- Drug abuse truncated the intellectual careers of many 60s thinkers (for example Alan Ginsberg).
- American universities failed to address the spiritual cravings that the 60s exposed.
- The media picked up on the legal and political controversies of the 60s but found it much more difficult to explore the religious side of the 60s.

However, an immense alternative culture survived the collapse of the 60s: New Age. Because New Age is unstructured and decentralized, it has been underestimated as a force competing with mainline religions. There is also the Esalen institute, which combines religious traditions (largely Eastern) with humanistic psychology. The problem with New Age, Paglia says, is that it is “choked with debris- with trivia, silliness, mumbo-jumbo, flimflam and outright falsehoods”. To counter this, we need scholarly knowledge of ancient history, including especially Buddhism and Hinduism.

The shift in the 60s was not a rejection of religion but a search for new forms of meaning in a rapidly changing world. This helped shape the era’s distinctive ethos of liberation and self-discovery. Laurie Chisholm

Living in the “After- Life”

I hope that readers will forgive me for using the above essay title, but it does actually fit the subject most precisely! Also, please forgive me for this very short resume of some 88 years of my ‘Life’ which probably mirrors so many others in having ‘average’ school achievement; changing employment(s); early marriage and a growing family contending with mortgages and the usual standard pursuits excepting, that at age 34, I decided to gain an external Open University(UK.) degree in History and Philosophy. Having done so, I decided to follow up this with a full-time degree at St. Mary’s College, St. Andrews (Fife) reading Theology (with Languages !!) which in turn led on to a Doctorate. In turn, this led to a further ‘50’-years of trying to keep abreast of various ‘learned’ academic studies. In the last few years, my failing eyesight made me transition to E-book reading & readers. Finally increasing mobility issues meant that I transited to my faithful computer and the New ZOOM-capabilities

increased my Visual /audio contacts with others by computer in continued conversations and discussions.

Despite the increased feelings of growing isolation, I was contented in my own home with my wife, my little dog companion(s), and the view of beautiful hills East of Gisborne as well as the local roadway with its passing traffic and homeward bound pedestrians. However, mobility issues alone finally meant that I needed to accept that 'full-time,' Rest Home care became inevitable. Having used 'one' particular Home for 'Respite-care' covering my wife's (necessary) recreational holiday with her family, I reluctantly agreed to permanently re-accept residency there because of her impending illness which necessitated hospitalised surgical care. I AM NOT going to discuss conditions in this Rest-home! [They are simply excellent in their provision of food; care; Staff; and available facilities.]

But and hence the article Title!

Once a 'resident,' I very quickly became aware of something I had NOT noticed previously. There was a definite lack of conversation and inter-communication between most of the residents. I remembered having read an article (see below) written by an Australian living in a similar facility. In that, he described his 'ABSOLUTE and UTTER BOREDOM'! I noticed that in my case, it was not that everybody was simply 'old' and mainly 'female'! It was that most folk were suffering from varying degrees of 'dementia'! Lovely, ordinary homely folk; 'salt of the earth' folk. Mainly Pakeha but with quite a sprinkling of elderly Māori. [Just recently, there has been medical-speak here in NZ of a growing statistic of 'dementia' within its rapidly ageing population.]

As someone who has been a church minister –[Church of Scotland & PCANZ] I still was intensely interested in all the 'goings-on' in current world affairs; church affairs; as well as local news, I found it most difficult to adjust to the fact that (here) the spoken word was, and is, seldom 'heard' unless it is in the canned music of yesterday's era of 'pop'! The truth is, that in that first 6-months, I simply have NOT adjusted. Such was its impact that for the very first time in my whole life; I found myself feeling intensely 'depressed.' I found myself becoming totally dis-interested in everything.

I have to also say that these Homes do provide Staff who are tasked with what is called 'diversional therapy.' This is usually 'games' in which all present can take part in some capacity. Folk music groups feature prominently in what is

offered and usually is music from 'yesteryear' which can sometimes induce some participation in singing treasured and remembered words. 'Bingo' proves to be popular with many which poses questions about the real state of the residents 'thinking' capacity -- hence my comment earlier about 'degrees' of dementia!

