

The Necessity of Hope

This Conference issue of *Sofia* begins with the talks given by our two guest speakers, Tony Carroll and Richard Norman. These two philosophers presented a ‘double act’, each speaking for 20 minutes on ‘Hope, Faith and Redemption’, Tony first and then Richard responding. After that, they engaged in a conversation with each other and the audience. Can we speak of hope if we all die, many tragically and many with hopes unrealised? For Kant, Tony says, eternity is extra time, ‘the penalty shoot-out after history in which the right team wins in the end!’ But, Richard answers, ‘we can only put our faith in something which we know to be real. Faith as trust *in* God presupposes the belief *that* there is a god.’ Despite that sharp disagreement, both speakers agreed that the religious and non-religious can work together to transform our world for the better, in a joint endeavour which ‘honours the memory of the victims of history through further pursuing the cause for which they struggled.’

This year is the centenary of the First World War. John Pearson’s poem ‘Passchendaele’ (p.26) is based on a true story of waste of human life, ‘the pity of war, the pity war distilled’. We cannot be triumphalist.

Carol Palfrey’s ‘Revisiting’ piece (p.16) is on *Middlemarch* by George Eliot (the translator of *The Essence of Christianity* by Feuerbach, who also figures in Richard’s talk). Carol concludes that though she is disappointed when Dorothea marries Will Ladislaw, ‘nonetheless, I warm to Eliot’s conclusion which gives hope to us all: “But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive; for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs”.’

At the Conference I attended a workshop on women, led by Carol. I was thinking about the word ‘man’ and remembered how in the 1970s Women’s Movement, we used to laugh at the final sentence in Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*: ‘*L’homme est une passion inutile!*: Man is a useless passion!’ Then women would share stories of falling in love with useless men. Since that time, most English publishers generally prefer ‘inclusive language’ with words like ‘people’ or just ‘we’, rather than ‘man’. Still today in most Latin languages (*hombre, hombre* etc.), and in the Greek of the New Testament (*ἄνθρωπος*: *anthropos*), the word for humanity as a species and an individual male is the same. Echoing the letter to the Colossians (3: 9-10), when Che Guevara, and then Ernesto Cardenal, passionately promoted ‘*el hombre*

nuevo’, they meant both a new humanity in a fairer, more enabling society, and a new, more generous human individual (not just male, although women had to fight to make that point!). Christ is seen as the prototype and head/figurehead of both species and individual, – humanity as one whole body in which each human being is included.

Of course, in traditional Christianity, God does make everything all right for the dead ‘in Christ’ (as Paul stresses in his first letter to the worried Thessalonians). However, if God and an afterlife are just imaginary, the dead remain dead. We remain mortal animals and can only do our best to contribute in our limited lifetime. As Auden puts it in his poem *Atlantis*, ‘Stagger onwards rejoicing’. Even if you cannot get there, ‘you should still be proud/ Even to have been allowed/ Just to peep at Atlantis/ In a poetic vision’:

Remember the noble dead
And honour the fate you are,
Travelling and tormented,
Dialectic and bizarre.

In John Heath-Stubbs’ poem *Plato and the Waters of the Flood*, Plato ‘Reared a republic in the mind/ Where only noble lies/ Reign; he expelled the poets...’ Plato represses the waters of the flood and represses and excludes the poets. In contrast, the Christ Epic is a vision of *incorporation* and *inclusion*. Christ descends to the depths of human degradation and carries that all back up with him. Likewise, for Jesus the hallmark of ‘salvation’ is a society that is good news for the poor. ‘The least of these my brothers and sisters’ matter. No one is excluded.

As well as sorrow and death, human life offers tenderness, pleasure, laughter, joy and sometimes ecstasy. Humanity also means the wealth of human talents, for cooking, gardening, mending, building, inventing, singing, making music and poems. Poetry may plumb the depths of the inchoate and suppressed to articulate and incorporate it in a body of words that is ‘ordinary language heightened’. Poetry may reach high for a vision of hope. Both the depths and the heights belong to humanity and must be included.

Even if people keep trying and falling short, I think there is still plenty to hope for, necessary to hope for, without insisting on adding an afterlife – with its penalty shoot-out to ‘resolve’ the game.

Centenary celebration of John Heath-Stubbs is in St James Church, Piccadilly, London, at 2.30 pm, September 15th 2018.