

Fellow Feeling and Generosity

‘To all my Fellow Creatures that shall view these Ensuing Lines.’ This is the dedication of John Taylor’s introduction to his fellow Digger Gerrard Winstanley’s tract about the Earth as a Common Treasury, published in 1649. I’ve always found it rather delightful that the Diggers used the term ‘Fellow Creature’ as their common mode of address.

It is a pity that the word ‘fellowship’ has become debased, so that to many people it now sounds quaintly archaic or repellently sanctimonious. However, we can still speak of ‘fellow feeling’, ‘fellow sufferer’, ‘fellow student’ and ‘fellow citizen’ and the reality remains very important.

We humans are fellow creatures because we are all the same kind of animal and paradoxically one of the ways in which we are alike is that we are all unique individuals, each of us is a person. That is the kind of animal we are. Each of us needs not just physical things such as food and shelter, but to live our own life, be our own person. We can’t be a person in isolation, we need other people, fellow creatures, to talk to, argue with, dance with, love. All on your own you can’t even enjoy a good laugh. We can imagine how another person feels and that may (though does not always) lead to sympathy, fellow feeling. Do as you would be done by is the golden rule.

The title for this *Sofia* is *Fellow Feeling and Generosity*. As we have noted before, kindness and generosity have the same root, (Proto-Indo-European kn/gn: the former descending into English through the Germanic and the latter the Latin branch). ‘Kind’ means both good-hearted and sort or type (‘humankind’) and is related to kin, akin, German *Kinder* (children). Likewise, generous is related to genus and also to genius, generative, engender. So being capable of fellow feeling means being kind and also the *kind* of animal we are. It is our genius to be generous and such behaviour is fruitful, generative, it engenders more humanity.

We begin this issue Easter issue with an article on Oscar Romero. Francis McDonagh describes how this conservative young cleric, appointed archbishop of San Salvador as ‘a safe bet’ by the authorities, gradually came to find the repression, maltreatment and murder of so many of his fellow countrymen intolerable. He preached a sermon: ‘I beg you, I beseech, I order you. Stop the repression!’ and was shot dead at Mass the day after. His generosity led him to sacrifice his own life; he was martyred for defending *humanity*.

Next, Penny Mawdsley writes candidly about the pleasures, pains and impediments to fellow feeling. She points out it can also take the ugly form of a majority ‘ganging up’ on the outsider. She goes on to give examples from life and literature. She describes how kind Syrian refugees went to help out in the recent devastating floods in the north of England, because ‘they wanted to give something back’. This was not only an expression of their human dignity but also helped change perceptions in some self-confessedly ‘very white’ areas.

Bobbie Stephens-Wright gives the history of her own struggle with depersonalisation and explores how lack of a secure sense of self is a barrier to sympathy with others. Altogether, fellow feeling and generosity prove to be more complex than perhaps we may have first thought.

I offer my second *Theological Reflection* on religion as a human creation. This one for the Easter *Sofia* is on ‘Death and Resurrection’.

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With this issue you should receive inserted fliers with a booking form and description of this summer’s annual SOF Conference. It will take place from Thursday 21st July to 23rd July 2016 in the usual Leicester University venue. Its title this year is *Religion – Where Next?* We hope you will be able to come and will enjoy it.