I ask (of myself) ...' is this situation' (- which I am trying to accurately describe) a function of aging or is it a factor induced by dominating circumstances? Is it that NZ Rest Homes are really a 'sort-of' last resort for what to do with geriatric persons? As a former Minister in New Zealand, I visited many of these Homes and never actually became aware of these absolute 'silences! [Mea culpa !!] Was I particularly insensitive ... (or just too 'busy' to notice?) Retaining 'most of my marbles,' I quickly learned most of the staff and resident's names quite easily. I then thought that here was an opportunity to 'minister' within this community. Not in any proselyting manner, but as an evolving change of Theology aimed at expressing Christian friendship (fellowship) and pastoral care for my 'colleague-in- care.'

After 6-months, I still keep asking myself new questions. How do I cope with my personal sense of 'useless-ness'? The mental pain of enforced inactivity means that time seems to drag-on endlessly. [This had never been an issue in the past!] There is no longer any sense of purpose within my life. I understand the depth and effects of UTTER BOREDOM on me but am only just beginning to see partial solutions.

I now make a deliberate effort to join the 'exercise' session each morning. Not only does it provide some easy physical exercise, but it also offers a welcome opportunity to engage in small talk conversations with others. The net result has been to encourage others to respond to each other in like manner. Remembering everyone's names 'engages' people in a meaningful (but limited) way [I will resist claiming any credit, but I have noticed that others, previously silent, now speak to each other more often.]

This daily contact keeps me 'up-to-date' with news of illnesses and other 'insider' information which otherwise would go unnoticed. It allows me to 'drop-in' to other rooms and say "Hello etc.!" whilst moving around the premises supporting my own personal mobility.

Where I have discovered a niche which could be called a Christian 'pastoral' purpose is making a conscious and deliberate effort to sit alongside other residents who have suffered debilitating strokes and are infrequently visited

(perhaps) by out-of-town family and whanau. I find this (personally) most rewarding by simple smiles and attempts to speak acknowledgements to small-talk. I stress the fact that I do not try any form of 'spiritual-talk' on such occasions. Any form of 'reward' is in the personal feeling of having tried – in my own way, to alleviate their obvious loneliness. I do notice some small improvement(s) in their communicative efforts which may (or may not be) directly correlated. Who can really tell ... but it seems that way to me.

Am I adjusting: - OR complying? Or finally 'aging'? It has taken months. I only have done so by trying to hold on to this idea of 'purpose-in-my-life.' I now read everyday books/fiction from the Royal Blind Foundation "Blind Low Vision Library" using a downloaded Dolphin Reader App, and monthly, join a small but worthwhile ZOOM group to discuss the latest choice for the Month. These are instructional as well as social and most enlightening. I use ZOOM to keep my world-wide interests and contacts. I use my computer for many different things. Staff now note that I am 'working' and keeping my brain ticking! Meaningfulness is slowly returning. My experiences and trauma, - in its own small way, may cause you to reflect usefully on everyday issues such as inducing PURPOSE and MEANING into what you are doing or will be doing in the future.

Somewhat as an afterthought, I do wonder whether the current debates around EUTHANASIA are rooted indirectly by proponents in their own personal search for 'Purpose & Meaning'!!!

