

For this Life

This Easter issue of *Sofia* called *For this Life* opens with an article by Dave Francis tentatively suggesting those three small words as a possible motto for SOF Network. He begins by exploring the point of ‘mission statements’ with some scepticism and mentions a school where the statements ‘Simply the best’ and ‘Manners’ were displayed in the library window and by lunchtime had been anagrammed (except for the two ‘n’s’) into ‘HELP ME – MY BEAST ‘STIRS!’ Then he goes on to unpack what he means by each of those three words ‘For this Life’. He concludes: ‘I’m sure the Network does not need a motto, strap-line or mission statement, but it is an interesting endeavour to reflect from time to time on what we are about.’

The day is over for the fundamentalist enforcement of a single ‘sacred text’, the mandatory monopoly of the six-beat jussive gerunds ‘exploring and promoting religious faith as a human creation’. Apart from anything else, surely all but the clothed can hear that often a six-beat line sounds ungainly in English, just too much. Dave Francis offers his motto ‘For this Life’ for reflection and does not attempt to impose it on the whole SOF Network on pain of anathemas at the AGM.

Next we have an article by Carol Palfrey with some thoughts on ‘For this Life’ from a Unitarian perspective. Palfrey, who is the Secretary of the Octagon Unitarian Chapel in Norwich, says that nowadays Unitarians are more concerned with behaviour than doctrine, and life on Earth rather than an afterlife.

Our third article, ‘Radical Theology and the Media’, is by Ronald Pearse, a founder member of SOF Network and its Secretary for 20 years. He gives a personal account of the trials and media reports of clergy who, following Don Cupitt’s 1984 TV series *The Sea of Faith*, openly declared that God is imaginary. These brave clerics risked, and in one famous case lost, home and livelihood for confessing their beliefs.

For the word ‘radical’ Pearse says ‘we took it to involve scholarly, scientific examination of the historical soil in which the seeds of our faith were sown and of the cultural environments into which its roots were from time to time transplanted.’ At the end of his article he notes that, in contrast, today the term ‘radical’ is also used for a murderous ideology.

Cupitt’s TV series *The Sea of Faith* concentrated on philosophers and for these first SOF clerics

‘radical’ mainly meant radical in disciplines such as philosophy of religion and biblical scholarship. They did not connect it with other radical theologies active at the time, such as black theology with its vital input into the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, at its height in the 1980s, with Nelson Mandela and other black political prisoners being released in 1990 and Mandela becoming President of South Africa in 1994. Neither did they link it with the radical, non-Anglophone liberation theology which strongly informed the Nicaraguan Revolution of 1979 and the Sandinista government of the 1980s decade – so that it became the most theological revolution since the English Revolution of 1649.

In that year, 1649, in our native English radical tradition, Gerrard Winstanley both referred to ‘the Great Creator Reason’ and led the Diggers to dig up land on St George’s Hill to begin to make the Earth a common treasury for all. At the time of the French Revolution in 1789, London poet William Blake wrote ‘all deities reside in the human breast’ and not long afterwards his poem *Jerusalem* was a vision of the beautiful city (*polis*) of kindness which we ‘mutual shall build...both heart in heart and hand in hand.’ (In 1999 a previous editor of this magazine, David Boulton, published a fine short study, *Gerrard Winstanley and the Republic of Heaven*.)

To be *For this Life* we need head, heart and hand, to be radical not only in philosophy of religion and biblical scholarship but also in the socio-political project of the gospel (good news) of what Jesus called the ‘reign of God’ on Earth, since if God is imaginary, a leading idea, an emergent property, that leaves only ourselves to care for our fellow creatures, both human and the rest, and for the Earth herself, our common home. We could certainly do with some good news at the moment.

On the next page we have listings of some forthcoming events. There is still time to go to the SOF London Conference entitled *In the Beginning was the Word: Religion as Poetry and Story?* on 25th March at St John’s Church, Waterloo Road, London SE1. Download a booking form from sofn.org.uk and post it, or you can just turn up from 10am on the day. And with this *Sofia* you will find fliers with details and a booking form for the SOF Network Annual Conference on 25th – 27th July whose title is *Being Human*.