

SOF 2019 Conference

At this year's annual SOF Conference our first main speaker was from Northern Ireland. *Sofia's* front cover shows the Tree of Peace and Unity in the garden of the Dundadry Hotel, Belfast. It began as two lime trees but as they grew, they joined together to become one. Tony Blair, David Trimble and John Hume met under this tree to broker peace in Northern Ireland in 1998. (That hard-won Good Friday Agreement is now threatened by a No-Deal Brexit.)

Our in-house main speaker's talk was on Justice and *Sofia's* back cover shows the flamboyant golden statue of Justice on the roof of the Brittany Parlement building.

The Conference's official title was *Is That All there Is?* For most of the time that theme hovered somewhere in the background, rather than being explicitly addressed. But from the three very disparate main speakers and other contributions, a theme that did emerge strongly in the course of the Conference was Exclusion/Inclusion.

Our first speaker, Ernie Rea, describes his Journey of Faith from Exclusive to Inclusive. As a child growing up in a Protestant family in Northern Ireland, he played with all the local children, except the one Catholic family. They were different, he thought, and worshipped a different God. He began meeting Catholics when he went to university. Then when he worked as a Protestant minister and for BBC Radio Ulster during the Troubles, he made steadfast and courageous efforts to fraternise with Catholics and support Civil Rights. When in 1989 he became BBC Head of Religious Broadcasting, he says, 'I became part of a wide interfaith network. So I became friends with Jews, Muslims and Hindus.' What is fascinating in this Journey is how, as he becomes more open and generous-minded through meeting people, his God becomes more open and generous-minded too. In his conclusion he says: 'I believe in a God who not only tolerates diversity but loves and embraces it.'

Our in-house speaker Stephen Williams traces the development of ideas of justice through Justice as Law, Justice as Virtue, to Justice as Fairness. He does raise the question: 'Is that all there is to Justice?' when he says:

'When we take a long view, we see law as dynamic, altering over time and with the principles dominant at one time often contradicted in the practices and procedures of a different age... However, I suggest that if we were to stop the clock at any point in that history, instead of an acknowledgement of that reality, we would find an assumption that the current expression of justice is the only right one, the embodiment of an eternally valid principle.'

But by the end of his talk Stephen plumps firmly for Justice as Fairness. He quotes founder of the NHS Aneurin Bevan's critique of utilitarianism in his book *In Place of Fear*: 'Not even the apparently enlightened principle of "the greatest good of the greatest number" can excuse indifference to individual suffering.' In his concluding section Stephen looks in some detail at the work of John Rawls, who proposes Justice as Fairness and, of course, fairness means *inclusion*.

Our final main speaker, yoga teacher Avril Robarts, speaks about her engagement with Indian religious ideas and how she has found it helpful to include them in her spiritual life and practice.

There were also many short talks and workshops at the Conference. For reasons of space we can only give summaries and reports of a just a few of them. Among the short talks, Carol Palfrey spoke about 'the forgotten hero of Norwich', Thomas Browne, who included ideas from both science and religion. 'Belief can be soft and flexible,' says Browne. 'I have experienced a few Christians and I have mixed my own by *commolition* to satisfy mine own reason.' David Francis' short talk was on developing an inclusive religious education for schools.

It was a packed Conference and this is a packed *Sofia* but it still has space for two poems, a love poem on page 15 by David Lambourn, and Kathryn Southworth's poem, 'A Perturbation of Light' (page 25) does directly address the question *Is That All there Is?* She answers, in effect, yes but so what?