

# Is the Sea of Faith Drying Up?



Ian Harris

It's just over a year since I visited the shingly foreshore of Dover Beach, where Don Cupitt began his *Sea of Faith* television series 22 years ago. A low-key Sea of Faith pilgrimage, you could say. There I stood listening to

*the grating roar  
Of pebbles which the waves suck back, and fling,  
At their return, up the high strand,  
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,  
With tremulous cadence slow . . .*

- you'll recognise the lines from the poem of Matthew Arnold that gives the Sea of Faith its name. I even collected a few pebbles as material relics – I won't call them "holy" relics – of the beach where Arnold and Cupitt and cross-Channel swimmers have found stimulus and challenge.

Arnold saw in the retreating tide an image for the ebbing convictions of Christian faith in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Instead of the sea of faith brimming full,

*Like the folds of a bright girdle furled,*

now he could only hear

*Its melancholy long withdrawing roar,  
Retreating  
- to a glorious new day? No,  
- to the breath  
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear  
And naked shingles of the world.  
To the bliss and freedom of non-belief? No,  
For the world, which seems  
To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
So various, so beautiful, so new,  
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;  
And we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night.*

So there you have Arnold's answer to our conference theme: "After Religion, What?" Not a brave new world, but confusion, alarm, struggle and flight.

He wasn't alone. As the year 1900 drew to its close, Thomas Hardy looked out on a desolate wintry landscape in Dorset. In a bare bush he noticed a thrush, singing its heart out amid the gloom. It moved him to write a poem, which ended:

*So little cause for carolings  
Of such ecstatic sound  
Was written on terrestrial things  
Afar or nigh around,  
That I could think there trembled through  
His happy good-night air  
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew  
And I was unaware.*

## What role for the Sea of Faith?

A hundred years on those questions of faith and hope, emptiness and doubt, still resonate. So my question – and I mean to be provocative – is: Is the Sea of Faith part of the solution to that sense of confusion and loss? Or is it simply treading water in their midst? And beyond that lies another question: we call ourselves the Sea of Faith, but of what faith is this the sea? For all practical purposes, have we become the Sea of Non-Faith, the Sea of Froth, even the Sea of Anti-Faith?

I've heard our movement described as a holding-pen for people who no longer find in their churches that joy, love and certitude Arnold writes about. Rather it's a haven where they can express their doubts openly; a forum where they can find other ways of tackling the ultimate questions life throws at us. That's a valuable role for the Sea of Faith. Maybe it's all the movement can realistically aspire to. But we're the Sea of Faith, and in faith terms, is that enough?

These are important questions. They're also necessary questions in a movement that sets great store on honesty and integrity. The answers each of us comes up with will obviously vary. They'll be coloured by our personal experience of life and faith, and by what goes on in the local group we belong to.

You might ask where I'm coming from. Well, I sum myself up as a secular Christian and a religious humanist. I've been a member of the Sea of Faith Network in New Zealand from its beginnings in 1993. I was also in at the start of another group in Wellington, called Ephesus, which began three years earlier.

Over the years, I've sensed a divide opening up in both groups, but especially the Sea of Faith, between those who want to maintain some sort of connection with the Christian tradition that has moulded us, and those who would jettison it. The first group believes there is value in rethinking that tradition in light of our secular culture and world-view. The second sees the Christian tradition as passé, a supernaturalist relic, intellectually indefensible. Look at the churches, they say. The sooner they're dead and buried, the better. As for religious rituals, anything's worth considering as long as it's not Christian. My impression is that that tendency in the Sea of Faith has become steadily more dominant, so there's now a strong impulse within the movement to squeeze anything recognisably Christian to the margins.

I want to challenge that – but don't get me wrong. I'm not pleading that the Sea of Faith Network become Christian. Part of its attraction is that it casts its net wide. It's open to the insights of Buddhism, humanism, Islam, eco-spirituality, Hinduism, secularism, atheism and other religious and quasi-religious paths. I've attended sessions at various conferences on the afterlife of animals, Celtic spirituality, Maori spirituality, witches. Obviously there's merit in many of these. Whether that breadth of approach will lead to love, light, peace and help for pain, or just a thick brew of philosophical soup, remains to be seen. But given all that, I find it puzzling that some among us seem eager to hold only the Christian path out of the Sea of Faith mix, seeing it as incapable of offering anything useful to our secular world.

