

Religion – Where Next?

One of the things that struck me about the July SOF Annual Conference on the theme of *Religion – Where Next?* was that ‘religion’ seems to be becoming an uncomfortable word. Two of the talks, published in this *Sofia*, are entitled ‘I’m not Religious but...’ and ‘I was Religious but now I’m...’ In the former, Denise Cush begins by referring to the claim (based on YouGov surveys) that now ‘the majority of people in Britain identify as non-religious’. She points out that people ticking ‘no religion’ are not necessarily atheist but ‘what “nones” seem to have in common is a dislike of the label “religious” and a rejection of external authorities and religious institutions.’ She goes on to describe her research into contemporary Pagans in Somerset.

As I suspected quite a few readers (including myself) might not know a lot about the goddess in contemporary Paganism, I asked Katy Jennison (a Pagan SOF member) to provide a brief introduction and am very grateful to her that she did so at short notice.

In his talk ‘I was Religious but now I’m...’ John Breadon describes a difficult personal journey out of a bleak-sounding Northern Irish Protestant childhood, a quest that is not yet over.

Andrew Brown in his talk on ‘The Freedom to be Tomorrow what we are not Today’ suggested that people need to be educated ‘consciously to surpass, twist and reinterpret our old religions.’ He agreed with Heidegger that *‘overcoming is worthy only when we think about incorporation...’* and with Jesus that: *‘Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.’* Andrew Brown did not go into detail about what they might come up with but for this approach he has ‘a real hope (if not much optimism) that it can help genuinely to free some men and women to be more fully alive, awake and present in this world than they might otherwise be.’

Another thing I wondered about in listening to these talks on *Religion – Where Next?* was religion (or whatever replaces it if ‘religion’ is regarded as a discredited term) becoming *privatised* – as Denise Cush puts it, ‘part of a “subjective turn” where the self is seen as the authority, where what matters is individual experience and personal feelings.’ On the one hand, this is a welcome emancipation from ‘priests in black gowns’ bossing us about and even hovering and frowning in our bedrooms.

On the other hand, is privatisation always a good thing? Lately, in some political rhetoric, ‘public’ has become a dirty word. But is ‘freedom to be’ *nothing but* a private matter and, if so, is it achievable? In order to be free don’t we need a good society – *polis* – and in order to be fully human don’t we need other people?

I was riveted by John Breadon’s talk about his painful personal quest for liberation and self-realisation. When he said that recently he has quite often felt ‘liminal terror’, I thought of this as a ‘crucifixion’, a ‘descent into hell’, a classic *katabasis* to release what was in prison and – maybe? – rise again: ‘he who went up is the same who went down to the lowest parts of the Earth’. Great myths, such as the Christ epic, can have deep personal resonance. But also political. I thought of the watchword of the women’s movement in the 1960s-70s: ‘the personal is political’. Liberation theology in other parts of the world is about liberation of a whole *people*, as well as personal liberation. Christ is to be found today in ‘the crucified people’ and their struggle to overcome their poverty and oppression is Christ ‘rising again’.

I think many, both old and young, in Britain today care very much about what is happening in our society and our world, but perhaps they don’t call that ‘religious’. It would be a shame if religion was wholly relegated to private life, as ‘spirituality’ or something, and lost the power to incorporate the treasures of wisdom and kindness buried in traditional stories that can enrich – save – our public life as well.

Finally, at the Conference I enjoyed Anna Sutcliffe’s insightful introduction to John Burnside’s poem ‘My Grandmother’s House’ and Helen Bellamy’s reading of it. Since supernatural stories and myths are poetic tales, I think the ability to read and listen to poetry is vital to our task.

The 2017 London SOF Day Conference entitled ‘In the Beginning was the Word’ – Religion as Poetry and Story? will take place on Saturday March 25th at St John’s Church, Waterloo Road, London SE1 8TY. Speakers are Salley Vickers, Mark Oakley and Dinah Livingstone. For more info and to download and print a booking form: sofn.org.uk or contact jseargeant3@gmail.com – John Seargeant (SOF), 61 Fordington Road, London N6 4TH. Please enclose sae for a leaflet with booking form.