

Seeking Light

As the days get shorter and darkness falls earlier and earlier we long for light, especially sunshine. This December *Sofia* is called *Seeking Light*. The front cover shows the Greek god Apollo driving his fiery chariot across the sky through the hours of the day. The back cover shows sunrise at Stonehenge at the Winter Solstice with people coming to honour it. In the Advent Liturgy leading up to Christmas, there is a series of ‘Great O’ antiphons to the Magnificat, each praying ‘O Come’. The antiphon for December 21st at the solstice prays for shining light and that it may also be a Sun of *Justice*.

The word for ‘god’ in proto-Indo European is *Dyeus*, derived from the root *dei* (to shine, be bright). The god is a ‘shining one’. This is where the name of the chief Greek god Zeus comes from. In our first article Margaret Connolly tells us ‘Zeus or his equivalent appears among the Minoan, Mycenaean and Indian pantheons, and the name of the Germanic god Ziu reflects similar ancestry.’ He was a sky and weather god who developed into the ‘Father of Gods and Men’ of Homeric times. (His Latin equivalent Jupiter: *diu-pater*: ‘god-father’.) In her entertaining article she points out that Zeus and his fellow gods are not moral; they are like larger humans and behave at least as badly, if not worse, than us. In literary texts ‘created primarily for entertainment,’ she says, ‘we meet the gods both in horrifying and in humorous situations.’ But the gods tell us things about *ourselves* and, she concludes, they ‘have not fallen out of our consciousness ... live on in our literature and, for some of us, in our hearts.’

In our second article, ‘Gods and the Good,’ Richard Norman describes how Greek philosophers tried to seek the light – enlightenment – in a more intellectual way, within a culture that kept its traditional gods. Did those philosophers, I wondered, develop a kind of ‘Sofish’ attitude to the gods, as products of the human imagination or poetic genius? Norman describes how, for Plato, ‘our human values of justice, moderation, courage and the like are imperfect approxi-

mations to perfect timeless ideals which are the ultimate reality, more real than our changing physical world’; ‘the ultimate explanation of everything’ is ‘the idea of the Good’. For Plato those who do not understand this are living in a cave and see only shadows; they need to come up into the sunlight and be enlightened (like him!) in the ‘real’ world.

Plato’s ‘idea of the Good’ has had a powerful influence on Christianity. At the beginning of his article Norman refers to the Prologue of John’s Gospel, which says of the divine *Logos* (Word): ‘In him was life and the life was the light of humanity.’ In the First Letter of John, God is ideally perfect like the idea of the Good. The Letter says: ‘God is light, in him there is no darkness at all’ and ‘God is Love.’ That God has come a long way from the Yahweh who got in rages and enjoyed the smell of roasting meat floating up to him in the smoke from sacrifices. So far so good.

However, as Norman points out, Aristotle criticises Plato for not being *practical*; ethics ‘is supposed to tell us *what to do*’. The climax of John’s Prologue is: ‘The Word was *embodied* and lived among us and we saw his shining ... full of grace and truth.’ Plato’s idea that perfect timeless ideals are ‘the ultimate reality, *more real* than our changing physical world’ has had a very negative effect on some versions of Christianity. The claim that somewhere *beyond* our changing physical world is *more real* denies the central Christian insight of *embodiment*. A ‘better world beyond’ has been used as a powerful mechanism of social control of the lower classes – in direct contradiction to Jesus’ gospel of a Reign of Kindness on Earth that is good news for the poor and hungry.

As the satirical song puts it:

*You will eat by and by
in that beautiful land beyond the sky.
There’ll be no hanky panky with Moody and Sankey
but pie in the sky when you die.*

If I invite you to supper and come gushing to the door saying, 'I've had an idea for the most perfect meal!' and then I sit you down to discuss it (maybe also cookery programmes on TV) for the next hour or two, you become hungrier and hungrier. The supper only becomes real when I get up and cook it and put food on the table.

On a Christmas theme, our next article, Frank Walker's 'The Festival of Adoration', comes down to Earth. Kings must kneel before the child who 'represents the deepest humanity'. This is followed by James Dunstone's piece on Quaker differences in the way they read the Bible, some literally, some poetically – and eclectically.

Because we long for sunshine in the Winter, perhaps in temperate zones it is difficult for us to take the threat of climate change seriously enough. In our culture, light and warmth are very

positive metaphors. In his article 'The Sun and the Climate' Edwin Salter examines why we find it so difficult to deal with climate change through global warming, and suggests things we should do. This message is now being urgently promoted, particularly by young people, in the massive recent Extinction Rebellion demonstrations in London and elsewhere.

Earth is in the 'Goldilocks Zone', ideal for life because it is neither too cold nor too hot. We need the light and warmth of the sun to live, but if we are over-exposed to its burning rays, we cannot survive either. That sounds like an echo of Aristotle's virtue of 'moderation', mentioned in Norman's article.

Finally, below this editorial you will see an advertisement for the forthcoming SOF London Conference on music on March 28th just after the Spring Equinox next year. There is also an insert flier if you want to sign up for it.

SOF NETWORK LONDON DAY CONFERENCE 2020

In the Beginning was Music?

Music and Religion

Saturday 28th March 2020

10.30 – 4.30 pm

St John's Church, Waterloo Road, London SE1 8TY

Speakers

Patti Whaley

BA, MA Musicology, ABRSM Diploma in organ performance (Distinction)
Former Chair of Trustees, SOF Network (UK)

The Revd Stephen Mitchell (with Elaine Henson)

BA Music, former Secondary School Music Teacher
Former Chair of Trustees, SOF Network (UK)

Professor Joanna MacGregor CBE

Head of Piano, Royal Academy of Music

Download booking form from sofn.org.uk
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