Of course I understand people's impatience about the church, and I sympathise with it – that's what got me going in the Sea of Faith. But if the reaction tips too far, it can become reactionary. That's why I hope the Sea of Faith will keep the door open to the Christian strand within our heritage. To be post-Christian, in the way I've heard the term used by Sea of Faith members, doesn't necessarily mean dismissing all the positive potential for humanity still present in the Christian tradition. But those possibilities can be unlocked only by making the effort to radically rethink that tradition, without recourse to any supernatural trump card. That seems to me to hold more promise, even in Sea of Faith terms, than a cavalier dismissal of anything that smacks of Christianity.

Yet at one Sea of Faith conference I heard the call to leave all of that behind, in the same way a space capsule leaves behind the booster rockets that carried it into space. Outside the movement I've repeatedly heard people I'd expect to be sympathetic brand it as dogmatically atheist. For those who have thrown off the trappings of Christianity, that must sound such an enlightened alternative. No God! No theology! No creeds! No worship! Just revelling in Being itself.

Well, if that brand of atheism grabs you, good luck to you. But atheists define themselves by what they reject, namely theism. They confront a particular way of conceiving of God – the way of theism – and declare that that God is not. It's important to note, though, that theism doesn't exhaust the possibilities inherent in that little word "God". There are "other ways of seeing", and the Sea of Faith should always be open to them, or else it will merely have elevated one dogmatism over another.

## Of what Faith is this the Sea?

But I want to return to the question which for me is the nub of it: Of what Faith is this the Sea? I wonder how you would answer that. I expect some might say that “faith” is precisely what you’ve cut loose from, and you don’t want to waste any more time on it. Others, that it’s not a word you feel comfortable using any more. Others again, that what matters isn’t faith, but spirituality. Sea of Spirituality doesn’t have quite the right ring to it, somehow.

If we admit we’re a bit thin on faith, what about the sea? At least that will always be there – in fact as the ice caps melt, there’ll be more and more of it. That’s one prospect, but there’s another. Towards the end of *Revelation*, that strange book of visions and symbols, comes the promise of “a new heaven and new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.” The Jews of those days weren’t taken with the romance of the sea. It was the home of monsters, a place of terror and foreboding. Life would be more serene if it went away, and *Revelation* reflects that. But don’t despair – it moves on to the climax that “the home of God will be among mortals”. Well, there’s got to be some Sea of Faith potential there!

Come back, though, to the question, “After Religion, What?” If we answer by saying, “Well, obviously, the Sea of Faith,” and then we find we’re leery of the “faith” word, and then we come up against the vision that there’ll be no more sea, we’re likely to end up both frizzled and barren, within and without. The question for our next conference would then have to be: “After the Sea of Faith, What?”

Let’s get back to first principles. Let’s accept that the Sea of Faith agenda is religious, in the sense of seeking “a total mode for the interpreting and living of life” in our century. Our statement of purpose says it succinctly: “The Sea of Faith Network (New Zealand) is an association of people who have a common interest in exploring religious thought and expression from a non-dogmatic and human-oriented standpoint.”

Notice, please, an interest in exploring, an interest in exploring religious thought, an interest in exploring religious thought and expression. Yes, our approach is non-dogmatic and from a human-oriented standpoint. But that doesn’t require anyone to cast aside all religious thought from the western Christian tradition. “Non-dogmatic and human-oriented” don’t equal “atheistic”. You can work at and interpret the Christian tradition from a non-dogmatic and human-oriented standpoint – in fact, for me that’s the most promising approach open to me.

But am I right in perceiving any overtly religious exploration is becoming less welcome here? What do you read into the theme “After Religion, What?” The notion that religion is a dead duck? That the sooner we’re shook of it, the better?

It’s interesting that similar questions have surfaced in the Australian Sea of Faith. Last February the movement’s *Bulletin* carried an article titled *Has the Tide Gone Out for the Sea of Faith?*, where one Nicholas Rundle writes about two conflicting currents in the movement. One is the anti-metaphysical current of non-realism and even antipathy to religion. He likens this to scientists on the shoreline measuring the tidal ebb and flow, taking salinity readings and studying samples of the creatures living there. The other current comprises the “poets, priests, explorers, worshippers and ecologists who appreciate the beauty, and who love to immerse themselves in the experience.” Although the science is important for this second current, it’s what it all means that really matters. Rundle says he hopes the Sea of Faith in Australia will evolve as a society of connoisseurs on questions of culture, art, religion and philosophy, rather than of critics on the lookout for faults.

