

# Tree of Life and Death

First, I must apologise if you were expecting your magazine at the beginning of March. It has come to you a bit later because I have been abroad. However, the March *Sofia* usually has an Easter theme and this is also true for this issue: *Tree of Life and Death*. A publication date at about the time of the Spring Equinox seems more appropriate and in future the first *Sofia* of the year will be an Easter March/April issue and published on March 21<sup>st</sup> or thereabouts. The other three magazines for the year will continue to be published on the 1<sup>st</sup> of the month: the Summer *Sofia* in June, the September issue, and the Christmas *Sofia* in December.

For our title *Tree of Life and Death* Anthony Freeman has contributed his two-part *Eden Project*. In Part 1 he reflects on the origin of moral consciousness, starting from the story of the ‘fatal tree’ in the Garden of Eden. In Part 2 he looks at how the Passion Narrative in St John’s Gospel picks up and ‘reverses’ the theme of the tree in the Garden of Eden. The tree of the Cross undoes the harm done by eating the fruit from the forbidden tree in the Garden of Eden, so that the ‘Tree of Death’ becomes a ‘Tree of Life’. In the words of the ancient Easter hymn:

*Mors et Vita duello  
confluxere mirando*

Death and Life  
in strange strife.

Easter is the struggle of life against death. The Garden of Eden story of our ancestors eating fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil can be seen as a story about the achievement of

## Acknowledgment

The frontcover photograph for *Sofia 96*, June 2010, is ‘Crossroads’ by Martin Liebermann. It can be found at:  
[flickr.com/photos/liebermann/580181284](http://flickr.com/photos/liebermann/580181284)  
where some of his other fine photographs can also be seen.

moral consciousness, which surely, is not a ‘sin’ but an evolutionary advance. However, the arrival of moral consciousness means humanity becomes an animal that can be not only kind but *unkind*. We have a choice.

In our history we see the colossal cruelty human beings, including religious people, have constantly inflicted upon one another, especially the rich and powerful upon the weak. (Fascinatingly, Freeman speculates that ‘the evolutionary Original Sin was **bullying**’ and up to this day we have seen plenty of that by religious people, as well as others). Throughout our history we have also seen heroic struggles of resistance to bullying and countless examples of great kindness and nobility.

That is the struggle of life against death, the struggle for *humanity*. Jesus was unjustly killed by the powerful of his day. We do not have to believe – how can we? – that his corpse was resuscitated. The story of his resurrection is a crucial (in every sense) ‘poetic tale’, which we can believe whole-heartedly with poetic faith. It proclaims that in the struggle of life against death, life is stronger than death, love is stronger than death. Even though as individuals we all die, the struggle for humanity, for kindness, matters supremely, whatever the cost. What kind of animal are we? We are a poetic kind of animal who can be kind or unkind. To choose human kindness (which includes poetry) is our salvation.

Of course there are other ways in which trees are our salvation (we and our planet cannot survive without them). Of the huge amount of possible material about trees, we can, of course, only present a tiny selection here, with we hope, a few surprises. There is a ‘magical’ tree in the traditional ballad of Thomas the Rhymer, who meets a supernatural being, the Queen of Elfland, by the rowan tree. She carries him off by the road which is neither the road to Heaven nor to Hell, but to Elfland. There he must *keep silence* for seven years until she finally releases him, giving him the gift that he can never lie. That is the story of the

emergence of a poet (in contrast to Plato's exclusion of poets from the Republic because they were *liars*).

Thinking it over, I saw there were parallels with poet Anne Ashworth's brave, hard struggle for *honesty*, which she continues to relate in Part 2 of her Spiritual Journal printed here. We also have my favourite poem by Dorset dialect poet-parson William Barnes: 'Trees Be Company.'

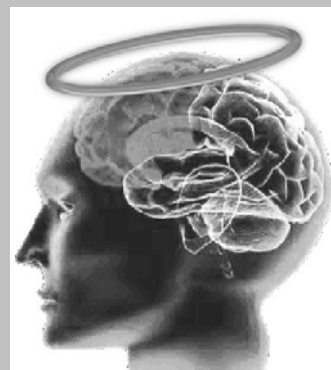
Poet, rock climber and botanist Libby Houston tells how she discovered three new tree species (of the *sorbus* genus to which the rowan tree belongs), while clambering about on Cheddar Gorge in Somerset. Her account is immensely cheering in a world where we constantly hear of species being threatened and becoming extinct. Long-term SOF trustee, cabinet-maker Oliver Essame, describes an intimate lifetime relationship with wood. And Cicely Herbert writes about the British Library great exhibition on the English language, which can also be compared to an enormous tree.

This edition of *Sofia* has a large crop of letters, reviews and regular items such as the SOF Sift column from a former Vice Chair of *Catholics for a Changing Church*, Christine Hacklett, and Radio Rockall with a report of an ugly little story of censorship.

Finally, please note the advertisement on the right hand side of this page for the SOF Annual Conference in July. It will take place in Leicester, as usual, and has a strong line-up of speakers on the subject of *Brain, Belief and Behaviour*. With the magazine you will receive an insert flier telling you more about the Conference and containing an application form. That is to encourage you to come, and to sign up as soon as you can to give cheer to the organisers.

I hope you will enjoy the magazine, approve the little springward shift of the publication date, closer to Easter, and find that it has been worth waiting for.

P.S. Thomas the Rhymer is said to have been one of your Editor's ancestors. One family member claims to have his sword, which is almost certainly a fake!



## SOF Annual Conference

# Brain, Belief and Behaviour

Leicester University  
22<sup>nd</sup> - 24<sup>th</sup> July 2011

This year we approach religion as a human creation from the perspectives of neuroscience, practical theology and behavioural psychology. Our principal speakers will be:

- Colin Blakemore
- Gwen Griffith-Dixon
- Alan Allport

For more details and booking forms see insert fliers or contact:

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