

The Christian Community  
*Perspectives*



The Sea of Faiths

September—November 2007

# Contents

<b>Apocalyptic Signs and the Second Coming of Christ</b>	<b>3</b>
<i>Douglas Thackray</i>	
<b>Dreaming the new earth</b>	<b>5</b>
<i>Martin Samson</i>	
<b>Christianity and the Religions of the World</b>	<b>9</b>
<i>Tom Ravetz</i>	
<b>Do we know it all? Do we have all the answers? Can we always be all things to all people? An open enquiry into other spiritual streams</b>	<b>15</b>
<i>Kevin Street &amp; Cathy Rodham</i>	
<b>Islam in Istanbul</b>	<b>18</b>
<i>Angelika Monteux</i>	
<b>Reviews</b>	<b>23</b>

**Cover picture:** *The Sun Chariot of Surya, India*

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# Perspectives

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The relationships between religions is perhaps the most burning issue in international affairs today. In his influential book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Samuel Huntingdon suggests that the conflict between civilizations has replaced the conflict between ideologies that dominated the twentieth century. These civilizations have their roots in various religions: Western Christian, Orthodox, Muslim, Confucian and so on. The shocking conclusion he draws is that human beings can only really relate to others in their civilization; recognizing this and dealing with the inevitable conflicts between the great blocks of civilization offers the only hope of creating world peace.

This view of inevitable conflict flies in the face of many of our hopes, and indeed of our experiences. More and more people integrate various experiences of the religions in their sincere individual striving. And more and more seek and find dialogue which shows that the different faiths enhance human experience. The strengthening of this open seeking is a deed for the future of humanity.

TOM RAVETZ



# Apocalyptic Signs and the Second Coming of Christ

Douglas Thackray

The earthquakes in the orient, cyclones in the occident and other scary events are enough to alarm us. Have we incurred God's wrath; are we being punished in order that we change our ways? Or are these a prelude to something worse to come? These and many other questions are the concern of people all over the world today.

If we look for an image that will relate these uncanny elements to each other, then the eruptions and the weather disturbances conjure up the picture of someone who has a weakness in their immune system, and is prone to viral attacks which break out in random places.

The reaction of the man in the street is not to seek explanations but rather look for reassurances that before long the world will go back to normal. However, the predictions are, that the situation will get worse in the future. It coincides with what in the Creed of The Christian Community is called 'the dying earth existence' which appears to be coming on apace; that is to say that in the divine plan the world was not expected to last until eternity but as Christ said when He walked in Galilee, 'Heaven and earth shall pass away but my words shall not pass away.'

The events we are witnessing are seen by many as irreversible; in other words, if one combines all these phenomena and takes them to their logical conclusion one cannot but come to the realization that we are in fact drawing near the 'end days' within a more or less predictable period of time.

There is no point in looking for the guilty party or in making recriminations, as it is evident that we are experiencing a shaking up that can unhinge the delicate balance of world economy, which is unable to change its structure without collapsing. One may refute these facts, maintaining that nothing of this is happening. It is something about which each one of us can make up their mind; either shut a blind eye to it or get prepared.

The Advent gospel contains a preview of the tribulations that await mankind at the end of time, but which are linked to the promise that by going through them we will be able to see the Son of Man and stand before him. This implies that if we are able to see Him in the clouds we will also be able to see the divine in the other. This will then become the fount of a new world order in which we will be able to transform matter into a spiritualized form as depicted in the

*Douglas Thackray is a priest of The Christian Community in Sao Paolo.*

coming down of the New Jerusalem. In these two images of the Son of Man coming in the clouds and the coming down of the New Jerusalem, matter is transformed. Both have the physical form but their substance is light. The prophecy contained in the little Apocalypse of our Advent gospel-reading describes how things will be changed without going into the detail of how this will come about in practice. There is always a gap which the mind of the person of faith has to leap if it is going to get there, leaving those who do not believe behind.

Although there can be nothing equivalent to this in history, there is nevertheless in the history of the Greek and Spartan people something of a parallel which we can draw on. Their communities were continually threatened by the vast hordes of Persians who could at any moment wipe them out from the face of the earth. It was in exactly this climate of danger that the Greek culture was born. There was an expectation that every free citizen would be interested in philosophy, in rhetoric, geometry, poetry, the practice of arms and the use of strategy, in the Olympic games, sculpture and the sciences, in all aspects of life. The effect of this cultural current was considerable. Every man carried himself firmly in life and yet if necessary was ready to die. There is a tomb stone outside the walls of the town commemorating the death of many hundreds, which says: 'Remember those who did their duty.'

Clearly the rebirth our culture needs will be different from what happened in Greece, yet the spirit that lies behind it will have something of this enormous strength in the face of the adversary. The Greek civilization left to us a legacy that speaks of living in the moment with intensity, doing our duty with dignity and being ready for absolutely everything, like the warriors of old.

Our recognition of other people is based on our memory of them, imprinted in us by their image and gesture. If we want to gain a living picture of the Son of Man we have to look for Christ in the historical aspects of his life as portrayed in the gospels, which we can imbue with our feeling as though we had been there with him. The realization of the Cosmic Christ comes about through our gradual understanding of his sacrifice on earth which became transformed into a cosmic deed at the moment of the resurrection. The etheric Christ, the Son of Man, coming in the clouds, is but another image of his presence who through the sacrament, the transformation of the bread and the wine into his body and blood, gives us the possibility of uniting ourselves with him, and transforming the world we live in. Paul in his letter to the Colossians sums it up: 'If you would be raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God, set your minds on the things that are above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hid in Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, appears, then you will appear with him in great glory.' (Colossians 3:1-3)

# Dreaming the new earth

**Martin Samson**

One of the oldest cultures in the world is that of the Australian Aboriginal peoples. At present archeologists are dating artifacts of Aboriginal settlement as far back as 90 000 years. The amazing thing about the Aboriginal people is that their culture has remained similar for so many thousands of years. In fact it has only been in the last two hundred years since the invasion and impact of white people that this culture has now lost its freedom to express itself in the untouched environment. In many ways through the loss of possibility it is also redefining itself.