The article stirred a spirited reaction. Some said Rundle was drawing the lines too sharply. But when either the scientific rationalists or the intuitive poets begin to feel uncomfortable from the constraints of “an unspoken orthodoxy” (that’s Rundle’s phrase), something is going badly wrong.

## The arts

Let me develop that thought by focussing on a part of our experience where the Sea of Faith is rather weak. I refer to the arts. What makes good art and great artists? What influences come together to give birth to the eras we look back on as “golden”?

A recent American study tackled these and other questions, and the results are set out in a book by Charles

Murray called *Human Accomplishment: The Pursuit of Excellence in the Arts and Sciences, 800BC to 1950*. The methodology is painstaking as Murray ranges across Western, Indian, Arabian, Chinese and Japanese accomplishment. The book is as rigorous an attempt as you're likely to see to get an objective and consistent evaluation of a highly subjective topic.

The bulk of the book is devoted to tracing patterns over 21 fields of accomplishment, identifying first the significant figures and events, then the giants among them: people like Shakespeare, Basho, Michelangelo, Zhao Mengfu, Beethoven, Sankara, Newton, Darwin and the like. Then Murray asks: Why them? Why there? How come that of 4000 significant figures he identifies, close to 2800 come out of Europe between 1400 and 1950? And how come that of those 2800, seven in 10 came from only four countries: Britain, France, Germany and Italy.

Murray suggests four broad reasons:

First, he says, *the highest human accomplishment is fostered by a culture in which the most talented people believe that life has a purpose*, and the function of life is to fulfil that purpose.

Second, *autonomy*. Creativity, says Murray, comes down to solitary acts in which an individual gives something new a try – and individualism is the defining cultural characteristic of Europe.

In the Middle Ages, when Europe was galvanised by the rediscovery of Greek and Roman philosophy, science and art, Thomas Aquinas found a way to marry the church's teaching that everyone is equal in God's sight to the Greek idea that acting as a rational individual is the essence of being human, so faith and reason are not at odds. This is the third reason Murray gives for the flowering of scientific inquiry and artistic expression in Europe after 1400: *faith and reason complement one another*.

And fourthly, this powerful Christian current furnished or underpinned another element necessary for supreme accomplishment. Murray calls it "*transcendental goods*" – *that is, the ideal qualities which artists and scientists reach out to in their own domain*. He sums them up as "the true, the beautiful and the good", using "good" in the sense of a vision of the best that humans are capable of; and from 1400 to around 1900, the concepts of God on the one hand, and of truth, beauty and the good on the other, were mutually reinforcing.

So when I read in our Sea of Faith newsletter that a British philosopher damns faith as a vice, and note elsewhere an American academic's call for scientists to "blast the hideous fantasies of a prior age with all the facts at their disposal", and see faith patronised in a newsletter book review as "a human foible", I want to say "Hang on a minute! Can something that generated so much that's supremely inspiring in music, art and literature be a vice? Be so hideous that it must be expunged from our consciousness? Be dismissed as a "foible?"

Indeed, as the church continues to decline in the West, I wonder whether it's the arts that will keep our cultural consciousness alive to this great spiritual heritage. That was certainly my impression during Wellington's international arts festival this year. There was Wagner's *Parsifal*, drawing heavily on the legend of the Holy Grail and the imagery of the Eucharist; Arvo Pärt's *Passio*, re-telling John's story of the Passion; James MacMillan's *The Quickening*, a setting for choir and orchestra of a poem on the mystery of birth and life, full of biblical allusions; New Zealander Ross Harris's orchestral piece *As though there were no God*, based on the lines from an old Scottish Psalter,

*He hides himself so wondrously,  
As though there were no God;*

and you could add the treatment of love and meaning, experience and creativity in a modern theatrical take on the legend of *Tristan and Yseult*. *Parsifal* aside, all these were created within the past 25 years.

And if you ever get the chance, visit the marvellous collection of 20<sup>th</sup> century Christian art in the Vatican, or the British Methodist Collection of modern Christian painting, which I saw in Winchester last year. The fruit of "vice"? Of "hideous fantasies"? Of "foibles"? I'd say rather of energy, creativity, aesthetic talent, an ability to catch the spirit of a religious tradition and transpose it into a modern setting.

