

Come All Ye

When starlings gather to join in their swirling dance at sunset over Brighton West Pier, it is called a Murmuration of Starlings. This year's SOF Annual Conference could have been called a Murmuration of Members. Not only did it have three main speakers but also sent out the invitation 'Come All Ye', inviting members to lead forums or to give short talks on any subject that concerned them. That gives this Christmas issue of *Sofia* its title *Come All Ye*.

Five of these contributions are published here (there were many more). Jane Howarth led a forum asking some 'Questions Left on the Beach' when 'the Sea of Faith's receding tide draws our sense of a real God away'. Her chart is reproduced in the centrefold on pages 14-15 so that it could be used in discussions. It is accompanied by her introduction on pages 13 and 16 (thus printed on the back of the chart: contact *Sofia* Editor if you would like a pdf of these four pages to print as a leaflet).

The Conference title was *The Necessity of Hope*. David Paterson's Short Talk (page 12) was called 'People and their gods evolve together' and concludes with G.M Hopkins' sonnet 'Carrion Comfort', in which the poet wrestles with despair.

In this centenary year of the First World War Stephen Williams led a forum on *A War to End War?* (page 17). With a question mark, because, of course, it didn't.

Two people who ran forums at the Conference have sent in follow-up pieces to them. Martin Spence's forum was on Terry Eagleton's book *Hope without Optimism*. As this had already been reviewed in *Sofia*, he follows it up with a review of John Gray's *Seven Types of Atheism* (which Eagleton reviewed critically in *The Guardian*).

Carol Palfrey led a forum on women's suffrage and struggle for equality and for her follow-up, she says, 'it occurred to me that it

would be relevant to write an article connecting women's suffrage and women's fiction and to consider whether securing the right to vote had had any impact on the lives and interests of women in general and of women writers in particular.' She looks at some neglected, enjoyable novels written by women and mentioned in Nicola Beauman's book *A Very Great Profession* (Virago, 1983). In her 'Revisiting' Alison McRobb offers another 'take' on *Middlemarch* by George Eliot, one of those twentieth-century women writers' great predecessors.

This is the Christmas issue of *Sofia* and in the hymn 'O Come All Ye Faithful', we are invited to come to Bethlehem to see Mary and her newborn child. In our first article, 'Hail, full of Grace! A Remembrance of Things Past' Dominic Kirkham explores Egyptian parallels to the Christmas story of the holy mother and child and goes on to consider the extraordinary expulsion of 'the feminine divine' from the three Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In Christianity Mary did become honoured as *theotokos* – mother of God – but was expelled again at the Reformation.

In the story of the Annunciation, the angel Gabriel greets Mary: 'Hail, full of grace!' and in the prologue to John's Gospel her son, the Incarnate Word, is called 'full of grace and truth'. The second article explores nature and grace, both in classic theology and our everyday world.

Lastly, in his *As I Please* column – the title comes from George Orwell's famous *As I Please* column in the *Tribune* – John Pearson urges us to see films at the cinema: 'Try the real thing'. He is looking forward to *Mary Poppins Returns*, released on December 21st – a Christmas treat, perhaps? Wishing all our readers grace and peace and a merry Christmas, or if you prefer, Winter Festival.