Yet it is a fantastic possibility to know how cultures of antiquity lived and with what consciousness they walked the earth. Robert Lawlor in his book *Voices of the First Day*\* looked at the Australian culture and through anthropological understanding made the observation that every culture on the earth makes choices as to what activities they include. Aboriginal society knew about houses, clothes, boats, crops, herding and what we would normally call 'culture'. Yet their folk spirit made a choice not to spend time on developing these activities. Much of Aboriginal community spent the bare minimum on finding food and building houses and settlements. In fact most of the cultural gesture of the indigenous Australians was spent on music, dance and ritual, on what is commonly known as Songline or Dreaming.

The whole culture is held in the vessel of dreaming or totem. Each human being is born under the guidance of two sacred moments. The spirit-child announces itself to the father who marks the place of annunciation and then finds a mother who births the sperm-child. Where she births is the other place which determines the child's totem or moiety.

Three activities of any human's life are determined by their totem, which range from animals to plants, and in a secondary activity include sources of life in nature like light and water. Another way of seeing totem is the role of custodianship, the task given to Adam in the Garden of Eden. The creature or dreaming that is your totem is your work, and your task is to ensure that the environment is able to provide sanctuaries for that particular entity. It may even mean that one has to keep a particular site uncluttered and includes making sure that whatever it is that you have custodianship of main-

*Martin Samson is a priest of The Christian Community in Australia.*

tains equilibrium with the environment. If it does not, a certain amount of maintenance is required which is attained with fire management.

The task of being a custodian includes ensuring that the community benefits from your work. The custodian is the person who harvests a crop or kills an animal and knows how to do this according to ancient custom. Interestingly, the person is not allowed to eat his own totem. The fruit of one's labor comes to the good of the community while one's own well being is maintained through the fruit of the labor of others.

The second realm of activity determined by one's totem is all one's civil rights. Whom one can marry, where one travels, forms of introduction and punishment systems are all carried within the understanding of one's totem.

The third realm is that of spiritual activity or dancing and singing the dreaming. The dreaming is the story of ongoing creation. The stories tell of the work of God in the earth and her ongoing maintenance and development. The energy of the earth is the active Spirit of God, perceived still in animal form, and needs human activity to nurture and guide it in the evolution of the planet. The songs and dances are designed so that the landscape and the earth energies can remain united with the evolving earth. The people of Australia dance the earth into health and support her as she slowly evolves in the journey of both herself and humanity.

This final picture is that when a person dreams their totem they are not dreaming some animalistic deity. The connections with the spiritual energies in the dreaming are a communion with the becoming human being. A person's spiritual activity, through their totem, is also a strengthening of their own humanity.

The ability of these people to walk the ley lines of the earth and massage the mother's being with the dances of their feet and soothe her soul with the sounds of ancient songs and mystical instruments is a task that belongs to our human condition. God asked us to do this in the first instance when we were in paradise and since the coming of Christ the activity of the human beings takes on even greater significance.

The aboriginal people ask us western people to say sorry for the destruction we have wrought on the indigenous cultures. At present it is a fraught situation because governments fear that when they apologize they will be sued for compensation and native title, which also does happen.

The actual meaning of 'sorry business' in the Aboriginal understanding is far more inward, like the Muslim concept of Jihad which can be seen as a personal battle in my own soul. To say sorry is to sit down with the



earth and make reparation with her for the impact we have had on her. When there is a natural disaster or an event that impacts on the landscape, humans come and dance the dances of healing and well being on the land. This soothing and reweaving of the subtle energies that have been broken (or crucified as the Aboriginal people say) is the activity of participating in the resurrection of god and her energies, which are to flow into the new landscape. This work needs to be done and only human beings can do this creating of the light and life forces in the earth upon which we walk.

Is it so hard to think that we can all participate in this sorry business in celebrating the deed of consecration, extending our consciousness to knowing that light and life are resurrected, massaged and soothed in both the earth and the cosmos when we sing the dreaming of Christ together?

\*Inner Traditions Bear and Company (22 Oct. 1992)



Bocca della Verità, marble sun disc (Church of Santa Maria in Cosmedin, Rome)

*'In the beginning was The Word'  
and the words tumbled down  
from vast regions which existed  
before there were stars  
and bubbled up out of dark crevices  
beneath matter.  
And the first word,  
from God,  
may well also be the last,  
and all those strung in between  
a circular journey of discovering their meanings.  
Like the catalyst of you,  
the feeling I have been here  
and already know,  
but am repeatedly asked  
to relearn Why.*

*and on evenings  
when there is no moon  
you can see them all....  
even those that died  
a million years ago,  
and those that are  
not yet born...  
if only we lived that close,  
it would all be there,  
bright as the vanishing infinity  
of the night sky*

Lucy Trevitt

# Christianity and the Religions of the World

Tom Ravetz

As mental horizons have expanded, the existence of very different cultures and religions has impinged on the consciousness of humanity ever more. There can hardly be anyone in the western world who is not aware of the existence of quite different faiths. We all have to accept the fact that there are others who believe and behave quite differently from us, and yet are as convinced as we are that their way of seeing the world and living the good life are the only really right ones. This contrasts strongly with the situation of humanity 200 years ago. Along with the more obvious crises brought about by the discovery of geological time and evolution by natural selection, the encounter with utterly different cultures and religions was a huge contributor to the development of modern consciousness. Today, when one of the greatest challenges facing humanity is that of overcoming the barriers created by people's belonging to different faith-communities, the question has acquired a new relevance.

There are various reactions to the variety of faith-commitments. Some seek to keep the reality of otherness at bay, in a reaction that tends towards fundamentalism; others embrace it and allow it to undermine their own faith in anything, in a kind of relativism. Any thinking person who makes a commitment of faith—be it in a creed, or in having no creed—needs to find a relationship to the fact that others make an entirely different commitment.