## A time for creativity

And here, perhaps, we have a clue for charting a course for religion fully compatible with the Sea of Faith. It's to apply the artist's energy, creativity and aesthetic talent – which we all have in varying degrees – to catch up the life-enhancing elements of the West's religious tradition and transpose them into our modern world-view. Some people seem to find it hard to let the old baggage go – they hang on to it and take every opportunity to trot out everything they find wrong or inadequate about the church.

It's time we moved on. Those bogs of negativity, besides being unproductive, are terminally boring. We're on firmer ground when we exercise the freedom we have to fire up our imagination, and then go on to express our experience creatively. They're the processes that will carry us forward.

Of course, some of you may wish to apply yourselves to religious traditions other than the Christianity most of us grew up with. Others may turn to philosophy or ecology for inspiration. In the Sea of Faith, those are perfectly respectable options.

## Words of promise . . . watch that fox!

But so, I would argue, is the potential that lies within a Christianity reinterpreted for today, and the rest of what I have to say will focus on that. I'm going to take four words that cause palpitations among some Sea of Faithers, yet which could also help lay the foundation for keeping alive a Christian-based option faithful to our Sea of Faith score.

So brace yourselves: the words are God, faith, Christ and liturgy. Oh dear! Aren't they precisely what some of you are trying to put for ever behind you? If so, please bear with me. The tack I'm taking may not be quite what you expect.

It goes without saying that in Sea of Faith company, each of those words can be heard as negatives. They can be used in a way that's barren of any positive association at all, or as shorthand for superstition, supernaturalism, anti-scientific head-in-sand attitudes, wishful thinking, delusion. They can be; but they needn't be. And if there's one thing more than any other that I wish members of the Sea of Faith could do, it would be to stop treating the old, credal associations of those words as if they alone were valid, leaving us no option but to reject them. It's much more fun to bring them alive again.

Let me set the scene for what follows with a short poem by Billy Collins, an American.

*The fox you lug over your shoulder  
in a dark sack  
has cut a hole with a knife  
and escaped.*

*The sudden lightness makes you think  
You are stronger  
As you walk back to your small cottage  
Through a forest that covers the world.*

There are two meanings you can take from that. You can regard the fox as all those words with meanings and associations you can't abide. You've been lugging them over your shoulder, but now you've sloughed them off. You feel a sudden lightness, you feel stronger, there's a wonderful new expansiveness as you launch into life without them.

That's one possibility, but there's another. Listen as I read the poem again:

*(Read)*

Did you notice that it's the fox that cuts itself free – free of you! It's broken out of your dark sack. It's escaped your clutches. Those words are now out in the open, free to breathe, free to evolve. They too have gained a new lease on life, they too can walk with a sudden lightness, through a forest that covers the world.

So the tables are turned – suddenly it's you who are the problem! You've allowed those foxy words to become so thoroughly tangled up in other people's cramping definitions that they've become a burden. Yet it's always on the cards that they'll cut free and acquire new associations, new meanings, new and liberating power.

## God

God, faith, Christ liturgy – four foxes a lot of Sea of Faithers lug over their shoulder. So let's begin with God and a principle. The principle is that a foxy word like this can cut free. Its meaning can evolve. I'd go further and say it must evolve if it's not to die in your sack.

Now I acknowledge that *God* means so many different things to so many different people, not least in the Sea of Faith, that there's a good case for dropping it from serious religious discourse. I want to suggest, though, that there's a better case for re-minting it, without a lot of the baggage that's made it so suspect in our secular world. It really can be filled with fresh meaning.

Actually, that's already happening – the fox has cut a hole in the bag and has escaped. But from the way some folk in the Sea of Faith talk, they haven't twigged that yet. They keep talking about God – and this includes the atheists among us – as if they don't know how to let go of the old definitions, the old baggage. It's perfectly possible to use the word "God" in a way that gives a sudden lightness as we walk through the forest that covers the world.

I'm quite relaxed now about using the word in the way I've gradually come to conceive it. That use is not theistic. Theism presumes a God, a Being in a supernatural world beyond this one who's the first cause behind everything, who intervenes at will in both the natural world and individual lives as he pleases, and so on. I can't go along with that any more.