Clive Yates

Article Quoted and Reproduced for comparison purposes:

*"... As I sit in my room in this Australian nursing home, I'm enveloped in warmth and coziness. The afternoon sun filters gently through the curtains, casting a soft glow that dances on the walls. The room, modestly furnished, is my sanctuary—a haven from the unpredictable world outside. It's a strange paradox really to feel so safe and **yet so profoundly bored.***

***My days here are predictable to the point of tedium.** Breakfast at eight, lunch at noon, dinner at five. In between, there are activities designed to keep us engaged—bingo, chair exercises, and the occasional sing-along. While these diversions are pleasant enough, they do little to dispel the monotony that often settles like a heavy fog. The staff, ever kind and attentive, do their best to make life here comfortable. They are like an extended family, always ready with a smile or a helping hand. Yet, despite*

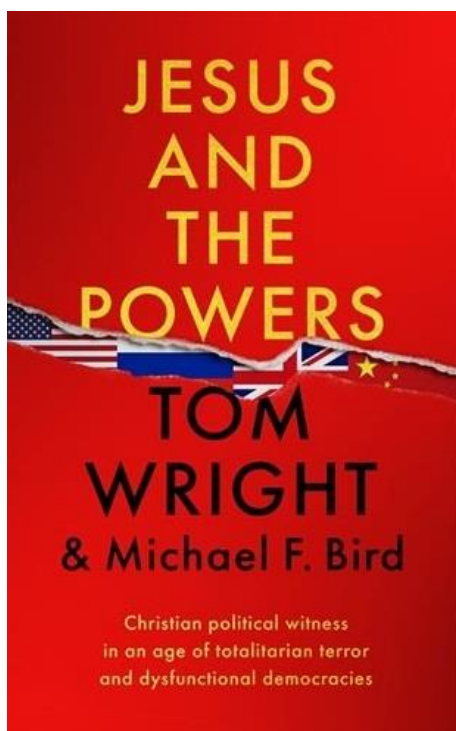
their efforts, there is a loneliness that creeps in, a yearning for the days when life was full of spontaneity and adventure.

I spend a lot of time in my chair by the window, watching the world outside. The view is limited to a small garden, meticulously maintained, where birds occasionally flit about. It's a tranquil scene, but it lacks the vibrancy of the bustling streets I once knew. I miss the simple pleasures of daily life—going for a stroll, having a chat with a neighbour, popping into the local shop. Reading has become a cherished pastime, offering a temporary escape into different worlds. Yet even the most gripping novels can't entirely fill the void. Conversations with fellow residents often revolve around the past, our shared memories a bridge to a time when we were more than just the sum of our ailments.

*In this warm, cozy room, **I am safe, but the price of this safety is a stifling boredom.** It is a delicate balance; this life of security tinged with monotony. I am grateful for the comfort, yet I can't help but long for a touch of the unpredictability that once made life so exhilarating.”*

Jesus and the Powers

A Book Review, by Dominic Kirkham (from the UK SOFiA March magazine)



Our world is ‘dangerously combustible, due to financial crises, pandemics, increasing injustices and inequalities, democratic chaos, geopolitical upheaval, wars and rumours of more wars to come.’ So begins this book by two distinguished New Testament scholars, Tom Wright and Michael Bird (W&B). The talk now is all about the end of Western civilisation, or at best, how to save what’s left of it. W&B are plunging into this debate to establish what political witness the church can contribute that will enable a positive engagement.

The book is wide-ranging, well-informed and up to date. But I must confess I found it difficult

to get to grips with. Not just because of the scale of the issues, but also because of their complexity. The authors imply as much in their postscript on Gaza, of which they say, 'It is almost impossible to say anything about this subject without inflaming someone somewhere' (p. xi). If this is true of one very specific regional event, how much more true is it of the last two thousand years of European history?

It seems to me that a significant element of the cultural controversy is the increasingly incendiary use of words: racist, fascist, terrorist, genocidal...Invective is hurled back and forth as an emotive attack rather than promoting understanding and dialogue. Words are used as cyphers referring to vague hinterlands of contention. At the outset of this work, the authors present their thesis that 'Jesus is King, and Jesus' kingdom remains the object of the Church's witness and work' (p. vii). But what do these words mean?

Take 'king', no doubt we have a pretty clear idea of what this word means, but is it really appropriate for a man whose career begins (in Luke's Gospel) with the announcement that the mighty will be cast from their thrones and the humble exalted; who denounced those who seek privilege to lord it over others (Luke 14. 7-11), and who defined himself as one who stands in our midst as a servant: the ascription of Pilate was the attribution of a pagan! Clearly words like 'king' or 'kingdom' are being used in a very unconventional way.

