

Towards Humanity

The seeds of humanism are rooted deep in the Christian theology of the Incarnation. 2013 marks the anniversary of the publication of two landmark books progressing towards that humanist outcome: the fiftieth anniversary of John Robinson's *Honest to God* (SCM 1963) and the twentieth anniversary of Anthony Freeman's *God in Us: A Case for Christian Humanism* (SCM 1993). That is why, following the Christmas issue entitled *Towards a Tolerant Secular Society*, this Easter issue of *Sofia* is called *Towards Humanity*.

Philip Feakin, a day chaplain at Southwark Cathedral and SOF member, recalls the excitement at the publication of Robinson's book: 'It would be difficult to describe the publication of *Honest to God* on 19th March 1963 as anything but a sensation.' He looks at the fierce debates that followed. Robinson concluded his 1962 preface to the book: 'What I have tried to say, in a tentative and exploratory way, may seem to be radical, and doubtless to many heretical. The one thing of which I am fairly sure is that, in retrospect, it will be seen to have erred in not being radical enough.' Unfortunately, as Feakin concludes: 'Sadly, if the book was published today I feel it would still receive the bitter criticism that it had in 1963 because of the inability of the church to properly discuss and debate those issues that John Robinson brought to its attention fifty years ago.'

Following the publication of his book *God in Us*, Anthony Freeman was sacked from his job as a Church of England priest and lost his home. He eventually moved to Exeter, a different diocese, where he was allowed to retain his priestly licence. Vicar of Hythe, Tony Windross, who enjoys the relative security of a Parson's Freehold, looks back on the case. He himself was ordained into the Church of England in July 1993, the very same month as the 'Freeman affair' was making the headlines and Freeman was in touch with him at the time. Windross says: 'For large numbers of intelligent people in western society, the very idea of a supernatural Supreme Being is impossible'. The church is declining and reacts by entrenching its position. Windross argues that it urgently needs the protestations of people like Freeman, whose loss of traditional faith has led him to something new and deeper.

Next we have an article by David Lee, 'Two Cheers for Pelagius'. The ancient British monk Pelagius, who rejected the Augustinian doctrine of original sin, could be described as a proto-humanist. Lee honours him

for his insights but gives two cheers, rather than three, because he says Pelagius was too cavalier about our human potential for wickedness.

In response to a spate of books arguing that Jesus was 'just a sage' I have written a short defence of the Christ Epic, which reasserts Jesus' gospel message of the Kingdom of God – an envisioned fulfilment of humanity in a humane society – in a powerful, mythical way. Realising that all supernatural beings are created by the human imagination or poetic genius, I think it is essential that we keep this myth or 'poetic tale' to inspire and encourage us in our striving for humanity, both personal and social. That is the sense in which we can say, 'I trust in your resurrection.'

The outcome of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation – Christ as wholly human and wholly divine – is humanism. Christ – God – 'empties himself' back into humanity. And, in fact, the full-blown orthodox statement of Chalcedon: that the Incarnate Word, one and the same Lord Jesus Christ, is wholly God and wholly man – one and the same person – leads to the most humanist outcome. God – I AM or I WILL BE – is not 'outside', but to be sought in humanity and the cosmos, to which humanity belongs and whose spokesperson it is.

Sofia is committed to a sane and kindly humanism that sees the liberation and flowering of humanity as the chief object of culture. Both Jesus' lifestory with what he taught *and* the mythical Christ Epic are vital contributions to that endeavour. Those who desupernaturalise these things, sometimes at great personal cost, should be honoured, because ultimately that is the only way these 'treasures of wisdom and knowledge' can retain credibility and moral power, and the church can live effectively in our time.

In this magazine you will find insert fliers and booking forms for the SOF Annual Conference. In these hard time the title *For the Common Good* could be described as subversive. We have three excellent speakers. One is Chris Howson, whose book, *A Just Church*, is reviewed by SOF Chair John Pearson on page 21 of this issue. Alom Shaha's *The Young Atheist's Handbook* was reviewed by Mary Lloyd in *Sofia* 106 and Tim Jackson's *Prosperity without Growth* by David Paterson in *Sofia* 96. There will be comfortable accommodation at Leicester and the chance to meet old friends and sparring partners.