But just as that monotheistic God evolved out of polytheism, and polytheistic gods evolved out of tribal or ethnic gods, and tribal gods evolved out of animism or nature worship, so today we're seeing an evolution from theism into non-theism. Non-theists are trail-blazing a positive path out of theism.

Actually, that idea has deep roots within the Christian understanding of God. Remember the Incarnation? Remember the Trinity? Well, the flipside of those doctrines is that they make the human an essential part of the concept of God. That means we can talk not only about the humanity of God, but also and equally the divinity inherent in humankind. And we can hear those words from *Revelation* in a new way: "the home of God will be among mortals." (That, incidentally, holds the beginning of an answer to the second question in our conference theme, "Is nothing sacred any more?")

Non-theism therefore recognises and appreciates "God" as a symbol of all that matters supremely and ultimately in human life. It doesn't speak of "a God", which is an object, but of "God", which need not be. For the non-theist, God is not real in any objective sense, but is "for real" in interpreting our experience of life. That allows us to talk about God in a qualitatively different way. We can then go on to relate to the Judaeo-Christian tradition in a new way, because what the word symbolises still matters supremely:

- In using the word "God" we're pointing to what is best and highest and deepest in our human experience;
- We're summing up what is central to our understanding of life, and what we sense as ultimate in the values we choose to live by;
- And we're alluding to a focus of coherence for all our experience of life.

So this is a concept that allows us to quarry deep in our western Christian tradition without for ever being tripped up by the creeds and doctrines expressed in past ages for past ages. It's non-dogmatic and human-oriented. It's as open as humanity, as deep as philosophy, as wide as the arts, as fresh as you care to make it.

## Faith

Foxy word number 2 is *faith*, another word some Sea of Faithers shy away from. But as with "God", it all

hinges on what baggage you insist on bringing to the term. For me, faith isn't credulity. It isn't believing something that you know deep down can't be true. It's not basically belief at all, in the way we use the word today.

Forgive me if I go over familiar ground, but this is critical. The problem is that *believe* doesn't mean now what it used to mean. It comes from a Germanic word that means "to hold dear" or "to cherish" – the *lieve* of *believe* is the cousin of the *love* of *beloved*. When the New Testament was being translated in the early 1600s, it still had that sense of "holding dear", or "putting one's trust or confidence in". So "I believe in God" didn't mean "I've considered the evidence for and against and on balance I'm of the opinion that God exists" – nearly everyone took that for granted back then. It meant "I put my trust in God".

In Greek the words for "believe" in that sense and for "faith" share the same root [*pistis* and *pisteuo*]. But by 1600 English no longer had a word that made the link obvious. So the Bible translators used *faith* when they needed a noun and *believe*, in its old meaning, when they needed a verb. From those innocent beginnings have large misunderstandings sprung.

But we don't have to be lumbered with those misunderstandings. We can move on. So I have no problem using *faith* to mean a trusting orientation to life and its possibilities, while avoiding *belief* because today that means something quite different from what was originally intended

It makes quite a difference when the fox cuts loose and you start using faith to mean a trusting orientation to life and its possibilities. It also makes it possible to retain the title Sea of Faith, and to see it really does refer to faith, not non-faith.

## Christ

Next, *Christ*. Now we're really getting controversial. So much has been poured into that title, so many theological barnacles encrust it. Jesus – well, maybe. You can relate to the human Jesus in a rational way. You can admire him as a man of integrity, vision and insight. You can see him as a great sage

But Christ, never! The word is redolent of divinity, the supernatural, the miraculous, the other-worldly, atoning sacrifice, sin and salvation – it seems beyond redemption for the Sea of Faith. If you feel like that, just check whether you're not letting yourself to be manipulated by your baggage. Just allow the possibility, remote as it may seem, that even this fox can cut free.

I've come to use and value the word in a new way, by building on the mythic aspects of the Christ story – the aspect that allowed Paul to talk about Christ dwelling in you and you in Christ. This is obviously an imaginative, not historical, way of speaking. It's poetry, not prose. We enter a religious myth – any religious myth – to seek release from darkness and despair, to be energised for a new quality of living, to tap into an archetypal power that's buried deep within us, yet is also wider than our own consciousness. The mythic Christ also helps us make the leap between our individual uniqueness and isolation and the experience of others yesterday, today and into the future. It's short-hand for a transcendent quality in our life experience – transcendent but not other-worldly, because it lies totally within the realm of human experience. It points to wholeness, connectedness, expansiveness, creativity, vision. It's a power within.

