

Sofia: the Pursuit

Editor Dinah Livingstone shares some thoughts about *Sofia*.

I can't speak for the whole SOF Network but with this hundredth issue I thought I'd say something about *Sofia*, which I have edited since 2004. Before that, the magazine had served its purpose well at the time when, rather like the early Christians hoping for an imminent Second Coming, there was an imminent hope that the churches might openly 'buy non-realism'. When I took over the editorship, I wanted to move the magazine on from what might be called the ding-dong mode – the mode of apologetics, the unending argument about 'realism' and 'non-realism' and the famous 'sliver', the proposition lists, the 'hypos'...

Sofia takes for granted that God and all the gods are created by the human imagination or poetic genius, and religions are human creations. On that basis, it tries to explore our common treasury of religious stories and practices, which may contain much wisdom. It would be a pity if that wisdom were lost to a secular society. At the same time *Sofia* is fully prepared to confront and criticise the negative things to be found in religions.

Stories of supernatural beings are 'poetic tales' or myths. But we need *mythos* as well as *logos*; imagination is as important for our humanity as are philosophical statements. Recently, we have been offered a Jesus who was merely a sage and moral teacher, which assumes it was a 'disaster that early Christianity turned him into a God'. However, for his followers Jesus became both *logos* and *mythos* incarnate or, as Blake would put it centuries later, 'the Lord, the universal humanity'. I think there is great richness, wisdom and insight to be explored in this developing theology, for us too who regard all supernatural beings as products of the human imagination. We need both *logos* and *mythos* in our approach not only to stories of God as universal Father, but also to stories of God the Son and God the Holy Ghost.

While 'historical Jesus' research is interesting and important, it is not the whole story. There is also the danger that the researcher will construct a 'historical Jesus' that accords with his (usually) or her preconceptions and reject any evidence that

goes against them. Anyway, I don't think Jesus saw himself primarily as a 'sage' or ethical expert. His behaviour, like that of many revolutionaries – for example, his reported consistent rudeness to his mother – is not a model to be followed blindly in all circumstances. First and foremost, Jesus thought he had a mission to announce and inaugurate the coming on Earth of what he called the Kingdom of God, which was not just a matter of private morality but of *social joy*.

He described that Kingdom in many parables. This is the central Christian 'myth', to which were added the splendid *kenosis* hymn in *Philippians* about one in the form of God 'emptying himself'; together with pregnant images of a new humanity as 'the body of Christ' (developed in recent decades in the liberation theology of 'the crucified people'); and the marriage of heaven and Earth with Christ as the divine bridegroom and 'fair Jerusalem his bride'. She then becomes the beautiful city where tears are wiped away. And more, including the intricacies of the developing Christian theology of incarnation and trinity. In fact, the Chalcedon statement that Jesus Christ as human and divine is one and the same person, the same, the same, the same ... leads to the most humanist outcome. All that is ours.

Sofia believes we should 'test everything; hold fast to what is good' (1 Th 5:21). It is worth exploring the whole Christian tradition and sifting for 'what is good'. Or perhaps we should say traditions. *Sofia* is interested in both the 'high' and 'low' traditions – for example, the Catholic sense of the sacramental and wealth of liturgy and symbol, and the Protestant challenging of overweening clerical claims to authority, 'cleansing the temple'. 'Exploring' is not always 'endorsing' and we should not hesitate to be fierce critics when necessary. The majority of SOF members come from these Christian traditions so that is our starting point. At the same time some SOF members (as well as non-members) can tell us more about the richness to be found in other religions, for example, American Indian religions. Bolivia, which has its first indigenous president,



Evo Morales, is giving the Earth, known as the mother goddess Pachamama, legal rights in its 'Law of Mother Earth'. It is not clear, though, how this law will operate.

When we say 'hold fast to what is good', the question arises 'good for what?' The answer has to be for humanity and Earth our habitat. In rejecting the supernatural, *Sofia* is for humanity with its questing imagination and enabling dreams, for a sane and kindly humanism that sees the liberation and flowering of humanity as the chief object of culture. Religion is part of human culture; it is one of the main ways in which people have tried to make sense of their lives and the world in which they find themselves. They make gods and then these gods make them. *Sofia* rejects the postmodernist view that 'it's all relative'. It regards humanity and the Earth as of the utmost importance. That is not something you prove but something you love. And you don't need a God to tell you to do that.

For the full flowering of humanity we need poetry as well as love. Human love and kindness become richer when their imagination is fed. With its full awareness both of the inestimable value of our treasury of religious stories and that the supernatural is a product of the human imagination, *Sofia* (together with SOF Network as a whole) is in a strong, perhaps unique, position not only to reflect on that treasury but to keep it current and active in our general culture. Apart from anything else, much of our literature can't be understood without some knowledge of it.

For this treasury is not the private property of religious institutions; it belongs to us all. We should not treat it as a separate 'bank account' held in a foreign country (always dodgy). That is why it is *Sofia's* policy to give some space to poetry that is not confined to what are usually thought of as 'religious' topics, as well as to accounts of visits to all kinds of exhibitions and places charged with meaning.

I constantly meet people who say, 'I'm not religious but...' and then go on to express their interest in religious themes and stories and, often, commitment to their import. Such people do not usually go to church but I also think many people who do go to church are quietly thinking *sofist* thoughts, despite (or because of?) the fact that many churches have officially been becoming more fundamentalist. So although it seems unlikely that SOF will win in a knockout ding-dong with the official churches, *Sofia* wants to be part of that process which could be described as

osmosis, that scent, that gentler infiltration not only into the churches but our whole society.

In this attempt to move outwards, I have to say what a relief it is that the magazine is now called *Sofia*, because the name is much more understandable outside a narrow circle of initiates. In February this year I was invited to take part in an international poetry festival in Granada, Nicaragua. Among my biographical details, with which I was introduced by the organisers, was 'Editor of the magazine *Sofia*'. The local audience and the poets from over fifty countries all round the world had an immediate inkling of what the magazine might be about, whereas *Sea of Faith* would probably not only have baffled but misled them. The same thing happens in London when *Sofia* is mentioned. SOF is the root and *Sofia* is the flower and my wish is that she may blossom as abundantly as the maytree in this glorious Spring. I mean wisdom, which the magazine does not claim to be, but is called after, her patron saint. Or in Pauline cosmic terms – echoed by Blake above: 'Christ the wisdom of God' (1 Cor 1:24), in whom everything is 'recapitulated' (Eph1:10). At the same time 'wisdom' is not confined to Christianity. *Sofia* does not dispense wisdom but pursues it – but yes, those Tories are at it again, trying to abolish May Day and all it stands for, and that destructive David Cameron had a nerve, singing in Westminster Abbey about building Jerusalem.

This is a sketch of what could be called *Sofia's* editorial line. The magazine is also a forum for all SOF members, as well as writers from further afield. Different points of view are welcome but the Editor and everyone else is free to disagree with them.

'Seek first his kingdom' (Mt 6:33). Jesus announced the Kingdom of God, or we could translate it 'the reign of kindness', coming on Earth. This kingdom belonged first and foremost to the poor, the hungry would be satisfied. It would be a society in which people are kind to one another, a task that is both personal and political. Jesus thought that kingdom was coming soon but as we can see, it has not come yet, except in small ways and unlikely places. Nevertheless, this is the central 'poetic tale' in the Christian story to which *Sofia* holds fast. Or perhaps we should say vision. As William Morris put it at the end of *News from Nowhere*: 'If others can see it as I have seen it, it may be called a vision rather than a dream.' That is *Sofia's* main pursuit.