Of this matrix, the distinguished exegete J.D. Crossan, following Josephus, notes that the ministry of Jesus relates 'to the invention of a non-violent resistance against his homeland's Romanisation'. Though this way of life accepted the possibility of martyrdom, its novelty and focus lay in the empathetic compassion of communities of support. This kind of humanitarian era has been inspiringly described as a new kind of 'kindom'. In all of this, we begin to see what was so radical, even revolutionary, about the movement that grew from it, known simply as The Way: concepts like Christianity or The Church would take centuries to crystallise out.

All this was very different both in its organisation and beliefs from the movement that by the fourth century became known as Christianity. In contrast, W&B give the impression of a fully formed Christianity encountering and transforming imperial Rome, so that, 'Beginning with Constantine's legislation and empowerment of clergy, Christianity began a social, legal and moral revolution that still echoes today. 'This is the contrived perspective we

see emerging in Eusebius' History of the Church, which, retrospectively, attributes a threefold male ministry as implicit from the outset, completely discounting women, in which empowerment lay in the imposition of newly coined credal beliefs, such as those of Nicaea, as the touchstone of orthodoxy. It is worth noting that historians have concluded that this council unleashed the worst violence in the entire history of the Roman Empire, in which an estimated 30,000 Christians were killed by other Christians in defence of 'orthodoxy', of which the Emperor Julian famously commented, 'even wild beasts are less savage to men than Christians are to each other.' The die had been cast for a nascent European Christendom.

Needless to say, we are given no clear indication of how such a radical transformation of The Way came about in the new alliance with Caesar. Instead, the authors prefer to see what happened from at least the third century as part of 'God's purposes through God's people in a political world' (p. 65). At best 'the sins of the past' are to be excused because of 'the achievements of Christendom and for Western civilisation' (p. 34).