The origin of religious and cultural difference is explained in a mythic picture in the Old Testament, in the story of the Tower of Babel. Here, a humanity that has lost faith in its ability to gain access to the spiritual world by natural means decides to storm heaven. Human beings are frightened of the consequences of the separation which is clearly the lot of humanity: 'Come, let us build a city and a tower with its top reaching heaven, so that we may make ourselves a great name and not be scattered over the face of the earth!' The consequence is that the progressive spirits of evolution bring about the confusion

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Perspectives.*

in language. From then on, human beings are irreconcilably divided, and different cult-practices emerge. This is part of humanity's journey towards being enmeshed in the chains of earthly existence.

The event of Babel is the backdrop to the story of Abraham, and the legends of the Jews. Abraham's decision to leave Mesopotamia is sparked off by the building of the Tower. This backdrop helps us to understand the strange tension that exists in the story of the Jewish people until today: the tension between *particularity* and *universality*. The process of forming a particular folk with a connection to a particular spiritual being is the means by which Jahweh prepares for a future where a new, universal humanity will come to fulfilment. He promises that Abraham's descendants will mirror the stars in the heavens—on the one hand, an indication of their number, but more importantly, a symbol of their universality. He tells him that 'the nations of the world will be blessed in them.' At the same time, the inauguration of the specific, Jewish bloodline is instituted through circumcision, and the principle of a kind of spiritual breeding starts, with the rejection of the bloodline of Sara's Egyptian maid, Hagar, the bearer of Abraham's first son.

As the story of the Jewish people progresses, the double strands of the formation of a particular people and the development of its all-embracing task go hand in hand. We witness Jacob wrestling with the angel whose name is echoed in our Michaelmas epistle—Pni-el, the countenance of God—and receiving the blessing and the name of his people: Israel, the one who wrestles with God. It is a unique moment in spiritual history, in which we witness a folk-spirit taking on his task. This is supremely a moment of folk-formation. But from this moment and its blessing flows the fulfilment of the promise made originally to Abraham—Jacob has twelve sons, whose tribes form an image of the twelve signs of the Zodiac, the 'stars in the heavens.'

After the sojourn in Egypt, the loose federation of tribes becomes a people that receives its calling through Moses. It is to be a 'kingdom of priests, a holy people' (Exodus 19:6). It is worth looking at this image in more detail. Within a people in the ancient world, the priestly caste fulfilled the task of maintaining the connection with the god of the people. Within the peoples themselves, the Israelites are to take on a priestly role, connecting all the various peoples with the God of humanity. At the same time, they are to be 'holy'. Holiness in the ancient world was a concept with no ethical content: it meant simply separate. The prostitutes of the Canaanite temples are called 'the holy ones' in the Old Testament, because they are



separated from the world around, and dedicated to a particular purpose. In giving the Jewish people the task of being 'a holy people,' Jahweh shows that the fulfilment of their universal task lies to begin with at least in a radical separation from the rest of humanity.

As the story goes on and the Jews enter the Holy Land, the tension between the universal mission of the Jews and their destiny as a folk grows. At times Yahweh appears to be a folk-god alongside those of the other peoples, guiding his people in battle and wreaking vengeance on its enemies; in the next moment he embodies something of the Holy Trinity.

In the Roman world, the Jews were known as the fanatical nationalists, the one conquered nation that would not embrace the Roman emperor-cult. Educated Romans had succumbed to a kind of relativist cynicism: it was better to worship many gods than just one, or none at all, for who knew which one might turn out to be real. The universal Roman Empire was based not on an appreciation of the spiritual contribution of each subject people which could have led to a new unity, but on an iron will that imposed a spiritless universality.



Bust of Mithra,  
British Museum, London

This was the background of the Incarnation. Here, the tension between the universal and the particular reached its climax and was exploded. It is one of the great challenges of making the Incarnation real for ourselves, to imagine that in the God-man Jesus Christ the Son of God, the Creator-Spirit who once dwelt in the sun, became a human being living in a particular time and place—a first-century Jew, who quite possibly could not write. I vividly remember one of my theology professors describing how, on a visit to Jerusalem, he had seen a young boy playing with a hoop in the street. Suddenly it struck him: Just so did our Lord play! Many of the readers of this article may have a different picture of the relationship between Christ and the child Jesus. Nevertheless, thinking of the Incarnation as something real poses us a great challenge. We often like to take refuge in thoughts such as, 'Well, he did know everything after all,' without thinking what this would mean for the reality of a true embodiment as a human being.

Only by feeling this challenge—what theologians call the 'scandal of particularity'—do we appreciate the Christian mystery. The deepest, highest,

most intense meeting of spirit and matter was in this particular incarnation. The spirit works not against the tendency towards specialization and individuality but with it and through it. We do not need to look away from the earth and the particular forms the spirit assumes when it comes into connection with the earthly world, if we want to experience spirit. To be spiritual in a Christian sense does not mean to be abstract, detached from earthly circumstances.

The Incarnation means that every earthly phenomenon can be an icon—no mere symbol, but an embodiment of the spiritual reality towards which it points. This is the beginning of sacramentalism. It is perhaps as great a challenge as the idea of the Incarnation, to make real for ourselves that Christ can become present in the bread and wine we feel and taste on our lips and in our mouths.

The early Christians had an inkling of this combination of the universal and the particular. Justin the Martyr, who died for refusing to make the sacrifice to Caesar in 161, wrote that all reasonable human beings are gifted with the Logos, a seed of the divine reason implanted in their breast. Such human beings as had lived out of this logos-seed were ‘Christians before Christ’. Implicit in this is the idea that Christ is far more than can be contained in any religion, in so far as a religion inevitably is the product of a particular culture, language and time. The church has the task of being an icon, a sacrament that embodies the reality of Jesus Christ; it can never claim to ‘have’ the whole of him.

