

Towards a Tolerant Secular Society

'Peace on Earth to people of good will.' That Christmas theme has inspired the title of this issue of *Sofia*: 'Towards a Tolerant Secular Society.' And of course, so has another Christmas theme: 'Down to Earth from Heaven', that is, not just an idea that is 'up in the air', but something realised here in our everyday lives.

Our first article, 'Reinventing England' by Dominic Kirkham, argues that a characteristic of 'English' identity has been, not only the rich creativity and inventiveness of its people, but also its capacity to reinvent itself. Beginning from the Venerable Bede, who actually invented the concept of 'the English people', Kirkham takes us on a breathtaking gallop through English (then British) history, with all its metamorphoses, culminating in its latest self-reinvention as a multicultural secular society, 'a process that is well under way'.

This was illustrated in 'the sporting extravaganza of the Olympics and Paralympics', at the beginning of which Sir Tim Berners-Lee, inventor of the worldwide web, tweeted in giant letters round the stadium: 'THIS IS FOR EVERYONE'. Of course, not everyone agreed. Staffordshire Tory MP Aidan Burley notoriously described the opening ceremony as 'leftist multicultural crap'. But the consensus was against him. As Kirkham concludes: 'Despite the accusations of racism which continue to circulate, England has become one of the most open and cosmopolitan societies in the world.'

These social gains did not just happen; they had to be fought for. In the early 1970s, in what was called 'the second feminist wave', expressed in magazines like *Spare Rib* and the *Guardian Women* newspaper page, women with their motto 'the personal is the political' made considerable advances. In that decade too, the anti-racist cause was advanced by movements such as the Anti-Nazi League, Rock against Racism, the Anti-Apartheid Movement, and in the 1980s, the Non-Stop Picket of the South African Embassy in Trafalgar Square for the release of Nelson Mandela (whom Thatcher called a 'terrorist'). Such organisations helped ensure that neo-Nazism and neo-Fascism never established a

strong public presence in British politics comparable to that in some of her fellow European countries.

In the 1970s the gap between rich and poor, which had been closing since the end of the Second World War, was the narrowest it had ever been. Unfortunately, as Denis Gildea points out in his review of Paul Krugman (on page 24), from 1979 with the advent of Thatcher to power, declaring 'there is no such thing as society', the gap began to widen again and continues to do so to this day.

Thus, many of the hard-fought social gains (tolerance, anti-racism, women's rights, gay rights etc) persist and, despite the odd maverick backwoodsman, have become mainstream in our society, but the gains in economic justice have fared a lot worse.

In the heady days of the late 1960s, as a generation growing up healthy and hopeful (perhaps on all that NHS orange juice), when, as Wordsworth put it, 'bliss was it in that dawn to be alive/ but to be young was very heaven', we used to have a theology discussion in what we called the Friday Group, that met at the Aquinas Centre in Gospel Oak in London. I remember one of the buzz words was 'realised eschatology' (see also *Mayday Note* 'The Eschatological Dimension' on pages 26-7). Encouraged by radical English Dominicans of the time, we discussed how the 'kingdom', the good society that Jesus preached, was, as he said, both 'among us' and 'to come', both 'now' and 'not yet'. There was much that still had to be struggled for. 'Realised eschatology' meant signs of the 'kingdom' that were already present or emerging and, we thought, set to grow – including the social improvements mentioned above.

So this *eschaton* or 'last world' has been *partly* realised, gains we should not underestimate (or forget that they can be lost). But it is complacent in the extreme to think that the society we have now is the best that we can do. The first 'sign of the kingdom' is good news for the poor and they are certainly not getting that in Britain (or many other countries) today. We have to remain

committed both to the good that is *now* and that which is *not yet*.

Our society has become a lot more tolerant and in our big cities we see a much greater mixture of peoples who have to try and get along together. That is the importance of a *secular* society, which defends people's rights to follow any religion they want, provided it does not harm other people. A religious or theocratic society exclusively promotes its own religion. In defending people's rights to follow their own religion, a secular society does not *endorse* any of these religions, and must struggle to find a common humane ethic to which all citizens are subject.

In three extracts from his book, *The Young Atheist's Handbook*, Alom Shaha explains why he has rejected the Muslim religion in which he was brought up in South London. At the same time he deplores the Islamophobia, with its underlying racism, as preached by groups such as the English Defence League. *Sofia* would like to thank the publisher for permission to quote these extracts from this brave book (which is also reviewed by Mary Lloyd on page 21).

SOF explores religion as a human creation and many members remain Christians or continue to value their Christian tradition. However, it appears it is not possible to remain a practising Muslim and hold that God and the Quran are human creations. Those who believe this become ex-Muslims and often, like Shaha, strongly reject their former God and dislike the Quran.

Precisely because religions are human creations, SOF should explore every aspect of them, both positive and negative. While relishing the diversity of 'poetic tales' and appreciating the ethical insights and practices of the various religions, it should not whitewash these religions or cover up their darker side. It must not ignore the tyranny and abuse that go on behind closed doors in families, and are perpetrated by clergy, Christian and other. As I write, an educated Muslim in Wales has been arrested for beating her seven-year-old son to death for failing to read the Quran, and her husband has been accused of doing nothing to stop her. Boys are often slower at learning to read, and I remember my seven-year-old son (who now has several degrees) was still struggling with *Miffy*, while his two sisters read fluently aged five. But as Shaha says, religions

are not uni-dimensional, and the fact that some people kill in the name of their religion is not a reason to condemn everything about that religion.

Pursuing his interest in inter-faith dialogue, David Paterson invited some of his friends to make short statements about 'what my religion means to me'. With a brief introduction, he has produced a mini-anthology, which includes two Sikhs, a Hindu, a Buddhist, a Muslim, a Jew, an atheist, a pagan and a Christian. Paterson presents the rules of engagement and courtesy in this dialogue as 'softly softly'. The point of the exercise is not to argue, but to listen to the 'Other' – someone who is not me.

If we re-read early Agatha Christie or other pre-war popular fiction, we are startled at the routine racism displayed. This reminds us that we have come a long way since then. As Kirkham puts it: 'A trip though any of England's cities can offer a kaleidoscope of all the major cultures and faiths of the world: each is allowed a space to be itself.' To visit a good inner-city primary school is a delight, and so is the nonchalance, saltiness and humour with which, say, Londoners enjoy their diversity, their 300 languages. But we must not be complacent. There are still racist bigots about. And, of course, there are other aspects of our society, particularly the growing economic disparity and destruction of the public good, which are ugly indeed.

The Divine Vision still was seen,
Still was the human form divine.

In his vision Blake saw London as Jerusalem, the beautiful city, the now and not-yet coming of the kind society. It will be a society that rejects intolerance, greed and selfishness:

Is this thy soft family love?
Thy cruel patriarchal pride?
Planting thy family alone,
Destroying all the world beside?

In this new Jerusalem 'every land shall walk' and work together, not clenched-fisted, not kid-gloved but open-handed:

In my exchanges every land
Shall walk, and mine in every land,
Mutual shall build Jerusalem,
Both heart in heart and hand in hand.