I don't know about you, but I think those are worthwhile aspects of our human search for meaning and purpose. And it seems to me that for many westerners the mythic Christ, rethought and re-interpreted for our secular world, still offers real possibilities for authentic religious experience. Isn't that, at least in part, what the Sea of Faith is about? But first you have to let the fox cut free.

## Liturgy

The last of my foxy words – and now I am getting into deep water – is *liturgy*. If you're Anglican or Catholic, you'll immediately think of the Eucharist. If you're Presbyterian or Methodist, you'll think of a set form of service. If you're none of those, you'll think "totally irrelevant". It's certainly become irrelevant to the Sea of Faith, despite the fine words in our statement of purpose about expressing religious thought.

The last time a Sea of Faith conference engaged fully in a liturgy was at King's College in Auckland five years

ago. That liturgy was based on a book that's been described as the first Sea of Faith-type novel, E L Doctorow's *City of God*, with a prayer of St Francis providing a counterpoise, and music and a litany to round out the theme.

In the conference evaluation, those who approved outweighed those who disapproved four to one. And that's where it ended. There's been no attempt at liturgy since, in my view to the detriment of the Sea of Faith movement here in New Zealand. For if we're into expressing religious thought, as our statement of purpose says, why is the impulse to work on appropriate rituals ruled out? No ritual will satisfy everyone, but surely it's better to try to find a communal expression of our striving and fall short, than never to try at all.

But perhaps it's the word "liturgy" that puts us off. Take another look at it, and especially its secular origins. It comes from the Greek words *laos* and *ergon*, people and work. So *leitourgia* is literally "the work of the people". In the Greek cities such work included repairing the roads, clearing the drains, or some other civic service.

In our secular culture, *leitourgia* would bring together our experience of life, our world view, the meaning we live by, the values we affirm, the questions of ultimate importance to life on this planet. It would also draw on whatever understandings from our religious traditions draw all that together, because those traditions, re-thought and re-processed for our own times, remain a hugely rich and diverse resource. I'd go so far as to say that if the Sea of Faith is not interested in liturgy in the way I've outlined – or worse, if it finds it irrelevant or repugnant – then we ought to sort out smartly what exactly our statement of purpose means by "religious expression". Surely it has to go beyond endlessly chewing the fat?

God, faith, Christ, liturgy – yes, the words may have associations you're no longer comfortable with. That's part of the baggage we bring to them. But they can cut loose, they can evolve and in time they can be filled with new content – content you might even find useful one day!

For avoidance of doubt, let me repeat: I'm not arguing that this is the only path worthy of a place in the Sea of Faith. But given our cultural heritage, I do contend it's an important one. Once the baggage is dumped, it's a path rich in possibilities.

### **It's over to you**

So I return to the question I began with: Is the Sea of Faith drying up? If you mean the movement, I don't know – maybe, maybe not. That depends on what people like you and me do about it.

But as for Arnold's sea of faith in a general sense, I'm optimistic. Sure, the tide has its rips and currents, and they can be most uncomfortable. But the sea of faith doesn't look like drying up as in the vision of *Revelation*. It will be here to splash around in for a long time yet. So if people like us would only let the foxes run free, religion – reinterpreted, re-processed and re-expressed for our secular world – opens up an ocean of infinite promise.

Don Cupitt began his *Sea of Faith* TV series on Dover Beach. I'll close with the words he used to end it: "You must decide - it's over to you."

*Ian Harris 2006*



## NOTES

### Leading Figures

Basho: 17<sup>th</sup> century Japan's greatest poet and master of the haiku.

Zhao Mengfu: 13<sup>th</sup> century Chinese painter. Revolutionised Chinese landscape painting.

Sankara: 9<sup>th</sup> century Indian philosopher who refined and systematised the *Upanishads*. Established philosophy of Advaita Vedanta, hugely influenced development of Hinduism.

### Charles Murray on the end of Islam's golden age

Islam provided a sense of purpose and vitality that helped power the achievements of its golden age, but Islam could not accommodate itself to the degree of autonomy required to sustain it.

H Floris Cohen: "The root cause of its decline is to be found in the Faith, and in the ability of its orthodox upholders to stifle once-flourishing science."