After the 4<sup>th</sup> century, however, another tendency began to emerge. The icon has a negative counterpart: the idol. An idol is no longer a window on the universal reality of the spirit, but it becomes a thing to be worshipped in itself. This tendency—the inherent danger in any religion—was at work in the history of the Christian Church particularly from the 4<sup>th</sup> century on, when the church became an instrument of Roman state policy. The ‘catholic’ church—simply meaning, the universal church—gradually became the Roman Catholic Church. Later, this principle went further, when churches were named after their founders: the Nestorian church, the Lutheran church.

It was a narrow minded, idolatrous spirit that dominated the Christian and Jewish communities of the Arabian peninsula in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century, when the questing soul of the young Mohammed sought to find a way to bring the Arabian tribes to monotheism. It seems that the Arabs had been deemed to be unworthy of missionary efforts by either of the great faiths, who saw them as inferior. Had there been a different attitude, perhaps the

spiritual experiences which Mohammed received would have been channelled in different directions.

At the beginning of this article, we saw that there is a variety of responses to the fact of the plurality of religions. One is to hide one's head in the sand; to ignore it. The other is to adopt a kind of relativism, which may be cynical about all the religions with their seemingly mutually exclusive claims, or it may try to find what is in common between them.

What of our task in *The Christian Community*? In its title it reverts to the usage of the early church: it is not the church of a particular nation, nor that of a particular teacher or leader. As it makes no binding doctrinal formulations, it could not claim as Cyprian did in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century: 'He who does not have the Church as his mother cannot have God as his father.' What we celebrate is not something negative and exclusive, but something positive. This is Christ's deed. We might distinguish two aspects of this. One, it is universal if it is anything at all. We celebrate this in every Act of Consecration, but particularly on Easter Sunday, and in the weeks leading up to the Ascension. It is summed up in the sentence of the Creed: *Then he overcame death after three days*. This changed reality itself. We can call this aspect objective: it happened, whether or not anyone noticed or did anything about it.

The second aspect could be called subjective. This has to do with the appropriation of what Christ achieved. This is the aspect that is highlighted at Whitsun. The Apostles realised that it is not enough that Christ died and rose for human beings: human beings need to be told about it, and to live lives that make it real for themselves and spread resurrection in the world.

This appropriation has often been seen to mean accepting particular teaching, or belonging to a particular church. However, our experience of life tells us that neither holding particular things to be true, nor wearing a particular badge, guarantees that anyone lives the kind of life Jesus lived, spreading the power that overcomes death. Our Creed is instructive on this point: *he will in time unite for the advancement of the world with those whom, through their bearing, he can wrest from the death of matter*. It seems to be a question not of our intellectual convictions, but of our *bearing*, our behaviour, whether Christ will be able to work through us.

Such a thought lay behind the phrase coined by the great Catholic scholar, Karl Rahner: 'anonymous Christians'. By this he wanted to affirm that Christ is at work far beyond the bounds of the church, just as he is

not necessarily at work in all that the church does. Of course, adherents of other religions have responded by returning the compliment:

There are, in fact, Hindu philosophers who say that devout Christians are Advaita Vedantists at heart, because they have a real desire for the truth although they do not yet know what the truth is. They are anonymous Hindus. And likewise there are Muslim theologians who say that the devout Christian has Islam in his heart and is an anonymous Muslim. (John Hick: *Christ in a Universe of Faiths*. <http://www.qug.org.uk/HICK6.DOC>)

The seeming absurdity of this brings the great theologian John Hick to suggest that all claims of ultimate revelation, including the Incarnation, must be abandoned in the light of the variety of forms of religion. With great sincerity he treads the path towards a positive relativism. In so far as we see Christianity just as one of the religions, we must do the same. There is however another possibility: that we grapple with the reality that Christ is greater than any of his churches, which are at best a partial icon of a far greater reality. This means that we are bound to be humble in all of our attempts to embody this reality.

When we look back on the evil that has been done in the name of idolatrous religion, we can perhaps understand the reaction against religion which has been a feature of the last two centuries, and which has reached a peak today, with the publication of such books as *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins, and *God is not Great*, by Christopher Hitchens. Both these authors level against monotheistic religion the charge, that it is responsible for most of the violence which has beset human societies for twenty centuries and more. Of course, this argument fails to differentiate between human idolatrousness and the reality of the spiritual world, which religion in its true being seeks to reflect.

There are some questions which cannot be solved philosophically. In the leaflet that describes the purpose of the Centre for Dialogue and Prayer in Auschwitz, the director states:

*Although our house is called 'Centre of Dialogue and Prayer in Auschwitz', it often seems that we should not start with either prayer or dialogue at this place. One should start with silence and listening...*

In the light of the divisions caused by what I have called idolatrous religion, and the terrible things done in its name today, we need to find a true humility in our attitude towards other faiths. This will mean that we grapple to understand the 'sea of faiths' for ourselves. In relation to others, it will involve far more listening than speaking.



# *Do we know it all? Do we have all the answers? Can we always be all things to all people?*

## **An open enquiry into other spiritual streams**

**Kevin Street & Cathy Rodham**

Words spoken by Christ point to further revelation, and that the future will reveal more than the present. Whilst we might want to accept this in a Christian context, it could be a worthwhile challenge to look beyond to other spiritual streams, and to open an honest dialogue with others who are similarly striving to find divine revelation as an ongoing dynamic, rather than as fixed canon. Who, however, can we turn to?

The nature of the problem might be illustrated by a Hindu seeking to understand the nature of Catholicism during the height of 'The Troubles' in Ireland. How might that be defined—by a member of the IRA? By a member of a Protestant Orange Lodge? By an academic Catholic theologian—or by a member of the Taizé Community?

We turn to a current troubled world stage to seek an understanding of Islam—just what filters will 'strain' this understanding, before we can claim to 'understand'?

