

The Uses of God

If we think that God(s) are created by the human imagination or poetic genius, then the question arises, why such imaginings? What is the use of God? The title of this issue of *Sofia*, 'The Uses of God', is taken from the first chapter of Don Cupitt's book *A New Great Story* (Polebridge Press, 2010). He has kindly given permission to reprint it as our leading article (p.5). In it he brilliantly describes how 'all our most basic ideas about the human self and the world were pioneered in connection with God'. Our move from polytheism to a single supreme being not only enabled us to conceive of a single ordered universe, but also, for each of us, as for this God, a unified self, an 'I am'. God is a leading idea.

Philosopher Philip Knight (p. 8) argues that God is impossible but that 'the name of God is the name of the possibility of the impossible'. He quotes Etty Hillesum: 'I find the word "God" so primitive at times, it is only a metaphor after all, an approach to our greatest and most continuous inner adventure.'

Biblical scholar Ray Vincent (p. 11) explores a 'non-real' interpretation of the volatile, relational, responsive God of the Bible and the biblical prophetic tradition that majors on resistance rather than acceptance, social justice rather than personal enlightenment. Like Pascal, he suggests this God may be of more use to us than the *Ipsum Esse* God of the philosophers.

Don Cupitt says: 'My new great story is more like Hegel's – but in a very English idiom.' In short, we progress by a *dialectic of ideas*. Later in this issue of *Sofia* we have a review by Mary Lloyd of *A People's History of London* by Lindsey German and John Rees (p.24). In a more Marxist-inspired approach, this account of 'key events in London's history, from its foundation by the Romans to the Occupy protest outside St. Paul's, in the heart of the City' describes 'the centuries-long struggle towards democracy' and the conflicts between different interest groups. Which approach is right? This is clearly another case of *both-and* rather than *either-or*. Ideas and action need each other. There is an internal dialectic within Hegel's and within Marx's system. Surely there must also be a dialectic *between* these systems, between idea and material struggle.

For example in the English Revolution of 1649 Winstanley has the idea that God (whom he calls the Great Creator Reason) 'made the Earth to be a

Common Treasury of livelihood for all mankind'. Then he and his 'fellow creatures' *go out and dig* St George's Hill. Winstanley describes this action as 'Christ rising again in the sons and daughters.' They do not succeed in making the Earth a common treasury but the idea does not die.

Cupitt points out: 'Broadly speaking, religion continued to be a progressive force in human affairs until the late sixteenth century'. Indeed in England, progress was discussed in terms of God at least until the Revolution fifty years after that. Then it became what Milton described as 'that which is not called amiss the Good Old Cause'. Through a long trajectory, ideas like Winstanley's 'common treasury', together with Rainsborough's 'the poorest he that is in England hath a right to live' (Putney Debates 1647), resonate in twentieth century Britain, in the creation of the National Health Service in 1948, and in 'social security' (even if the latter is only a safety net).

In the twentieth century 'Christ rising again in the sons and daughters' is also revoiced explicitly in liberation theology's 'crucified people rising again'. At the end of his article Cupitt describes how from the seventeenth century onwards, God became hijacked and fossilised by fundamentalists and creationists, becoming 'associated almost exclusively with cosmogony, quasi-scientific theorising about the origin of the Universe' so that 'the idea of God largely lost its old progressive drive'.

I think theology's 'old progressive drive' can be looked for now, certainly not in cosmogony, but in *christology*. As well as the liberation christology of Christ to be found on Earth today in *people*, particularly people suffering from injustice and struggling to rise again (Boff, Ellacuría, Sobrino *et al*) there is the Cosmic Christ with its accompanying eco-theology (Teilhard de Chardin, Thomas Berry, Matthew Fox *et al*). Most of the theologians who developed these christologies were from a Catholic background and most got into trouble with the Vatican.

Nevertheless, both christologies have sound New Testament roots and a solid tradition, mystical richness and a *practical* impact on human life in this world: the former in connection with the huge injustices in human societies worldwide and the struggle to realise the kingdom or reign of kindness on Earth; the latter in connection with the threat to Planet Earth from

over-exploitation, climate change etc. In his review of Neil Shubin's *The Universe Within: A Scientific Adventure* (p. 25) Dominic Kirkham mentions the theology of *recapitulation* (ἀνακεφαλαιωσις; *anakephalaiosis* – Eph 1:10): everything 'recapitulated' in Christ. Shubin's book tells how the whole universe is 'recapitulated' in us, our bodies. That is certainly cosmic.

Of course, these christologies only work as a way of thinking about *God* in terms of the full-blown Chalcedon statement that Christ is 'true God and true man'. As that appears to be psychologically impossible (or as Knight puts it, 'the possibility of the impossible'), this pushes us to realise that the Christ is a *mythological* figure, poetic, morally challenging and enabling. But the christology also only works if it retains an organic connection with the human Jesus. This Christ figure is the culmination of Vincent's 'human-like' God of the Old Testament.

For the poetry in this *Sofia* 108, by kind

permission of the publisher, we reprint Martyn Crucefix's new translation of one of Rainer Maria Rilke's *Orpheus Sonnets* (p. 14), in which he says '*Gesang ist Dasein*: 'Singing is Being' – pouring itself out with generous abandonment rather like Don Cupitt's sunshine and fountain. (Writing in 1922, here Rilke making profound statements about *Dasein* pips Heidegger to the post. The poets usually get there first!) These *Orpheus Sonnets* are reviewed by Kathleen McPhilemy on page 26 and her own poem *Pulse* is on page 17. That seemed appropriate, for it was Rilke who said: 'Rhythm is the superabundance of God'.

Our last poem 'Go' – a farewell to a daughter leaving home to work in New York – is by the retiring Chair of SOF Trustees, John Pearson. John has been an excellent Chair, efficient, positive, kind, and humorous. As well as working hard on the annual conferences and encouraging other SOF publications, including *Portholes* and two recent books, he has been a doughty champion of *Sofia*.

SOF Annual Conference

23rd - 25th July 2013

For the Common Good



SOF 2013

Speakers

Chris Howson

University of Sunderland Chaplain
author of *A Just Church*
(see review by John Pearson in *Sofia* 107)

Tim Jackson

Professor of Sustainable Development, University of Surrey
author of *Prosperity without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet*
(see review by David Paterson in *Sofia* 96)

Alom Shaha

Physics Teacher at Camden School for Girls, ex-Muslim
author of *The Young Atheist's Handbook*
(see review by Mary Lloyd in *Sofia* 106)

Do not live entirely isolated, retreating into yourselves, as if you were already justified, but gather instead to seek the common good together.' -

Epistle of Barnabas, c.130 AD



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