

Ken Smith writes: *Earlier this year SOF Trustees David Paterson, Allan Hayes and I had the privilege of being invited to take part in Think Week, a programme of Talks and Discussions organised in Oxford by the University's non-religious societies – Atheist, Humanist, Secularist – with Sceptics in the Pub representing the thought outside in the city itself. For me the occasion marked an important step forward in blurring the supposed distinction between SOF's 'point of view' and those of our fellow atheists who are clearly on our side. We particularly owe David a huge debt of thanks for his persistence and vision. At the end of the week I gave a talk, which I called:*

The Paradox of Religious Atheism

We are at least honest if to a certain extent we shrug and say that 'here, now, humanity and a good pint of real ale' is as good a way of coping with the world and any meaning we might feel the need to give it. Coupled with that is the sense among the majority of thinking human beings that the problems that threaten to overwhelm us are so massive that the last thing that should be giving us sleepless nights are the absurd ripples from the deliberations of medieval philosophers and theologians that gave us these problems in the first place.

With Mammon (or at least the international monetary system) increasingly showing itself to have feet of clay; with Gaia biting back in fury at the contempt we've shown her; with inequalities between rich and poor growing by the minute; with growing cynicism about our political leaders' ability to deliver the goods; with ideologies delivering their goods and attracting millions to their cause, the thinkers of the world should have more than enough to think about simply to improve the lot of our fellow human beings. I personally (if understandably selfishly) am glad that even while I write there are cancer experts so focused on their microscopes that the last thing they want is to be troubled by conflicting 'osophies, 'isms, and 'ologies that get in the way of clarity of thought.

So I'm glad that debating the Existence of God was deliberately written out of the agenda for *Think Week*. All of us ought to be bored to death by it anyway. We do better when we scrutinise more closely and critically those seats of power in Church and State that continue to hold so many in thrall to half-baked ideas. Any God that the so-called 'soft' atheists still allow to niggle at the edges of their consciousness would have rather more to do than simply exist. Incidentally how that word 'probably' got on to those bus posters I still lack the capacity to understand. The 'godless vicars' pilloried in the press some 20 years ago

when SOF first attracted public attention would regard atheist softies and the bus as woolly – even cowardly and hedge-sitting – in the extreme.

I began with a reading of R.S. Thomas' poem, 'Parent', which is essentially a revisiting of the Adam and Eve myth. He begins by depicting our first mother as a cave woman mating with our first father 'her yellow teeth bared for the love bite' and ends with 'the whole Earth a confusion of persons each with his own grudge rooted in the enormous loins of the first parent'. It became a meditation on the connectedness yet contingency of us all.

The idea of paradox as a title for my talk was first suggested to me by a conversation I had recently had with my eight-year-old grandson about human origins. We were talking about how our roots have to be sought in pre-historic caves and that there is/has to be a direct causal, contingent connection. And scarily, any break in the line would mean his granddad would never have been – and nor would he! He then shrewdly, if unwittingly, broadened the picture by saying: 'Hang on a minute, Ken (they do that these days, don't they?) if we're descended from that caveman, how come I have two parents, four grandparents, eight great grandparents, 16 great, great, grandparents, 32...?' Yes, our children have more to teach us than the other way round sometimes.

And there's something even more unnerving in my grandson's question. Maybe we have been so seduced by the Genesis story of the first parent that it continues to influence and even perpetuate the misconceptions that our Grand Narrative (both religious and secular) here in the West takes for granted. Maybe this is where even Plato started to get it wrong. So that East and West philosophical/theological traditions have largely developed independently of each other. Perhaps the story of Cain's murder of Abel has more to teach us than we realise.

As illustrative material I used these pictures:

1. A piece of Mount Etna Lava



This one because cosmic dread is at the heart – and almost certainly an important source – of religious experience. In my teaching over nearly three decades, I wanted my pupils to be awed by their own existence. Today I want our understandably parochial concerns here on Earth to be set against the background of the cosmos. Sitting as it does on my multi-faith shrine at home, this lump of rock frequently inspires me to imagine one particular carbon atom hidden in its mystery as representing our own supposedly big-banged universe; with the rest of this jagged piece of lava embodying what might be called ultimate reality. It awes me still and at the same time puts our human world in context.