However, within The Christian Community, we can find starting points from our own members and friends, where we can perhaps start our exploration on common ground before moving onto ground that might be not as 'uncommon' as first sight suggests. At a wedding I attended recently at The Society of Friends, I found myself in conversation with a member of The Christian Community—who also spends part of her worship time at the local Meeting House. Both movements are within the Christian tradition. Closer to home, Cathy (now in her 50s), a member of The Christian Community, has been increasingly drawn to revisiting Buddhism. Buddhism has been in the wings for many years, since in fact she was 19—but Anthroposophical work brought her, and later her family, into the sphere of The Christian Community. During this phase of her life, the sacraments, The Children's Service, festivals and the like, all combined to satisfy inner needs. A life crisis, however, brought her back towards some of the central tenets of Buddhism, though Cathy readily

acknowledges that her experience of Buddhism is personal, and in no way does she claim to be an 'expert'.

A chance comment she made to me recently—'I can be a better Christian by being a Buddhist'—challenged and intrigued me, and subsequently we spent an evening in conversation. The following is her experience:

*Rather than saying 'I can be a better Christian by being a Buddhist,' I would now like to say 'I can be a better Christian by following a Buddhist practice.' I feel the need to soften the fixity of my initial statement for it is at the heart of Buddhist practice to cultivate honesty and flexibility and the truth of my situation is that I have begun to practice Buddhism, not that I have become a Buddhist.*

*At a sensitive point in my biography I found myself again in the sphere of Buddhism and I began to re-adopt the two basic Buddhist meditational techniques: the mindfulness of breathing, where one focuses on one's breathing, without controlling it, in order to calm the mind, and secondly, Metta Bhavan, the development of loving kindness. I also practice 'just sitting' where one sits with oneself, allowing one's thoughts to arise spontaneously, acknowledging them, touching them, and then letting them go. This met a deep need in me for non-judgemental compassion through which I began to realize that at times I was touching the being of the Buddha, as at times I had touched the being of Christ during the Act of Consecration. Then I realized that at this point in my biography this is where I needed to be; in this space of the Buddha and his teachings of the dharma, which is the four noble truths concerning suffering. In this space I feel that I have met the tools that I need to find first of all, acceptance of my own life, and from that basic acceptance to then deepen both my understanding of myself, and my ability to attempt to understand the other. Both of these I feel essential to the definition of 'being Christian'.*

*The third of the basic tenets of Buddhism, after the Buddha and the dharma, is the sangha, 'the spiritual community'. And with time, I have realized that in my devotional life I have made the shift, through a deep sense of gratitude, to the Buddhist devotional life. I do not feel that this compromises my membership of The Christian Community, yet I do accept that these two spiritual communities inhabit different spaces. I am grateful to know the being of both these spaces and I am aware of when The Act of Consecration takes place, and inwardly acknowledge the fact of this deed.*

*Through adopting a Buddhist practice I have found the possibility to touch into a calm non-judgemental space inside myself through which many of the paradoxes of life, especially those of pain and suffering, can be understood experientially. It has been through the acceptance of 'non-peace' in my life that I have again begun to find 'the peace.' For me this has been the greatest gift of the dharma. Running parallel is that the dharma has provided me with the practice of mindfulness that is the tool I need to help maintain and deepen my spiritual practice. This in turn helps me to cultivate a naked honesty towards myself that gives me the ability to attempt to move into whatever life is asking of me.*

There was much Cathy said in the course of our conversation that I realise I could subscribe to, whilst I am still happy to remain on the 'inside.' In certain ways her experience resonated with mine. She feels called to be a co-creator, and her concept of spirituality is a moving and dynamic one similar to the unfolding of Meister Eckhart's position—that God needs me as much as I need God.

Indeed, as our conversation unfolded, I became very aware that much of what I take for granted within my understanding of Christianity was as much a part of Cathy's journey as my own. Labels are an issue for Cathy—and I still suffer when asked 'Are you a Christian?', with all that might imply about me



The Trundholm Chariot (Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen)

that just isn't true. Similarly, Cathy is reluctant to be labelled a 'Buddhist' by the same token—all of which points back to the challenge of Cathy's first statement—'I can be a better Christian by being a Buddhist.' Could we blow away pigeon holing and labelling in an effort really to understand what the other is saying? As our 'Movement for Religious Renewal' gains strength and momentum, we can hopefully expect more people like Cathy to still feel a part of us—and something else that is and is not us. This in itself becomes a part of the paradox we fall into when we attempt to look at our spiritual pilgrimage in the widest possible terms.

# Islam in Istanbul

## “Those who travel learn more than those who read”

Angelika Monteux

This sentence was spoken by a 14 year old boy I met in Istanbul in June 2007 when I was invited to his family for a festive evening meal.

How did I get there? That is a long story:

### The invitation

At the end of last year I went to a performance of Sufi music, poetry and dancing in Aberdeen. During the break there was a raffle to win a cultural trip to Istanbul and among the ten lucky winners were four co-workers of the Camphill Rudolf Steiner Schools! We were told that we only had to pay for the journey – everything else would be free and that we would hear details later.

We had to wait a long time, but eventually some more bits of information came and finally we boarded the plane to Istanbul, still not knowing exactly what to expect and who would meet us when we arrived.

We need not have worried: once we had read all the hundreds of signs held up by the crowds in the arrivals hall and found one saying: ‘English Trip’ we were safe. A group of young people was waiting for

*Angelika Monteux  
lives and works at  
the Camphill Rudolf  
Steiner Schools in  
Aberdeen*

us. They took us to a restaurant for a welcome dinner. There we were introduced to our ‘sponsors’ who told us how

happy and grateful they were that we had come and offered us a most delicious meal. Hardly any of them could speak English, however, so it was not easy to find out who these gentlemen in suits and ties actually were and why they were so happy to meet us and as we were tired from the journey it was all a bit confusing. Then we were taken to our hotel, the ‘Golden Horn’ in the old part of Istanbul, a very luxurious, 4-star hotel.

Just as I started to unpack my suitcase the call to prayer began at the nearby mosque and when I opened the window I discovered not one but two mosques; the hotel was right next to the famous Blue Mosque and the Hagia Sophia. The chanting was hauntingly beautiful and powerful and I went to bed still wondering what this week would bring, still unclear about the purpose of this cultural trip.

