

Nowhere Else But Here

What Can We Offer?

The question in the title of this year's SOF annual conference was 'What can we offer towards a healthier world?' If or since (as I and I think most readers of this would say) there is no supernatural life after death, then there is nowhere else but here, so it's up to us to make it as good as we can. The first article in this issue is (a slightly abbreviated version of) our first conference speaker David Boulton's talk: *Let's Hear It for Utopia!* Our second conference speaker was Andy Pakula: his article based on his talk will appear in the next *Sofia*.

As Boulton points out, 'utopia' can mean 'no place' – nowhere – or 'good place'. He starts by discussing Thomas More's original book *Utopia* and then goes on to some of the great figures in the English radical, utopian tradition, dwelling on Gerrard Winstanley, whose *Law of Freedom* is 'unambiguously focused on good place rather than no place', and William Morris with his two great utopian works *A Dream of John Ball* and *News from Nowhere*.

At the end of *News from Nowhere*, as Guest is about to wake from his dream, Ellen from the future seems to be saying:

'Go back again, now you have seen us, and your outward eyes have learned that in spite of all the infallible maxims of your day there is yet a time of rest in store for the world, when mastery has changed into fellowship – but not before. Go back again, then, and while you live you will see all around you people engaged in making others live lives that are not their own ... Go back and be the happier for having seen us, for having added a little hope to your struggle. Go on living while you may, striving with whatsoever pain and labour needs must be to build up little by little the new day of fellowship, and rest, and happiness.'

That's what Boulton offers in his talk: utopia as an 'enabling dream, an energising dream.' He notes that utopia is out of fashion now and often the subject of mockery. Indeed, for example, in the contest for the Labour Party leadership taking place as I write, one of the insults hurled at Jeremy Corbyn, for proposing ideas of a fair and kind society straight out of the English radical tradition, is that this is 'utopian'. 'The infallible maxims of our day' are still being proclaimed triumphantly and causing a great deal of misery to the poor, the disabled, the homeless and the strangers. Enabling dreams are of something better than this.

Actually utopian visions haven't stopped with William Morris at the end of the nineteenth century. They bore fruit in the 1940s in the National Health Service. And today in a globally communicative world, even though not in power, they are alive and well all over the place, for example with the (mostly indigenous) Zapatistas, who want 'a world with room for many worlds', in the World Social Forum with its motto 'Another World is Possible' and 'There is Another World and it is This One', which inspired, among others, the Occupy movement and Sister Teresa Forcades and her comrades in Spain. They are also alive and well in the People's Assembly, which recently held a huge demonstration, marching from the Bank of England to Parliament...

In *The Planet and the People*, our second article, Francis McDonagh discusses Pope Francis' recent encyclical *Laudato Si'* on the environmental crisis and poverty. Like Thomas Paine's work *The Age of Reason* (revisited by Barbara Burfoot on page 24), *Laudato Si'* is addressed to the whole world (not just to Catholics). Although the pope, presumably, believes in heaven, his focus is entirely on this world and nowhere else but here. McDonagh points out some 'blemishes in an impressive document,' in particular, the Catholic maintenance of the ban on contraception, ignored by many or most Catholics in the West but hurting poorer women in the Third World and thwarting population control. But what *Laudato Si'* offers is a call to conversion from an agenda of profit at any cost, in order to save the Earth our home and all its varied life, including human life. At the SOF conference the 'base groups' were asked to come up with suggestions for what we can offer towards a healthier world and our group stressed green issues and some practical things we could do.

In the third article Dominic Kirkham discusses two opposing meanings of 'radical': 'radical theology versus religious radicalisation.' He argues that SOF, which sees God and religion as a human creation, has a vital role to play in combatting violent fundamentalism without 'complete abandonment of religious sensitivities'.

On the one hand, it is right to denounce cruel practices like female circumcision on humane grounds (many little girls are sent abroad from Britain every year to suffer this illegal mutilation), and on the other,

it is right to engage in interfaith work, making friends with neighbours from different religions and cultures, seeking common cause on local issues, for example, and mutual understanding. But interfaith activity isn't the same as exploring religion as a human creation – SOF's specific task. I think we who come from the Christian/Humanist tradition (most members of SOF and probably most readers of this) should focus on sifting the wheat from the chaff in our own tradition. It is up to 'heretics' like Ayaan Hirsi Ali, whose book *Heretic: Why Islam Needs a Reformation Now* is discussed in Kirkham's article, to undertake the difficult and dangerous work of sifting the good from the bad in their own tradition.

