

Religion and Social Justice

The SOF Annual Conference in Leicester was on religion and social justice. Three speakers, two panel discussions and a large variety of workshops approached this enormous subject in a variety of ways. This issue of *Sofia* is very pleased to be able to publish the talks given by Kumi Naidoo, now Executive Director of Greenpeace, an activist for many years in the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa; and of Maryam Namazie, President of the Council of ex-Muslims of Britain, who spoke about the threat posed by allowing Sharia Law in Britain. She described some of the horrors of Sharia Law, as practised by Islamist states such as Iran, and explained that the civil code, which deals with women's rights in marriage and the family, is part and parcel of the criminal code that stones women to death for adultery.

Of course, the role of religion in bringing about social justice has been both negative and positive. Jesus preached the kingdom of God, a kingdom or reign of kindness – justice and peace – on Earth, which is good news for the poor and oppressed, and after them for all of us. This good news is both personal and political. The world is turned upside down. The kingdom belongs *first and foremost* to the poor. The disciples found this idea very shocking; they probably thought wealth was a proof of God's favour. They were scandalised.

Justice is *habeas corpus*. Have body. Have a body. Have your own body. Own your own body. That is what the Christian tradition has given us, a body, the body of Christ. Jesus identified with the poor. He said if you gave food to anyone who was hungry or drink to anyone who was thirsty you did it to me. He came into conflict with the ruling powers and was crucified: so he identified with the victims of history. In the story of his resurrection he was vindicated and still lives on. The early Christians, Paul in particular, thought of him as inaugurating a new humanity, called the body of Christ. Alongside the kingdom, the 'reign of kindness', this is another image of a good society, in which we are all members of one another and co-operate for the common good. Now as well as *habeas corpus*: have a body, it is *sis corpus*: be a body.

And here again there is something scandalous: that body was broken, crucified. If we look at humanity as a single body today, or if you like, if we look for Christ's body on Earth today, we have to look where it's crucified, where people are suffering, especially where they are suffering from 'the sin of the world': unjust wars, unjust terms of trade, oppression, lust for profit at any cost and so on. When suffering people struggle to overcome their lot, seek a better life, this has been called a hope of resurrection, so that the

body of Christ, humanity, may become a glorious body. That story has constantly inspired people struggling for justice, a kinder society, a more humane humanity on Earth. For example, in England it inspired the Diggers' leader Gerrard Winstanley, who called their action of digging up St George's Hill 'Christ rising again in the sons and daughters.' Likewise, the twentieth-century Nicaraguan Revolution spoke of downtrodden people struggling for a better life as Christ rising again: 'your struggle goes on and you're rising again.'

Christianity has a very powerful and resonant message of human fulfilment, both personal: each person has the right of *habeas corpus*, and social/political: each person has the right to *sis corpus*, to be part of society, to belong as a respected member to the social body, the body politic.

But what about the Church? Of course the Church has often allied itself with domineering and sometimes unjust worldly powers and at times has itself become a worldly power, even an unjust worldly power. It has committed horrendous abuses, particularly against women. But that powerful message of justice and peace has permeated and inspired our culture as a dream of possibility. Many other campaigners for justice right up to our own day have been inspired by that vision: the poorest he, and of course the poorest she, hath a life to live. That was the vision which inspired twentieth century reforms such as the National Health Service.

That is the vision – for the whole of humanity. In a globalised world it has to be a global vision. We know that many people living in Third World countries suffer massive unjust poverty and other woes, one cause of which is an unjust world order. But what about the West? Of course, in some ways we are now a more compassionate society and we have made great advances in science, medicine, technology and so on. Many people's lives are much more comfortable than they were in the past. But we simply cannot say that the West has now realised and embodied Christian principles. We note the many abuses of the poor and of prisoners in the richest Western country, the USA. In England we have a new coalition government with 18 millionaires in the full time cabinet of 23, whose inaugural budget has sided with the rich, and totally failed to tax the rich or the banks fairly... So we must conclude that the Christian gospel is good news and an inspiring vision of human fulfilment and a just society, but here in the West, and a great deal more so globally, we still have a long way to go and may not have left ourselves much time to do it in.