

Now Which Way?

What is the way forward when we realise that God and all the gods are human creations?

This issue – called *Now Which Way?* – begins with an article by Dominic Kirkham on *How we Created a Creation Myth*, which is critical of Howard Jacobsen’s TV programme about the origins of monotheism. Kirkham looks at the history and genre of the biblical creation stories, calling them myths, and then at how the bible was put together – by a process of evolution. We still need myths, he says, but questions whether the old ones still work for us.

Next we have a talk given by Ken Smith at the Oxford Think Week, which involved SOF speakers and speakers from the University’s non-religious societies – atheist, humanist, secularist – as well as the town sceptics. A retired Church of England priest, Ken Smith describes himself as ‘an inescapably post-Christian atheist’ and his talk is about the way he is going. Now, he says, his praise is for this world, instead of an imaginary supernatural being. As he puts it, ‘I gladly transfer my worship and devotion to the material reality of our existence.’

Then we have Katy Jennison, also a childhood Christian, defending ‘Heron’s Beard’ (as opposed to Occam’s Razor) and describing how she has sought a way forward in contemporary Paganism, in which reverence for the Earth also plays a major part.

Well-known morning hymns such as ‘The morning, the bright and the beautiful morning,/ is up...’ start by praising the morning and then go on to say: ‘O now let us haste to our heavenly Father,/ hasten to give him the praise that is due.’ But why should we not praise morning on Earth for its own sake, rather than diverting our praise to a ‘heavenly Father’? ‘Earth herself is adorning/ This bright May morning.’ There is so much to marvel at and delight in here on Earth and in the cosmos too.

‘Praise, that’s it!’ said the poet Rilke. The curious thing is that so *little* changes in an attitude of reverent praise, whether that praise is directed towards a supernatural creator or the Earth herself. The *attitude*, the ‘lift up your hearts’, is still the same. Ken Smith would call that a religious attitude, a paradoxical ‘religious atheism.’

We still need myths, says Kirkham and adds:

‘Perhaps Gaia is one such modern creation myth.’ Yes, there is every reason to extol the beauty of the Earth and the beauty of the skies for their own sake, instead of praising a supernatural creator. But praising Gaia does not actually tell us what *else* we should do. Praising the Earth might lead us to take better care of it. Yes, good housewifery (*‘oiko-nomia’*: ‘economy’) is important, but who wants to be just a housewife? Even given ‘lifted hearts’, there is so much more we might want to do with a human life. Secondly, it is *we* who praise – we are the voice of the planet – and *we* who care. The Earth doesn’t care. Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*, written ten years before Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, calls Nature ‘red in tooth and claw’. The poet accuses her: ‘So careful of the type, she seems, /So careless of the single life.’ He goes on to say:

So careful of the type? but no.
From scarp'd cliff and quarried stone
She cries: A thousand types are gone:
I care for nothing, all shall go.

Although caring for the Earth is an important ingredient in the creation of a good society, ‘Gaia’ alone does not provide enough for a Grand Narrative of human fulfilment.

Kirkham says: ‘The modern problem is that the ancient myths no longer work for us. To work myth must lead us into deeper understanding of reality.’ In the previous issue of *Sofia*, I suggested how the ‘poetic tales’ of the Kingdom of God – the reign of kindness – coming on Earth, and the Christ Epic of all humanity as one body *can* still work for us, even after their supernatural baggage has been discarded. I think that once we take for granted that God and gods are creations of the human imagination, we can move on from philosophical questions such as ‘Is God real?’ to sift our vast theological treasury and see what human wisdom it contains.

That is why this issue also contains a story by the Zapatista leader, Subcomandante Marcos, called *The Way*. The Zapatistas are mostly Mayan Indians living in the Lacandon Jungle in Mexico,

where they are struggling for indigenous rights, indeed for survival. Marcos meets the Mayan elder Old Antonio, who is ‘accompanied by the first gods, those who gave birth to the world.’ They go out together and get lost in the jungle. Marcos humorously tells how he shows off all his guerrilla expertise: ‘I described heights above sea level, topographical features, barometric pressure, degrees and minutes, landmarks etc, what we military types call “terrestrial navigation”.’ But they remain lost. Antonio lets them get more and more lost but then acts: ‘He took out his machete, and clearing a path through the jungle, he made off in another direction.’ Eventually they make their way home. The point of the story is that the way was not readymade before them: they had to *make* it and moreover, they had to make it *together*. Making mistakes was part of the process. Marcos with all his modern knowledge is accompanied by Old Antonio, who represents the wisdom of the ancient gods. As Marcos says at the end of the story: ‘I did not walk behind him [Antonio], I walked with him.’ I think we can do the same, we can walk *accompanied* by our own ‘poetic tales’ of the supernatural in order to *make* a new way.

Not long ago we local residents had a meeting with our council parks liaison officer. We discussed the problems in our little park. At the bottom of a hillock, an extremely long rosebed had been planted and, of course, some people had made their way through the middle of it rather

than going round. Our parks liaison officer said that all the rest of the bed had been respected but they were going to leave this short cut there, as it was a ‘desire path’. Everybody smiled at such a wonderful term.

Below this editorial there is a notice of the SOF annual conference, which is on *Religion and Social Justice*. Now is the time to register and it looks like an interesting event. There will be the opportunity to discuss the harm done by religion, such as its ill treatment of women – Maryam Namazie will be talking about Sharia Law. There will also be the opportunity to discuss the gospel that is ‘good news for the poor’. Good news for the poor has to be more than worshipping Gaia – being the kind of Green who would rather talk to a nut-tree than a neighbour* – at the very least, it has to be eco-justice and we will be hearing from Kumi Naidoo about that.

So I hope this issue of *Sofia* and the SOF summer conference will give plenty of food for thought about *Now Which Way?*

**PS I was glad to hear that Caroline Lucas, the Green Leader and now MP for Brighton Pavilion, and our own SOF Chair of Trustees John Pearson, who stood as a Green candidate for Newcastle Central, are both keen on justice that is good news for everyone, including the poor.*



SOF Annual Conference
Leicester University
27-29 July 2010

Speakers:

Maryam Namazie, Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain
Kumi Naidoo, Executive Director of Greenpeace International
Julian Baggini, Philosopher and Journalist
 Don Cupitt will reflect on each day's activities

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