Praised Be

The title of Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'* means 'Praised Be' in Francis of Assisi's Umbrian dialect and is taken from his *Canticle of the Creatures*, reprinted on page 27. Its refrain is: 'Praised be to you, my Lord, for Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Brother Wind...' Several of the workshops offered in the Speakers' Corner at the Conference were on 'Worship' or 'Reclaiming Religious Language' or 'Filling the God-Shaped Hole.' Prayer and Praising.

Moments of poetic vision when we are moved to ecstatic praise of the Earth and its creatures, or even ordinary people on a bus, 'a sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused', seem to have the same quality whether we praise God for them or the *things themselves*. Perhaps monotheism gave human beings the idea of a single *universe*, which we may praise as a whole as the *Canticle* does, but like Don Cupitt, we can see this God as a 'leading idea'. And when we drop the supernatural God, the universe and the praising of it remain.

At the conference closing ceremony David Lambourn beautifully read Rilke's Orpheus Sonnet *The Unicorn* (reprinted on page 19). That led me to revisit this amazing 'Orpheus' sequence and here I offer my translation of the first four lines of one of my other favourite sonnets in it:

*Praising that's it! Appointed to praise
he emerged like the ore out of the stone's
dumbness. His heart, oh, a transitory winepress
giving humanity an infinite wine.*

The sonnet refers firstly to Orpheus the singer himself, but also surely to humanity as a whole, which has evolved to be able to speak and sing and praise. When we have these moments of vision leading to praise we may feel 'godlike'. As Keats puts it, 'there grew/ a power within me of enormous ken/ to see as a god sees.' We may be moved by something in nature like a beautiful tree or by all the people going about their daily lives in a city. Our vision may lead us to feel we love everything and everybody. But when the

moment passes, we don't necessarily always behave particularly well or kindly. 'Spirituality', as this is sometimes called, isn't goodness.

Just as the idea of utopia may be dismissed and derided today, so is theology. People may go in for 'spirituality' but it is quite often considered progressive now to say all that 'theological stuff' is just an 'accretion' and we can drop it. But I think that exploring religion as a human creation isn't only a help in combatting violent fundamentalism. If we reflect on the myths of our religious tradition *as* poetic creations, and go beyond the polemic of just arguing that they *are*, we often find wisdom in them. SOF's role, I believe, is both to combat fundamentalism and to sift our own (for the most part Christian/Humanist) tradition, rejecting what is harmful in it (such as 'atonement' by human sacrifice) and holding fast to what is good. It is, to say the least, philistine to throw out all the deep cogitations of our predecessors without even considering them.

For example, the theology of the Trinity, of which I've heard people speak with derision, can give us an insight into our moments of 'godlike' vision. The Trinity can be seen as a model for the potential of the human psyche. Augustine compared the one God, who is Father, Word and Spirit, to memory, understanding and will in us belonging to one human being. In classic trinitarian theology God the Father almighty, the first person ('face', 'subsistence'), knows himself and that full knowledge issues in, expresses itself in Word, the second person. Then, together, that divine generative energy and seeing issue in, 'breathe' love, Spirit, the third person. This is a model of what should happen ideally, which we may aspire to but which doesn't always happen in ourselves. In moments of vision we may feel *being* and *seeing* pressing us to *love*, but we don't always keep it up later in the day. Actually, both poets and religious people are famed for their feuding.

But following the model of the Trinity, we can urge ourselves to make visions of the beauty of the Earth and humanity, or visions of utopia, fruitful in love, spirit, kindness, action and say – not to a supernatural being on high, but to ourselves: Send forth your spirit and renew the face of the Earth.

In forthcoming issues of *Sofia* there will be a series of 'Theological Reflections' on classic doctrines as human creations and what they might tell us. I think SOF can offer not only the liberating knowledge *that* religion is a human creation, with its accompanying greater humility and friendliness towards other traditions, but by sifting the wheat from the chaff, the ore from the stone, in its own mainly Christian/Humanist tradition *as* a human creation, SOF can offer that tradition's riches and wisdom to a secular world.