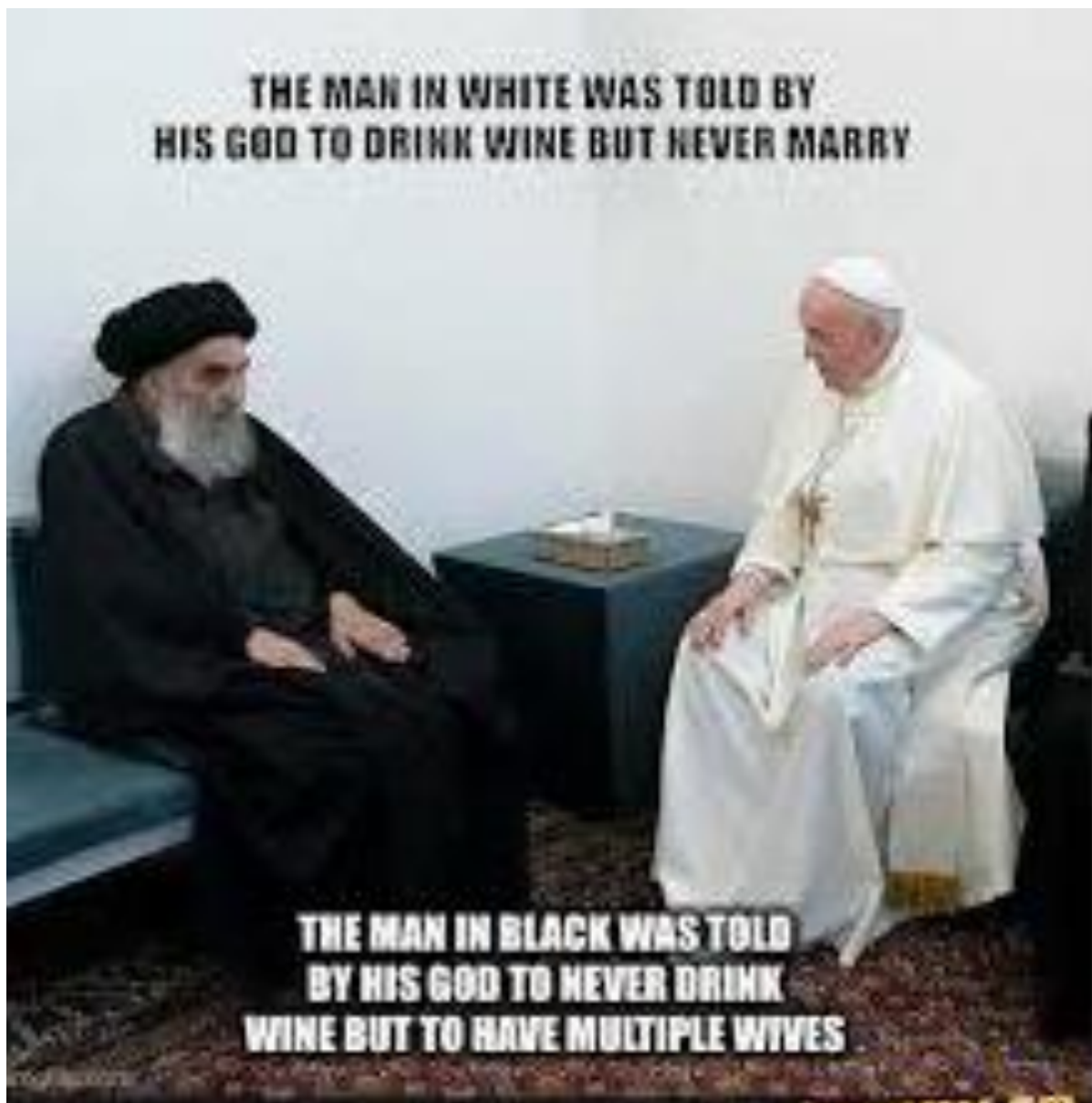
But again, what does this mean? In a secular age, what are we to understand of the word God or 'His' purposes? As with 'king' the Greek neo-Platonic concepts of the divine, such as 'logos', do not necessarily convey the distinctive nature of faith (Emunah) as understood by a Jewish Aramean – as Martin Buber noted in his study of Two kinds of Faith. Even apart from this, the idea of 'God's purpose' has been fatally compromised by events such as the Holocaust, at least according to the Holocaust theologian Rabbi Dan Cohn-Sherbok who writes, 'In the past Jews believed in a providential God who guides and protects his chosen people.... But in a post-Holocaust world, for most Jews, the prayers have lost their meaning. The Jewish religion, Judaism — with the Lord of history at its centre — has been eclipsed by belief [in] the state of Israel. Has Zionism replaced God?'

This transformation mirrors what also happened to Christianity during the Enlightenment. W&B acknowledge this process of secularisation that has so changed the West, but are keen to affirm that the Christian moral structure that emphasises the importance of the individual still provides the foundation for the secular narrative of human rights and liberal democracy: 'Whether we are conservatives who believe that voiceless and vulnerable babies should not have their lives ripped apart in utero, or progressives who contend that women have the right to have control over their own bodies, we are all arguing in Christian language, and we are still trading in Christian currency' (p. 28).

At this point one begins to see that the thesis of this work is beginning to sound more like a work of apologetics with the reaffirmation of certain assumed themes. To the authors 'it is fiercely ironic then that the secular Kulturkampf is really a critique of Christian ideas with other Christian ideas.' (p. 143) This may be true but for me, as I indicated at the outset, the whole thesis becomes bogged down in a morass of words and assumptions that are not clearly articulated or even acknowledged. It is this that makes the book so difficult to get to grips with. For this, or any book, perhaps what we need most is a better methodology of writing, and of reading.

Dominic Kirkham

And Now, For Some Light Relief...



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, and/or attend a local group. 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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Copy deadline for the next Newsletter is 1 June.