2. Pieter Bruegel's Tower of Babel



This one because essentially (and much more insidiously than we realise) our central problem is about languages; the confusion of tongues, of persons and the aggravating fact of the barriers between even those who on the surface share a mother tongue, that only the most persistent of us will have modest success in breaching. While rejecting the biblical claim that such confusion is a divine imposition to ensure we don't overreach ourselves and claim equality with the Creator, it's painfully obvious that the persisting tribalism of our modern world is rooted in the inescapable fact that every single human being is born into (not language) but a specific language that creates a prison we only ever partially escape from.

3. Gian Lorenzo Bernini's Ecstasy of St. Theresa



And this one because I want to see passion and ecstasy made centre stage in all human debate and endeavour. We, for example, give so little time in education to developing a mature emotional life for our young. I also want an apology from the religious authorities – especially here in the West – for their marginalising of the body, and for the corrosive effect of sexual guilt. Also an apology from iconoclasts everywhere for their willful if ignorant destruction of so many things bright and beautiful.

Maybe the blame lies with the imperialists, the hemmers-in, the fence builders, the appropriators – perhaps beginning with the invasion of Canaan, the destruction of the fertility cults and the establishment of Yahweh as the ultimate guarantor of Truth. It may even be that the entire Western Philosophical tradition needs to be revisited and subjected to a more critical analysis.

As illustrative material I used the three items reproduced opposite. In the relaxed formality of a lecture room in Lincoln College these three images (together with two poems by R.S. Thomas) became, for an hour and a half, fruitful foci for contemplation and in a strange non-theist kind of way, worship and adoration; some of it in very attentive silence.

As an inescapably post-Christian atheist I haven't found it too difficult to transfer all the insights of orthodox trinitarian doctrine to a secular trinity of what we might call Space, Time and Stuff – despite the 'which and whence and wherefore proceedeth' perplexing me as much today as the original metaphysics did St. Athanasius and the delegates at the Council of Nicea. I gladly transfer my worship and devotion to the material reality of our existence, occasionally stopping to ponder whether (like Father, Son and Holy Spirit) they might be all of a piece – rather than three separate entities. I'm no tree-hugger but the truth is that long before philosophers and theologians got their almost puritanically ungrubby hands on them, the gods really did represent the great cosmic powers. For many less sophisticated people there was sacredness everywhere. Today it's more, not less awesome that we are star dust, rather than the creation of the One we allowed to become an abstraction.

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I want a world full of art and music and literature. I want people to listen as well as speak. I want it to be recognised that truth is paradoxical, that the world is not primarily an object of human scrutiny, but that we are sustained moment by

moment (sometimes against our wishes) by a gift. I want – with Gerard Manley Hopkins – to give glory to the god of my creation, fully incarnate not just in Jesus but ubiquitous in the very stuff of our existence. And to wholeheartedly affirm that any kind of duality is a nonsense:

For dappled things –
 For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;
 For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that
swim;
 Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;
 Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow,
and plough;
 And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.
 All things counter, original, spare, strange;
 Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
 With swift, slow; sweet, sour; a-dazzle, dim...

I gladly transfer my worship and devotion to the material reality of our existence.

If I do make an exception to the belief fallacy it is my own belief in Kindness. Here I want to pay tribute to Dinah Livingstone for her book of poetry with that title but also for her insistence on the here and now, and the teaching of Jesus that we take human pain seriously. On reflection we find that really it's not a belief at all. It's a way of talking about the increasingly incontrovertible fact of our existence. That we are kin (one kind), all of a piece with the cosmos, with our fellow inhabitants of our own world, and maybe even with the 'little green men' that might eventually drop in from outer space with either trident missiles or doves of peace in their hands. We fail to recognise and act on it at our peril.

I closed with 'The Kingdom', another poem by R.S. Thomas, an inspiration for me over many years, as well as a goad and a guide as to how things might be made better. It should be our dream. Our world where 'industry is for mending bent bones and minds fractured by life' made possible, 'if you will purge yourself of desire.... with the simple offering of your faith'.

Ken Smith is a former editor of *Portholes*.
 Poems by R.S. Thomas are in his *Collected Poems* (1945-90).