

The Future of God and Organised Religion

Unfortunately, as the pandemic is not yet over, the SOF Annual Conference had to be on Zoom this year. However, it was well attended. The various talks provoked interest and lively discussions. A main theme of the Conference was ‘The Future of God and Organised Religion.’ This issue of *Sofia* contains texts of most of the talks, with some having been held over until December for reasons of space.

The first talk was a report by Elaine Graham on her research (together with Graeme Smith) on the work of Don Cupitt. She says: ‘We think that Cupitt’s work has been neglected, especially within academic circles, but that his ideas continue to be supremely relevant today.’ She will also be researching into his role in the foundation of the SOF Network: ‘In many respects, they are intertwined, or at least run in parallel. But there are also significant ways in which each trajectory takes separate directions as time goes on.’ We don’t all always agree with Don!

Dave Francis and Denise Cush, both specialists in religious education, reported on their Solarity project: ‘The Story So Far’. They say: ‘It was clear to us that the SOF Network had something of importance to say’ to the younger generation. They have already produced a website with 82 sessions of ‘learning resources that could be accessed by young people themselves, or by leaders of [extra-curricular] clubs or groups interested in exploring some of the deeper questions of life’. Now, with a team of collaborators, they are working on an actual curriculum for ‘Religion and Worldviews’. SOF members have contributed generously to fund this latest Solarity development.

With different views and perspectives, three speakers – John Pearson, Paul Vittle and Iain Robertson – gave short talks on ‘The Future of God and Organised Religion’. After hearing all three, we were asked to discuss them in ‘breakout rooms’. Everyone had plenty to say in the one I was assigned to.

The three speakers, and probably most of the participants in the discussion, were from a Christian background. The key issue was if religion is a human creation, how much of it to keep. (Of course, that applies to all religions but perhaps first and foremost it is the task of members of a

tradition to explore their own.) Should we just keep the ethics and ditch the rest? Or can we also keep the stories and poems, the theology and liturgy? And if so how? Is theology a sister art to poetry? Perhaps, for example, the theology of incarnation and trinity are ‘poetic tales’ with a lot to say to us.

We are embodied mortal creatures and our timespan is linear, a lifetime from birth to death. Our timespan is also cyclical, day and night and a year of four seasons. The traditional Christian liturgy has ceremonies for important stages in life, and goes through the hours of the day and round the seasons of the year. In midwinter it goes down into the dark and then celebrates a new birth. In spring it celebrates life bursting forth again, resurrection. And humanity itself has a history of people living in the past. The liturgy recalls some of them on their feast days.

The gospel stories and the ensuing liturgy and theology have accumulated a mass of glorious words and music, poetry and song, as well as visual art. Do we have to ditch all that when we realise the divine is not supernatural and it is all a human creation? It’s a product of the human poetic genius, the human creator spirit. Isn’t that marvellous?

But how do we keep it? Seeing an altarpiece in an art gallery or hearing a Mass in a concert hall is not the same as the way they act in a church. Founders and early members of the SOF Network hoped that the churches would ‘buy non-realism’. But mostly that did not happen and many churches have retreated into a fundamentalist literalism. Edward Nickell gives an example of how he copes in his review on page 24.

Isn’t the task of SOF both to be honest and say plainly that religion is a human creation, but also to sift and find ways to keep this precious common treasury, so that it can enrich communities and individuals? Then it will ‘flash upon the inward eye (and ear), which is the bliss of solitude’ and provide insights that ‘pass into the fabric of the mind’. That adds to an abundant life, as well as the ethical inspiration provided by the poetic visions of a reign of kindness on Earth, humanity as one body all sharing the same bread, and the beautiful city where every tear is wiped away.