### First Impressions

On the first day we had a historic tour through Istanbul, learning fascinating aspects of Middle Eastern and Turkish culture, art and history; we realized how little we knew and the more I heard and saw the more ashamed, embarrassed and angry I became about my ignorance and the misguided western aim to bring ‘civilisation’ to this part of the world. So much scientific knowledge, philosophy and learning came from there and so many art treasures were looted and



taken to the west throughout many centuries —and what do we offer in return? Coca Cola, McDonalds, sex and material greed —our ‘values’.

The Blue Mosque and Hagia Sophia are of course magnificent and impressive, but three things left a strong impression on me:

The front door of the Hagia Sophia has a large iron arrow on it to show the way in. When it was a Christian Church this used to be a cross; instead of destroying it the Muslim conquerors took the cross beam and turned it into the arrow head—transformation rather than destruction!

Inside is a grave marked in the marble floor: that of a crusader who died there in battle.

Outside there is a hollow pillar. This used to be the place where the rich people would leave money for the poor who could come after Morning Prayer to take what they needed. This was done when it was still dark, to avoid embarrassment.

All this was fascinating and impressive and we were inspired to see and learn more, but we were still wondering why we deserved these experiences. This became clear on the next day when the programme included a school, a newspaper, a TV centre, a University and a hospital. At first there was some disappointment: why do we need to see those things? We were hungry for more culture, art, history and wanted to learn more about Islam. But visiting these places, meeting the people who worked there and explained their aims, values and philosophy we slowly understood who our hosts were and why they arrange these cultural trips for people from all over the world. They belong to what is called...

### **...the ‘Dialogue Society’**

Their aim is to be a ‘New Voice for Peace’:

*The Dialogue Society was established in 1999 by a group of Turkish-Muslim intellectuals, academics and volunteers as a not-for-profit charitable organisation. The objective of the Dialogue Society is to promote tolerance, understanding, mutual respect and acceptance of people as they are, between people from all walks of life. The Dialogue Society therefore actively encourages and nurtures dialogue between followers of different ideologies, different ethnic communities, adherents of different religions and members of society generally.”*

([www.DialogueSociety.org](http://www.DialogueSociety.org))

I was deeply moved and impressed by everyone we met, by their ideals, sincerity and wish to make the world a better place. They were open, interested, full of warmth and humour and at the same time very serious about their aims. Again and again we were told how important love, understanding, human values and dialogue are to create worldwide peace and that these values and attitudes are rooted in Islam and the Qur’an:

*We are all children of Adam and Eve, we are brothers and sisters, and this planet is the only place where we can live, so we better make peace with each other!*

It is important to point out that these people are not religious fundamentalists and that their aim is not to spread Islam all over the world. They want to build bridges between East and West, integrate old Islamic traditions and wisdom with modern scientific achievements. They represent a tolerant, loving and peaceful Islam,

they want to strengthen and build on the values of respect, tolerance, compassion, non-violence of the Qur'an.

Aggression, terrorism, hate and violence have no place in Islam and the Qur'an forbids the killing of any other human being.

"You cannot be a Muslim and a terrorist at the same time."

### The Schools

The founder of and inspiration behind the Dialogue Society is Fethulla Gülen (\*1938), an Islamic scholar, writer and poet. One of his great concerns is the need for the right education, because he is convinced that hate, intolerance and terrorism are grounded in ignorance.

*There must have been something wrong with their education. That is, the system must have some deficiencies, some weak points that need to be examined. These weak points need to be removed. In short, the raising of human beings was not given priority. In the meantime, some generations have been lost, destroyed and wasted.*

(Gülen 2004 in: Hunt, R.A, 56)

And about teachers he says:

*Teachers should be patient enough to obtain the desired results. They should know their students very well, and address their intellects and their hearts, spirits and feelings. The best way to educate people is to show a special concern for every individual, not forgetting that each individual is a different "world". (op.cit. 53)*

Does this sound familiar to those who know about Steiner Waldorf Education?

We saw this put into practice in several schools of the Gülen Movement we vis-

ited. They are modern schools with the most up to date equipment. The pupils are lively, enthusiastic and respectful without being over-disciplined. The curriculum is the same as in state schools, art, music, sport, dancing and crafts are added.

At present there are about 500 such schools in many countries and they are open to children from all cultural and religious backgrounds. They are private fee-paying schools, but children from poor families will be sponsored by those who can afford it.

I asked one headmaster what the difference between state schools and their schools is, and the answer was: "We do not only educate, we raise and guide children—our teachers have a mission and strong personal engagement!"

### Other Projects

I found similar commitment to ethical and moral values in all the other places we visited: more schools, a charity helping those in need wherever they are, the very impressive newspaper 'Zaman' (Time), which also has an English edition 'Today's Zaman' ([www.Zaman.org](http://www.Zaman.org)), a centre for Interfaith dialogue and more.

I was especially impressed to experience the personal and active involvement of these people: they give their own time and money and efforts to these ventures and they get personally involved with those who need their help. If someone is too poor to pay for treatment at one of their hospitals, they will for example find someone who will carry the cost and a family in need will be supported by a year's free food from a shop and be looked after by a 'godparent' family. Most of their initiatives depend on donations. On one

occasion I asked how secure this is and what happens if donations no longer come. The answer was a rather blank look and then: "this never happens!" One of the pillars of Islam is the requirement to give one third of one's income to charity – and this really happens!

Another example of their dedication was Ibrahim, our faithful guide who stayed with us throughout to help and organize everything. He is a young Turkish Muslim who lives and works in Glasgow and gave up one of the two weeks of his yearly holiday to care for us.

But the most inspiring events were the dinners with local families.

