

Being Human

Like this year's SOF Conference, this conference issue of *Sofia* is called *Being Human*. It starts with shortened versions of the talks given by our three main speakers, who approached the theme from different angles.

Richy Thompson, Director of Public Affairs and Policy at Humanists UK, kicked off by giving us some demographics and discussing some campaigns that Humanists UK are currently engaged in.

Next, Abby Day told us that most people in Britain are now human-centred, even if they describe themselves as 'Christian' on the census. She talked about her research with the people she called 'Generation A', the 'army' of about 70,000 laywomen volunteers who keep the Church of England going, and who are now growing old and dying out. This, she said, would have serious consequences for the Church's future functioning. These are the 'excellent women' who populate novelist Barbara Pym's social comedies.

Dilwar Hussain spoke of the battle going on within Islam between extremist, as well as oppressive, tendencies and more humane ones. There are those who want to integrate into British society and those who want to attack it. He was strongly on the side of integration. Islam can be extremely oppressive to women, in some countries (among other things), killing them for making love with an unapproved partner. This killing is actually also ordered in the Mosaic Law (Deut 22:22-24). Even in Britain, Sharia councils discriminate against women in divorce and child custody cases. In this context, Dilwar mentioned some Muslim women scholars who are struggling for change, and the strength and good sense of Muhammad's first wife Khadija.

'In my exchanges every land shall walk.' It is this idea of the city that terrorists recently attacked, with fear and loathing, in London, Manchester and Barcelona. City where so many with different histories, poetries, music, food (often delicious!), enjoy their everyday lives in common. Common humanity. Rather than being a threat, all these differences are the city's pride and joy, its wealth of people. At the vigil after the London attacks, 'speaking as a proud and patriotic British Muslim,' London mayor Sadiq Khan said: 'Our unity and love for one another will always be stronger than hate from the extremists... This is our city, these are our values. This is our way of life, London will never be

broken by terrorists.' After the Manchester attack, the We Love Manchester Emergency Fund raised £2m in 24 hours for the victims' families. There have also been huge demonstrations of solidarity and civic love in Barcelona. As they say in Catalan: '*T'estimem, Barcelona!*' For love isn't just a private matter, but builder of cities, 'both heart in heart and hand in hand'. That is being human.

Computer expert Oliver Essame's input into the Conference was focused on artificial intelligence and how far robots can 'become human'. For this *Sofia* he revisits Mary Shelley's Gothic novel *Frankenstein* and discusses some of the issues raised in it. I am hoping that this *Revisiting* will be the first of a series in a new *Sofia* column. So if you would like to 'revisit' a novel, poem or other literary work you consider important, please submit your thoughts for this new column. Send about 700 words to editor@sofn.org.uk. I hope people will be willing to have a go.

Please note that we now have a new SOF Membership Secretary, Richard Wood-Penn. For anyone wanting to join SOF Network or subscribe to *Sofia*, he is the person to contact (see inside front cover). His address is: Membership Secretary: Richard Wood-Penn, 3 Glebe Road, Cogenhoe, Northampton, NN7 1NR. Email: membership@sofn.org.uk

I'd like to thank Richard's predecessor David Lambourn for always being so meticulous, helpful and jolly in the job.

Note on the Front Cover

Built in 1566, the bridge over the River Neretva in the Bosnian city of Mostar, linking the Croat side to the Muslim side of the city, was blown up in 1993 during the civil war. The hump-backed bridge was rebuilt in 2004 and the traditional annual diving competition from the top of the arch (39ft 5in) was resumed. It is watched with excitement by people on both riverbanks, Christians and Muslims. *Sofia's* front cover picture shows a diver from the bridge and spectators on both banks.