

Making Connections

This Conference issue of *Sofia* contains the three main speakers' talks. Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society, argues that Secularism benefits society as a whole and all its members, including those with religious beliefs. He says: 'I hope I can persuade you that secularism is in everyone's best interests, except perhaps that of theocratic bodies who are bringing undue influence on the state.' Derek McAuley, Chief Officer of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches, discusses how to seek allies to make common cause for social initiatives. He offers 'seven laws of social connectivity which help us build bridges and mobilise social power'. Pippa Evans talks about how she co-founded the Sunday Assemblies, what happens at a meeting and what their purpose is.

We need to make connections to join with others to get things done. We need to do things together (singing together is a strong example – if you can sing) because we are social animals and can't thrive in isolation. Isolation is dehumanising and loneliness can kill. We also need to make connections in our *thinking*, in order to try and see better; a new insight is often a new connection – factual or metaphorical.

Serendipitously, both our *SOF Sermon* by Ronald Pearse and our *SOF Sift* piece this time are to do with evolution. The first great theologian of evolution, palaeontologist Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin, offered a vision of a fulfilled humanity by *connecting* evolution with christology. (This could be seen as another 'take' on Jesus' preaching of the 'reign of God'.) Teilhard saw evolution as a cosmic process, with humanity continuing to evolve – emerge – towards a 'point omega', a 'divine milieu', the 'cosmic Christ', in Paul's words: 'the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ', in whom 'all things hold together'. That connecting of the scientific theory of evolution with the myth of the Christ Epic has been immensely fruitful, among other ways, in promoting ecological awareness, helping us to realise that all life on our planet is connected in one process, one life, and needs looking after.

Of course we need to realise that myths with supernatural components are *stories* – 'poetic tales' – but stories deeply embedded in our psyche. They can be used for good or bad purposes, and if we

are to explore religion as a human creation, we need to sift the good from the bad.

Another example, which is related to the 'cosmic Christ', is the myth of Christ the bridegroom and 'fair Jerusalem his bride' – the beautiful city. That is the marriage of Heaven and Earth, the male and female human form divine. (What is remarkable about the bridegroom and bride in John of the Cross's mystical *Canticle* is their total reciprocity; they are both called 'beloved': he is *el amado*, she is *la amada*.) However, at the Conference workshop on *God Becomes Human* Carol Palfrey mentioned the questionable hymn lines:

From heaven he came and sought her
To be his holy bride.
With his own blood he bought her
And for her life he died.

Not only is this 'ransom theory' not how Jesus saw his own death, but the lines offer a dire view of marriage. If I get married I want my husband, if possible, to love me, not just to own me and use me because he's bought me.

Likewise, the myth of the 'promised land' was powerful in the black American slave struggle: 'One more river and that's the river of Jordan. One more river, there's one more river to cross.' It is also powerful in the present atrocities in Gaza with Israel legitimating its actions from the Old Testament book of Joshua.

We quite often hear people saying today: 'It doesn't matter what you believe. It's what you do that counts.' But what you believe strongly influences what you do. I think it is important that we remain aware of the myths and archetypes still deep in us and active in our culture, so that we can use them for better, not for worse. They are a powerful form of energy which, like electricity, can be very dangerous but, used wisely, can be of great benefit. What's more, it is philistine to ignore them. The stories are immensely rich; they enlarge our humanity by broadening our minds and, as Mary Wollstonecraft put it: 'Imagination is the true fire, stolen from heaven to animate this cold creature of clay, producing all those fine sympathies that lead to rapture, rendering men social by expanding their hearts'.