Apart from the absolutely delicious food and generous hospitality these were occasions for conversations, dialogue, deep personal encounters and a lot of laughter. And ever and again: the longing for mutual understanding, respect and tolerance and the message that Islam is a peaceful and loving religion and the pain about western media who focus on the minority who engage in terrorism. This is why they invite people to Turkey – to see and meet the 'real' Islam, because they know that these human encounters create understanding, whereas the media often create barriers and division.

They were very careful not to preach Islam or to give the impression that they wanted to convert anyone, and I sensed a certain reluctance to talk about deeper aspects of religion. In spite of this it gradually became clear to me that the source



The Trundholm Chariot (Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen)

of their ideals and actions lies in a particular aspect of Islam:

### Sufism

Sufism is a mystical and esoteric stream within Islam with an especially strong quality of contemplation and inwardness, and addresses the heart forces of love and compassion; it is a path towards utmost humility and submission to the will of Allah, leading to love and compassion for the whole of creation. Jelaledin Rumi is just one of the outstanding Sufi teachers and poets.

A special group within Sufism is the order of the Whirling Dervishes or Semazens.

*Sema – the ritual of whirling is not a performance, but a deeply spiritual ritual. 'Sema' means to hear or to listen. It is the whirling out of bliss whilst listening to the meaning of the Qur'an and the purpose is to make a spiritual journey towards God and to return, able to love and serve the whole of creation without discriminating in regard to belief, class or race. [...] Con-*

*trary to popular belief, the semazen's goal is not to lose consciousness or to fall into a state of ecstasy. Instead, by revolving in harmony with all things in nature, with the smallest cells and with the stars in the firmament, the semazen testifies to the existence and majesty of the Creator, thinks of him, gives thanks to him and prays to him."* (Aydin.E. 2004, 14-15)

At the Sufi evening in Aberdeen which I mentioned at the beginning of the article it was explained that this ceremony is full of symbolism and every detail has a meaning. For example: the long woollen hat represents the tomb and awareness of mortality, the white skirt represents the shroud and the platform represents the universe. After a time of meditation and many formal greetings the dervishes begin to whirl, lifting the right hand to receive the energy and grace of the spiritual universe and pointing the left hand to the earth and in so doing they direct this positive force to the world, right through their heart. One foot always remains on the ground, symbolizing groundedness in the laws of the Qur'an; the other foot is lifted high to create the whirling movement, also representing the semazen's openness to and connection with the world around.

We had the privilege to be flown from Istanbul to Konya, a Sufi centre and the place of Rumi's life and work. There we learned that the spiritual training to become a whirling dervish lasts for one thousand and one days. The last forty days are spent in solitude and intensive meditation. This has to be passed before being received into the order of the dervishes.

This beautiful, quiet and yet powerful striving lies at the heart of true Islam and inspires the life and work of the members of the Dialogue Society. I am deeply grateful that I was allowed to experience this and have the opportunity to open my heart and eyes to the values of Islamic culture that are sadly hidden and not proclaimed loudly enough in our part of the world.

Therefore I finish with another quote from Fethulla Gülen which sums up everything we met during this magic week amongst Turkish Muslims and which can be a call to all of us:

*Be so tolerant that your bosom becomes wide like the ocean. Become inspired with faith and love for human beings. Let there be no troubled souls to whom you do not offer a hand and about whom you remain unconcerned.* (Gülen 1998 in: Hunt, A. R. 57)

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- [www.DialogueSociety.org](http://www.DialogueSociety.org)
- [www.Zaman.org](http://www.Zaman.org)



# Reviews

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## ***Gnosis !***

**Sean Byrne**

Old Age Books 2007

*Reviewed by Jane Sahin, Stourbridge*

This first novel from author Sean Byrne centres around the life of Origen, a true Gnostic, and provides the backbone for narrating the birth of 'established' Christianity. It is set around 250 AD in Alexandria where Origen was appointed the new leader of a school for catechumens, those who were seeking instruction in the new religious movement, Christianity.

At this time, the events of the life of Christ were beginning to filter through to the wider community, with many different interpretations. The Roman Empire was rapidly falling into decay and decadence and, looking for some sort of restructuring, found the fast growing Christianity useful—but in the form of a dogmatic law. It was an age of the most severe persecution of Christians and of the most emperors—at one period, twenty-five in seventy years! Because of this, Origen was forced to preserve his teaching in written form, contrary to his belief in only oral teaching. Driven from Alexandria he set up a small school in Caesaria in Palestine, and, with the help of stenographers, he produced some 5000 books during the latter part of his life. Most of these, over the centuries, were burned, confiscated or lost, some were hidden and some were discovered as late as the last century at the Dead Sea. Origen himself did not escape persecution and after his death Gnosticism and his teaching were banned and he was denounced as a heretic.

Mr. Byrne has scattered this book with insightful jewels of interpretation. He shows how Origen's work of reconciling science with the Christian faith, philosophy with the gospels, continues today.

The writing is imaginative and informative, at the same time inspiring the reader to look again at these events following the turning point in time, at the renewal of the old mysteries through Christ. Many people today practice a way of thinking similar to these Gnostics.

## ***Job and the Mystery of Suffering Spiritual Reflections***

**Richard Rohr**

Crossroad Publishing Co, U.S.

2006 (Revised Edition)

*reviewed by Alma Denton*

## **About the Author**

Richard Rohr was born in Kansas, USA in 1943 and was ordained a Franciscan priest in 1970. Now he is an eminent author, theologian teacher and preacher of international repute. In his works he crosses many cultural and religious boundaries. He is the founder and director of the Centre for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, New Mexico (1986). He gave several 'sharings' or sessions in Sydney in November 2006.

In 1971 he founded the New Jerusalem Centre in Ohio, a centre intended to serve a dual purpose: to be a radical voice for peaceful non-violent social change, and to provide a forum for the renewal and encouragement of the individual who

seeks direction from, and understanding of, God's will and love.

