

The Struggle for Humanity

Let there be light! This familiar sentence was created by William Tyndale. It is his translation of Genesis chapter 1 verse 3, the first ever into English from the original Hebrew. He also translated the New Testament from the original Greek into a vivid, vigorous English which helped shape the emerging modern English language and, like Shakespeare, is 'full of quotations' that still resonate with us today. (90% of the 1611 Authorised Version is from Tyndale.)

Lockdown January was cold and dark and seemed to go on forever. How my heart lifted when at the beginning of February, I went out on a sunny morning into our park and saw the crocuses sprouting on the little hill. The first sign that Spring was coming. Soon they would become a river of colour up and over it. Let there be light! I said.

The front cover of this March *Sofia* is Botticelli's 'Spring', painted about fifty years before Tyndale's New Testament. This period in European history, known as the Renaissance, was an extraordinary flowering of creativity, a new Springtime. Human seeing and being was enriched in many ways. In Italy painters celebrated and enjoyed the human body, both male and female. Poets and playwrights abounded in their blossoming mother tongues.

With the flood of material pouring into Europe following the fall of Constantinople in 1453, scholars struggled to produce accurate texts and translations. There was a desire for independence of thought and a demand for freedom of conscience. It was a struggle for humanity. (Of course, with the rise of colonialism there was a darker side and the conquered indigenous peoples were often not accorded equal human dignity by their conquerors.)

It was a fierce struggle in Europe. Ten years after he had produced his New Testament, William Tyndale was sentenced by the Catholic authorities and burnt at the stake, at Vilvoorde (near today's Brussels airport). The Catholic church was authoritarian and corruptly selling indulgences. Protestantism opposing that corruption and authority sometimes took the form of an ugly, self-righteous puritanism that could be equally lethal.

In our first article Frank Walker tells the story of Calvin and Castellio, the great pioneer of toleration. From the 1540s Calvin ruled Geneva. '*De facto* he was the city's dictator,' Walker says, and he was not slow to punish or even kill those who opposed him. Castellio believed we should treat people humanely even when we disagreed

Changes to Sofia Subscription Rates

Although the price of Sofia has not changed for many years, rising costs mean that an increase is now necessary. The new annual rate for four editions will be **£24** (£30 for overseas subscribers) and for 1 copy £6. The new rate reflects the current cost of production and distribution which was the basis on which the then current rate of £15 was set about fifteen years ago. This change does not affect SOF Network members. Sofia will continue to be provided free to members.

The revised rate will be effective from **1 July 2021** for new subscribers. It will apply to existing subscribers from their next renewal date after 1 July.

with them: 'To burn a man alive does not defend a doctrine: it is simply to slay a man.' His struggle for humanity, even at the risk of his life, was heroic.

In our next article, 'Humanism as Translation', Martin Spence discusses the Renaissance humanists, who were 'scholars and translators. They were defined not by a particular body of belief, but by a particular body of practices. Those practices had a major impact on Christian faith, but it was felt within, rather than against, that faith.' He regrets that this history is forgotten by many who call themselves humanists today.

The struggle for humanity is not only about how we behave towards others but about what we are and become ourselves. In 'A Sense of Self' Bobbie Stephens-Wright describes her disturbing association and escape from the Spiritualist Church, where she lost her sense of self. This was part of her struggle for her own personal humanity. John Pearson writes about being a Christian atheist. Edward Nickell revisits *Debt: The First 5,000 years* by David Graeber. (Debt can be dehumanising.) And there is more.

The back cover of this *Sofia* shows the west front of Westminster Abbey with its memorial statues of ten modern martyrs, each from a different country, who struggled for humanity. Below the martyrs there are statues of four female figures representing Mercy, Truth, Justice and Peace (from Psalm 85, where they meet and kiss).

Christians have been saints and heroes. Christians and Christian institutions have also often behaved badly and still do. Nevertheless,

Christianity with its core doctrine of God becoming human, is a humanist religion. It was the mother of humanism in the West, even though some Western humanists today loathe religion.

Jesus had a vision of the coming down to Earth of a reign of kindness (God), which is *inclusive*. The poor come first (and out of their poverty), the hungry are fed, peacemakers and those who hunger for justice are blessed.

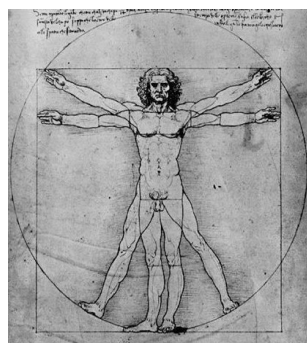
Paul translated that into a vision of a new humanity as one body 'in Christ', where everyone is of equal moral worth. This new humanity *embodies* Christ, *embodies* the divine vision of of mercy and truth, justice and peace; of being, seeing and loving more.

In *Revelation* there is another descent – the beautiful city: 'And I saw the holy city coming down out of heaven from God (from imagination to reality)... And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying: See the home of God is among humans. He will dwell with them... God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes.' (Rev 21:3-4). God is a *shining* that lights the city: 'The glory of God is its light.'

These visions of human possibility are our common treasury and it would be a pity to squander them or forget what treasures they are. Despite all our misdeeds, disappointments and distress, Blake insists in his poem *Jerusalem* :

The Divine Vision still was seen,
Still was the Human Form Divine.

The vision is both personal and political. It is a vision of human wholeness.



Leonardo da Vinci:
Vitruvian Man, c. 1497