

Perfectly Natural

‘Worship is a natural human activity. Its origins lie in the human response to nature,’ Anthony Freeman begins his article on page 12. It is ‘all perfectly natural.’ That is where we get this *Sofia*’s title. Freeman goes on to suggest that some questioning human mind might have speculated: ‘What if events in our “natural” world are controlled by unseen gods and spirits in this other “supernatural” world?’ So, he says, a development from a natural to a supernatural focus for worship and other religious activity is quite understandable and rational. But it does not have to be permanent. Fewer people now, at least in Europe, believe in a supernatural realm but Freeman, for one, ‘can affirm personally that it is possible to worship consistently and meaningfully... without believing that there is an unseen God “out there” consciously responding to my words and actions.’

This *Sofia* starts with an article by Michael Barrett on ‘Religious Naturalism’. He discusses what is meant by the term and gives a brief survey of its philosophical history and main proponents since the 19th century, focusing on ‘the epic of evolution’ and the theory of ‘emergence’. Love, for example, can be regarded as an ‘emergent property’. Inanimate things, the very stars, are attracted, they gravitate towards one another, animals too are mutually attracted and this ‘emerges’ in humans as conscious love. Augustine said it: ‘My love is my weight.’

Then in an article on ‘Religious Myths, Science and Society’, Marià Corbí, director of the Barcelona-based Centre for the Study of Wisdom Traditions (which has affinities with SOF) argues that relatively static pre-industrial societies were ‘programmed’ by religious myths, which had to be taken literally in order to provide a supernatural guarantee for the society’s power structure. On the other hand, ‘religion’s links with power go against the very heart of the teaching of religious masters’. When, as in present day European societies, the myths are no longer taken literally by many people, they cease to be able to programme the societies. But neither can science or technology, since ‘no scientific system, however sophisticated, can relieve us from having to deal with our human condition.’ Although religious myths, symbols and stories can no longer have a programming function, it matters that they continue to function purely symbolically in speaking of things ‘about which the sciences

have nothing to say’.

In his article Tony Windross, like Anthony Freeman a practising priest in the Church of England, asks ‘Why Bother Going to Church if you Don’t Believe Anything?’ He answers that he himself was re-enabled (by SOF) to take part in the liturgy he loves when he understood the supernatural stories did not have to be taken literally.

Penny Mawdsley reports on her visits to primary schools, giving a ‘concentrated philosophical workshop’ on humanism to nine and ten year olds – ‘and boy, do they concentrate, bless them!’

In his article ‘Worshipping Naturally’ Freeman describes how the liturgy follows the Earth’s annual cycle, linking the winter, spring and early summer festivals of Christmas, Easter and Pentecost to events in the Christ epic: birth – coming –, death and resurrection, the outpouring of the Spirit. This *Sofia* includes the first three verses from George Herbert’s great poem ‘The Flower’, in which he thanks God for enabling him to recover his oomph and devotion, which has returned like flowers in May, after a period of sad deadness:

Who would have thought my shrivelled heart
could have recovered greenness? It was gone
quite underground, as flowers depart...

He is grateful to his ‘Lord of power’. This poem still speaks to all of us who have experienced a similar bleakness; even without a supernatural person to thank, when we emerge from such darkness we can still feel immensely thankful. In one sense very little has changed. That is the point. It is perfectly natural.

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After a long and noble innings at her ‘As I Please’ column, which has given much pleasure and food for thought, Cicely Herbert has retired. She is succeeded in this issue with an ‘As I Please’ from John Pearson, writing about his visit to the war graves on the battlefields of the Somme.

Lastly, a reminder that this year’s SOF Annual Conference on *Making Connections* is from 18th–20th July (further details on page 8).