Richard Rohr now lives in a hermitage behind his 1986 centre. He engages himself in local work, as well as preaching and teaching in all continents. He is a scholar of Scripture and has also written books on a wide variety of subjects in the areas of male spirituality, the use of the Ennagram in spiritual direction, scriptural commentary and male initiation, plus other related subjects; most notably, *Simplicity: The Freedom of Letting Go*

### The Story

It was quite some time since I had read the Book of Job, one of the final books in the Hebrew scriptures<sup>1</sup>, when Rohr's book came my way. Within the reading of the first sentence of the Book of Job, 'There was a man in the land of Uz'. I was sent scurrying for my biblical atlas. My intention was to locate Uz. I soon discovered that Uz was a mythical place, Job an anonymous mythical and non Jewish hero and that the most prominent of the many subtle and profound themes was Job's relationship to God, even though throughout most of the text God is silent!

From the first sentence of The Book of Job, I was intrigued. And by the first paragraph of Rohr's explorations, and with my own re-reading of the Job text, where necessary. Rohr begins:

*Although the Job story has usually been regarded as a study of the mystery of evil—and it is—I prefer to look at it as the anatomy of a conversation 'For every age it is the diagram for those who fall into the hands of the living God.' (Hebrews 10:31)*

We can't observe the mystery of suffering from a distance.

Unless we've felt it, unless we've been up against the wall at a place where, frankly, God doesn't make sense any more, the Book of Job is going to be only an academic study<sup>2</sup>

If the thrust of Chapter One is 'conversation', then Rohr from the outset is pointing to the fact that the Job text is about relationship—relationship between Job and God, who eventually talks, and ultimately reveals his presence in the whirlwind. Job is honest and also cynical in his conversations, and even though he feels abandoned by his 'friends' and advisers, from his oppression and depression, he finally turns to the God, in a gesture of unconditional love, of total surrender to the only love we can trust as the unconditioned, the de-commissioned—the love that surfaces again in the words of the Act of Consecration 'in which we ask that we be 'taken' by Christ, as he gave himself to us.' As Rohr says:

*The difference between Job and his advisers is that they want to demand clarity and order from the universe. They want to foresee what God will do. Job wants to see God. They want to preserve a world of correct and coherent ideas. Job wants to preserve his relationship with God, even if it means his 'littlement'.*

*His friends preserve their theologies. He preserves his relationship. Job is the suffering man-who-should-not-be-suffering, and pre-figures Jesus, the dying man-who-should-not-be dying. Both of them bring us to the edge of what religious faith must mean. Both expand the possibility of human free-*

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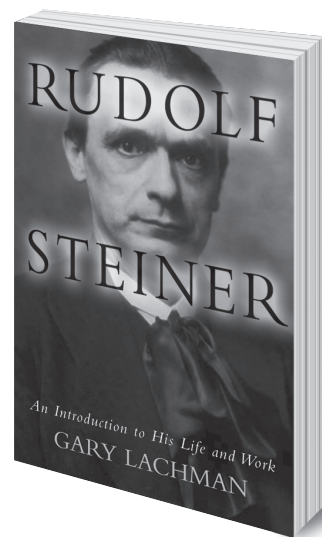
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Gary Lachman has written for the *Times Literary Supplement*, the *Independent on Sunday* and *Fortean Times*. He is the author of *A Secret History of Consciousness* and *In Search of P. D. Ouspensky*. He lives in London.

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*dom to the edge—where only divine union can sustain us, where our life is not just about us*<sup>3</sup>

Rohr points out (p.57) that the way Job thinks resonates in how we think today. 'it's between me and God'. In a sense the text is an anomaly in the Hebrew Scriptures, 'but it is very contemporary for westerners and for both the secular and religious mind': Job draws his consolation not from the promise of a future reward, but from truth and justice. Job's process shows that the grace to bear is never given until the moment arrives, and then we have to pray. Even so, grace is always a gift. Rohr also suggests that Job can no longer find God by thinking it all out. 'Job is being led beyond ideas and concepts to mere desire'. 'He has been simplified by suffering and so reduced to pure desire.'

Rohr also points out that Job discovers spiritual freedom through the diminishment of his physical freedom. In the text 'God and Job are continually freeing one another to love back in evermore perfect freedom'. Perfect unconditional love demands perfect freedom.

Rohr's work is sublime and original; he makes simple statements that keep me thinking for weeks, and wondering why I'd never noticed before, e.g. on page 156 he says 'I believe that the opposite to subjectivity is not objectivity but otherness', and 'true joy is not authentic unless achieved through pain'. (Page 52).

Elsewhere he writes: 'the opposite of love is not really hatred but control. God remains in love and therefore out of the control mode.'

I expect I'll be working with this spiritual classic for many years to come. It is truth and divine inspirations that lead me to a reality I can trust; not the reality of easy answers, but that of being led gently to a deepening of the mystery of pain and evil and the poignant intimacy of the mystery of life itself.

## Notes

2. (And my favourite)
3. Chapter 1, A Story of Conversion
4. chapter 2: What about evil?

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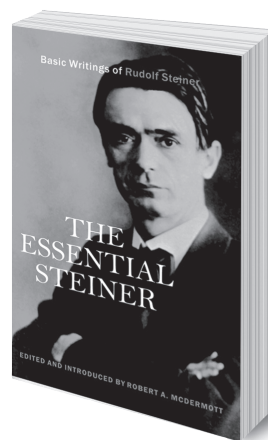
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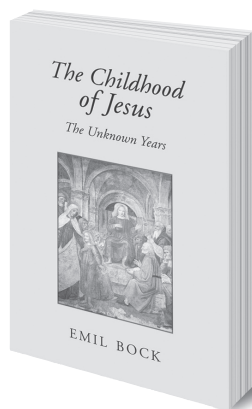
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The Unknown Years

EMIL BOCK

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Emil Bock was born in Wuppertal, Germany in 1895. He was one of the founders of the Christian Community in 1922, and led the movement from 1938 until his death in 1959.



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Integrating mainstream  
and complementary  
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*The*  
**Park  
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- a committed team of conventionally qualified doctors and nurses
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*Caring for you holistically*

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