

Secular Religion

This issue of *Sofia* begins with the three talks given at the highly successful SOF London conference in September. The organisers tell me that well over 200 people attended, the venue was packed out and they reckon they could have filled a much bigger space.

The three speakers were Don Cupitt, Stephen Batchelor and Richard Holloway. Cupitt and Batchelor each gave a personal talk on his own position: 'A Secular Christian' and 'A Secular Buddhist' respectively. Holloway began with Gaugin's three questions: 'Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?' Succinctly, with wit and warmth, he sketched four responses, which he called hard and soft religion and hard and soft atheism. He said something about his own position, which sounded like 'soft atheism with transcendent yearnings'. He still goes to church because he would 'rather be uncomfortably in than uncomfortably out' but points out that 'even secular religion, that famous oxymoron, is not without its contradictions. Very often it's drawing on capital banked by people who believe more than it does.'

Secular Buddhist Stephen Batchelor describes the Buddhist awakening as 'the opening up of a way of being-in-this-world that is no longer determined by one's greed, hatred, fear and selfishness'. He says that such a view of the *dharma* fits well with Cupitt's 'solar ethics' and recommends a visit to the British Museum room 33, where a beautiful 2nd century bas relief represents the Buddha as a stylised image of the sun, placed on a seat beneath the bodhi tree.

Secular Christian Cupitt discounts the Christ epic with its powerful mythological vision of a fulfilled humanity. He focuses on Jesus' preaching of the kingdom of God as a personal ethic of generosity, loving our enemies as well as our friends, pouring ourselves out without reserve like sunshine. Don certainly practises what he preaches; he is an immensely generous and unresentful person, who pours himself out in living, speaking and in at least 45 books (so far!)

Together with kindness, that quest for personal integrity in belief and behaviour is the principle and foundation of a good life and I think what people found so attractive in all three speakers was that they exhibit it to a high degree – perhaps another name for it is holiness.

However, though maybe it was beyond the speakers' brief at that Conference, there is more to

human life than just the personal and the private. It has to be said that it is a selective take on Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom or reign of God to confine it to personal behaviour. Yes, Jesus meant the kingdom would come *on Earth* and that is the most important point. But as well as the personal ethic, we cannot ignore what is subversive in this kingdom and the fact that a kingdom is a society, a *polis*. The kingdom is subversive: it turns the world upside down, it belongs first to the poor (the first beatitude, Luke 6:20) and it is very hard for the rich to enter it, harder than for a camel to go through a needle's eye. Secondly, the kingdom is a fair and kind *society*. The signs of the kingdom are healing and feeding – what the miracles are about. In the kingdom the dispossessed will come into their own, the hungry and thirsty will be filled. Jesus says: 'Seek first God's kingdom and his fairness (*δικαιοσύνη: dikaiosune*).'

Don is a very generous man himself and I wondered whether that was why his talk did not stress that, on the personal level, such generosity usually requires a change of heart – *metanoia*. However, on the socio-political level he says: 'We have given up all forms of liberal and socialist hope for a Better World in the historical future.' The liberal belief in the 'perfectibility of man' is dead and so is the socialist belief in a future better society, he insists. We may not think that human beings are 'perfectible' but Don himself believes that on the personal level we can become generous, which *does* often mean behaving better than we did.

On the socio-political level, is it a holy thing to see in a rich and fruitful land, in Britain (as well as the rest of the world), there are homeless people sleeping rough, people are losing their homes and their jobs, many do not have enough to live on and must choose between 'heat or eat'? Now it is December. In a country where there is plenty of wealth, we know that people will die of cold this winter.

If we have given up any hope of changing this situation, then we have given up on the vision of the kingdom of God. If we no longer think 'another world is possible', we have lost hope in humanity. Secular religion begins with the human heart, with wisdom and sympathy, which all three speakers gave us, but there is more to be said. At another conference perhaps?