

For the Common Good

Following the SOF annual conference in Leicester, this conference issue of *Sofia* starts with edited, shortened versions of the talks given by our three main speakers. First we have economist Tim Jackson, who is Professor of Sustainable Development at the University of Surrey. He explains the complex processes that led up to the financial crash of 2008 and lambastes the government strategy to solve the crisis. That strategy aims to reduce the public debt and promote growth by pumping money into the financial corporations who are losing the money, while cutting most of our social investment as fast as possible. He argues that this policy is not only very unjust but bad economics: 'Actually, George, it's complete rubbish – it is really economics of the worst kind.'

Next we have Chris Howson, a long-time activist in Bradford and now Anglican Chaplain at the University of Sunderland. Although his work has been inspired by liberation theology, his talk is not so much about theology but discusses some of the activities for the common good that he and his friends have been involved with, such as setting up a public library in Barclays Bank in Bradford (where, as elsewhere, libraries are being closed down). He admits this was great fun, especially when the police supported them, enraging the bank manager. He also describes continual inter-faith work in Bradford with Muslim, Sikh and Hindu neighbours, whom they 'got to know as friends and colleagues'.

The third speaker was Alom Shaha, who grew up on a south London council estate among other Bangladeshi Muslims. As a young man he rejected Islam and now teaches physics at Camden School for Girls. He describes how he came to write his *Young Atheist's Handbook*. Asked whether there were any aspects of Islam where he could say: 'I don't believe in Allah any more, but this is useful, this is constructive,' he replies firmly in the negative: 'Islam has oppressed me and has oppressed lots of people I know ... Actually, I *do* know what I got from Islam. It was something to rebel against and make me think.' At the same time he condemns the racism inherent in Islamophobia.

These talks and other conference activities gave rise to many fruitful discussions. There is room here to mention just two points where those could be taken further. Firstly, the talks show a clear tension between good interfaith relations and 'exploring religion as a human creation'. Howson rightly stresses the importance of getting on well with Muslim, Sikh and

Hindu neighbours, becoming friends and colleagues to work together. Shaha insists on the freedom to practise your religion, as long as it does not harm others. At the same time he denounces what is oppressive in Islam.

I think if SOF does its job of exploring religion as a human creation properly, it has to sift what is good and bad in other religions besides Christianity and not fudge things over. Precisely because religions are human and not supernatural, they are going to be a mixture of good and bad, as we are ourselves. And if we speak out roundly about the oppression and abuses in our own tradition (Christian and humanist for most of us in SOF) and treat other religions with kid gloves for fear of giving offence, that is treating their adherents as less responsible, less fully adult human beings than ourselves. That could be compared to the way in which, in the nineteenth century, Ruskin 'kid-gloved' women, preserving them from the hurly burly of public life and the burdens of adult citizenship in their 'queens' gardens'. (See also the letter on page 19 from Maryam Namazie, who spoke at a previous SOF conference.)

The second point is about theology and politics. Jackson uses the parable of the Good Samaritan to illustrate his thesis of 'The Altruist Within'. His talk does not mention God but he speaks out of a tradition where public policies that are good news for a few rich people and bad news for the poor are unjust and wrong (and furthermore, bad economics). Inspired by liberation theology, Howson assumes that activism for the common good equates with 'building the reign of God'. And on page 21 we have a report of the Tax Payers against Poverty Campaign, led by 82-year old retired Anglican priest Paul Nicolson, who now faces jail for his opposition to the government's austerity measures, and who also defends his action by saying: 'This is the gospel'. Some members of the audience objected that politics should be kept out of religion and SOF's remit. One person was heard to mutter, 'Oh God! Now SOF's becoming the Socialist Party at prayer!' He has a point of view, which merits much further theological (not to say political) discussion.

So let us hope the conference provided food for thought, talk and action and don't forget the London conference on Saturday 21st September, where the speakers will be Stephen Batchelor, Richard Holloway and our own Don Cupitt.