

Human Rights and Possibilities

This issue of *Sofia*, entitled *Human Rights and Possibilities*, begins with Barbara Burfoot's article on Thomas Paine, his involvement in both the American and French Revolutions and his three great works: *Common Sense* (1776), *The Rights of Man* (1791-2) and *The Age of Reason* (1794). The article is a follow-on from Barbara's very popular workshop at the SOF annual conference in July. The French Revolution excited a ferment of radical ideas in England ('bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,' wrote Wordsworth) and Paine was familiar with the circle of radicals often gathered for dinners by the publisher Joseph Johnson. There he would have met Mary Wollstonecraft (whose *Rights of Woman* was published in 1792) and, perhaps occasionally, William Blake. As Burfoot records, it was Blake who warned Paine to escape to France when he was in danger of being arrested on a capital charge for publishing part 2 of his *Rights of Man*.

Paine was a sort of Deist and Burfoot quotes from his *Age of Reason*: 'I believe in one God and no more and I hope for some happiness beyond this life. I believe in the equality of man, and I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy and endeavouring to make our fellow creatures happy.' William Blake also strongly supported the radical cause. He wore the 'red cap of liberty' openly in the streets of London, but laid it aside when news came in 1793 of the Terror in France: Burfoot tells us how Paine himself was arrested in France at that time. But Blake was no Deist. He believed 'all deities reside in the human breast', created by the human poetic genius, and at the same time he engaged with what he called the 'Everlasting Gospel'. In his highly recommended book, *Witness against the Beast*, E. P. Thomas describes how Blake grapples with the 'true God and true man' in the theology of the Incarnation to convey a poetic truth:

But a contradiction of thought, which derives from an acute tension of contrasting values, neither of which can be abandoned, can be wholly creative. If we will neither deny Christ's divinity nor elevate it above that of mortal creation which shares in the same divine essence, then we have an intense and mystic humanism. If God exists in Men

and nowhere else, the whole cosmic conflict between darkness and light, things corporeal and spiritual, must be enacted within oneself and one's fellow men and nowhere else.

As Wordsworth put it at the end of his poem on the French Revolution, we are called upon to exercise our skill 'in the very world, which is the world / Of all of us – the place where in the end / We find our happiness, or not at all!'

Although Christianity, especially when in power, has often acted as a repressive force, the 'Everlasting Gospel' made a substantial contribution to humanism and we have a strong image of that, in their revolutionary time, with William Blake warning Thomas Paine to escape when his life was in danger (which is why this *Sofia* has a Blake painting on both the front and back cover). After Burfoot's article on Paine, there follows part 1 of the talk your editor gave recently to the Barcelona-based Centre for the Study of Wisdom Traditions at their conference on 'Human Quality'. The talk is entitled *The Christ Epic as a Vision of Human Quality* and offers a humanist reading of the Epic.

Next we have a *Credo* from *Sofia* stalwart Dominic Kirkham, a *SOF Sift* from Graham Shipley and *Reflections of a Missionaries' Son* by John Cragg, who recalls: 'Dad was religious and strict and this had unfortunate consequences for me, his eldest son'. We have Michael Hell's response to the articles on the Christian liturgy by Windross and Freeman in *Sofia* 112, followed by letters, reviews, *Mayday Notes*. The last page has a poem by Jane Duran, in which she revisits a 'safe house' on the *Underground Railroad*, which helped slaves escaping from the South during the American Civil War (1861-5).

St Paul wrote that in Christ there is neither slave nor free but slaves continued for centuries after that. The long, chequered history of the abolition of slavery (not yet complete) is part of the struggle for 'a sane and kindly humanism that sees the liberation and flowering of humanity as the chief object of culture', the struggle in which Thomas Paine played such a noble part.