G E van Grunbeaum: Islam was never able to accept that scientific research is a way of glorifying God. "The sciences never did shed the suspicion of bordering on the impious . . ."

Aydin Sayili: Islam was unable to achieve the reconciliation with the Greek philosophical heritage that Christianity achieved, and free-flowing inquiry suffered.

Scientific truths that applied throughout the universe implied limits to what God could and could not do. Islamic piety consisted in obedience to God's rules and submission to his will, not presuming to analyse his works or glorify him with personal fancies and curiosities. Islam is not a religion that encourages autonomy.

*Human Accomplishment*, pp 399-401

### Charles Murray on atheism

"I have been an agnostic since my teens. But I am increasingly drawn to the proposition that of all the hypotheses about God, simple atheism is the least probable. That to be a *confident* atheist is the silliest of all intellectual positions. That thinking about spiritual issues, despite all its difficulties, must be part of being a grown-up."

10 Questions for Charles Murray, *Gene Expression*, July 2006

### Liturgy

Liturgy is a way of meeting religious needs, in company with others, by:

- Making sense of our experience
- Expressing what is of ultimate worth to us
- Reaching out beyond where we are
- Strengthening our community
- Tapping into a particular faith tradition
- Defining our framework for living

### Paul Tillich on religious terminology (from an article written in 1948):

"...I was to deliver the main address...In order to make myself understood to those

unfamiliar with or opposed to religious terminology, I had tried with great care to avoid any of the traditional religious words like God, sin, salvation, Christ, etc... After I had finished, Martin Buber got up and challenged my paper, not with regard to its contents, but its language. He stated with great seriousness that certain words are not replaceable, that there are “Urworter” (primary words) which no other, especially no philosophical terms, can ever supersede. Later liturgical attempts... confirmed for me the truth of Buber’s assertion. And his whole interpretation of the “word” as more than the bearer of a logically defined meaning has become an integral element of my theological and philosophical thought, and a weapon against the attempts of modern semantics to reduce the words to a quasi-mathematical sign.”

### Good religion

Good religion:

- Expresses what is of ultimate worth and ultimate validity to people in any time or place;
- Provides a sense of meaning, direction and purpose for people individually, and for the wider society;
- Nurtures people’s sense of Godness;
- Helps to shape the way people see the world, and to express this through poetry, myth, art, music, and in other ways;
- Enlivens our creative imagination;
- Renews our energy;
- Claims our commitment;
- Inspires our compassion;
- Makes people want to pass the experience on from one generation to another.

### Experience, imagination, creativity

These make up the pivotal trinity of all truly religious endeavour:

- Everything begins with experience.
- on which we unleash our imagination,
- which we engage to express our understanding through the creativity of our words, music, movement and art.

### Karen Armstrong on Myth:

“The stories that enabled us to place our lives in a larger setting, that revealed an underlying pattern, and gave us a sense that, against all the depressing and chaotic evidence to the contrary, life had meaning and value.”

A valid myth is one that “forces us to change our minds and hearts, gives us new hope, and compels us to live more fully”.

*A Short History of Myth, 2005*

### Don Cupitt, ending his *Sea of Faith* TV series:

“Scepticism as well as certainty can drive people to faith . . . It leaves you to see religion in a different way – not as a set of grand answers but simply as a spiritual path. When I look into the void of the modern situation and I see that it’s entirely up to me what I’m to make of myself and my life, then I find I need religion to give me a path, to give my soul shape, to give me categories to live by, goals to pursue . . . When I say the creed I regard it not as giving supernatural information, but as showing me a way to walk. You may not agree, but in a way that’s only to be expected, for our whole message has been that in the modern situation the individual stands alone with his freedom before the ultimate questions of life . . . You must decide – it’s over to you.”

John Dominic Crossan on Jesus and Christ:

“I presume that there will always be divergent historical Jesuses, that there will always be divergent Christs built upon them, but I argue, above all, that the structure of Christianity will always be: *this is how we see Jesus-then as Christ-now*. Christianity must repeatedly, generation after generation, make its best historical judgment about who Jesus was then and, on that basis, decide what that reconstruction means as Christ now. I am proposing that the dialectic between Jesuses and Christs . . . is at the heart of both tradition and canon, that it is perfectly valid, and that it has always been with us and probably always will be.”

*Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography, 1994*